

# Working/Not Working: Labour, Un/Employment and the Deserving/Underserving Poor in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Arnold Bennett's *The Card* (1911)

JOHN D. ATTRIDGE

## Abstract

Literary constructions of labour in the long nineteenth century frequently rely on popular conceptions of the 'deserving/undeserving poor', which were utilised by politicians and welfare providers of the era to justify punitive measures against those who were unable to obtain or sustain traditional modes of full-time employment. By the turn of the century such conceptions were proving fiercely resilient, impacting not only representations of urban manual labour and the rural toil of the working classes, but literary depictions of other kinds of work altogether. In this article, I argue that Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Arnold Bennett's *The Card* (1911) are emblematic examples of this representational shift. Published just six years apart, both novels feature protagonists who struggle financially and awkwardly navigate non-traditional modes of work, labour and un/employment at the turn of the twentieth century. In clearly recognising the physical, social and emotional efforts required of their protagonists, however, Wharton and Bennett complicate social hierarchies, expose upper-class moral hypocrisies, and advocate for new kinds of social mobility and/or welfare reform which deviate from the 'deserving/undeserving poor' debate. In doing so, each author offers a similar – but ultimately alternative – model for rethinking the enduring mythos of the 'deserving/undeserving poor', each of which are keenly informed by the idiosyncrasies of their own nationalities, genders, and contrasting social backgrounds.

## Keywords

Labour, unemployment, class, deserving poor, undeserving poor.

ON THE FACE of it, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Arnold Bennett's *The Card* (1911) appear to have little in common. The former is a wryly satirical take on questions of philanthropy, moral and social hypocrisy and female agency in the twilight years of America's Gilded Age; the latter a playful and mischievous dissection of working-class social mobility set in, or around, Bennett's fictionalised version of Stoke-on-Trent. Where *The House of Mirth*, an enduring and popular text, stylistically draws on the Henry James school of late nineteenth century American realist fiction, *The Card* (much less widely taught in universities today) follows in the British picaresque tradition of Fielding and Dickens, leaning heavily into its idiosyncratic and carnivalesque elements.

It therefore seems unsurprising that there has been little critical commentary comparing or contrasting these two texts (or their authors) over the past century. Where it does exist, such examples are usually brief and limited. In a 1915 review of Bennett's novel *These Twain*, for instance, the Irish-American author and critic Francis Hackett makes just a passing reference to Wharton, commending Bennett for effectively capturing 'provincial urban usualness' in a way other authors – including Wharton – hadn't quite managed.<sup>1</sup> Both novelists also feature in 'Naomi Jacob's List of Novels for Writers', first published in 1939 – but there is no direct comparison between the two.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Robin Peel suggests that Wharton and Bennett 'were both social realists more interested in the functioning of society and the material world than the world of the spirit and the mind', but he sees Wharton as having more in common with writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Ford Madox Ford than someone like Bennett.<sup>3</sup> Randi Saloman briefly brings up Wharton in her analysis of 'Arnold Bennett's Hotels' (2012),<sup>4</sup> but only Aileen Riberio, in her article entitled 'Arnold Bennett, Edith Wharton, and the 'Minotaur of Time'' (2010), offers a direct and

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Hackett, 'Husband and Wife', *New Republic*, 4<sup>th</sup> December 1915, 125-126 (p. 125).

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Jacobs, 'Naomi Jacob's List of Novels for Writers', *The Writer*, 52 (1939), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Peel, *Apart from Modernism: Edith Wharton, Politics and Fiction Before World War I* (Cranbury, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> Randi Saloman, 'Arnold Bennett's Hotels', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 58.1 (Spring 2012), 1-2 (p. 3).

extended contrast between the authors and their works, via a deconstruction of the semiotics of dress between *The Old Wives' Tale* and *The Age of Innocence*.<sup>5</sup>

Peel's remark nevertheless comes closest to identifying the overlapping concerns that do emerge from two texts apparently so unlike one another as *The House of Mirth* and *The Card*. Having been published just six years apart, both novels reflect on the changing social landscape of the fin de siècle, as well as the evolving attitudes towards class, wealth, poverty, labour and social mobility at the turn of the twentieth century – including, in Peel's words, 'the functioning of society' and the 'material world' that so clearly impact both Wharton and Bennett's protagonists and their lifestyles. In particular, questions of moral hypocrisy, mental wellbeing and economic survival are framed around each main character's ability (or inability) to navigate nineteenth-century notions of fate and circumstance which, in turn, are heavily underpinned by the 'deserving/undeserving poor' dichotomy that prevailed among political thinkers and social reformers at the time – both in the UK and across the pond.

Taking into account important distinctions between each author's gender, nationality and class background, this article consequently posits that a critical comparison of the representation of work, labour and un/employment between *The House of Mirth* and *The Card* offers useful insights into contemporaneous reactions to the 'deserving/undeserving poor' debate on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as an opportunity to reconsider how changing representations of labour at the turn of the twentieth century functioned as imaginative reactions against the moralistic lessons of the popular Victorian social/social protest novel. While, on the surface, neither text appears to directly nor robustly engage with social and/or political conversations surrounding poverty and welfare reform, both narratives do widen the debate around what constitutes acceptable forms of labour by situating upper- and lower-middle class characters in a societal schema somewhat resembling the 'deserving/undeserving poor' framework. Despite facing the perpetual and threatening prospect of poverty for their majority of their narratives, Lily Bart and Denry Machin are two characters who exemplify a steadfast resistance to traditional modes of fixed or full-time employment and who, through their apparent and

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<sup>5</sup> Aileen Ribeiro, 'Arnold Bennett, Edith Wharton and 'The Minotaur of Time'', *Costume*, 44.1 (2010), 89-95.

recurrent aversion to 'honest' hard work, should theoretically be categorised as 'undeserving' of the typical reader's sympathy. Both protagonists, however, frequently rely on their wit, good humour and affability (and at least in Lily's case, her youth and beauty) to get by, and are repeatedly forced to think and act creatively – and thus exercise some form of labour – in order to avoid the daily grind of consistent work. Bennett and Wharton thus clearly recognise the physical, social and emotional efforts which result from their main characters' inability and/or refusal to obtain full-time employment, complicating the more commonly accepted understandings of what constitutes 'deserving' and 'undeserving' behaviour at the time in which they were writing. Both novels consequently offer similar – but alternative – models for rethinking the enduring mythos of the 'deserving/undeserving poor'.

### The 'Deserving/Undeserving Poor'

In both the UK and America, assumptions and/or conclusions about how to look after or treat the poor throughout the long nineteenth century were regularly framed, structured and disseminated around the narrative of the 'deserving/undeserving poor'. In Britain, according to Maureen Moran, this ideology was heavily informed by the rise of Evangelicalism in the early Victorian period, which saw parishioners across the country distinguishing 'harshly between the 'deserving' poor (gainfully employed, dutiful and righteous) and the 'undeserving' (unemployed, idle and morally suspect).<sup>6</sup> This dualism was further extolled in popular newspapers, magazines, and periodicals,<sup>7</sup> as well as in a variety of Victorian social novels (particularly by Dickens) and non-fiction publications (such as Samuel Smiles' popular conduct book *Self-Help* (1859)). At the same time, politicians and social reformers in Britain espoused the ideology of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' in parliament, pamphlets, and other public addresses,<sup>8</sup> while organisations like the British Charity Organisation Society (COS, est. 1869) urged reformers to look for 'signs of thrift and temperance' before directing individuals 'to the appropriate specialised charity' – leaving the 'drunken [and]

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<sup>6</sup> Maureen Moran, *Victorian Literature and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> See the Illustrated London News archives for pertinent examples. At 'The British Newspaper Archive' [online]. Available at: <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/illustrated-london-news>.

<sup>8</sup> For more information, see Robert Humphreys, *Sin, Organised Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).

improvident' to fill up the workhouses.<sup>9</sup> According to Gareth Stedman-Jones, 'control of charitable outlets allied to strict poor law administration would, it was hoped, effectively demonstrate to the poor that there could be no practicable alternative to 'incessant self-discipline' – a mantra that proved more powerful and enduring in the UK than any rallying against capitalism proposed by more revolutionary reformers such as Marx and Engels.<sup>10</sup>

By the turn of the century, such thinking continued to prevail among those in positions of authority and influence. Stefan Collini highlights how even liberal Edwardian politicians like Leonard Hobhouse subscribed to the overarching elements of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' framework in their treatment of what were often referred to as "the idle', 'the unemployable' or 'the residuum' – those whom Hobhouse revealingly labels 'the morally uncontrolled'.<sup>11</sup> By the time Bennett was writing *The Card* 'in the first two months of 1909',<sup>12</sup> there were some limited attempts to ameliorate the condition of the poor in the UK via reformatory legislation, but the fundamental ethos of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' still directed social policy. As Jocelyn Hunt contends, 'the notion of personal responsibility was by no means abandoned [at the close of the Edwardian era]. The Poor Law remained in place and the distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor was maintained by all engaged in both the discussion and the implementation of the new social legislation'.<sup>13</sup>

According to Frank Christianson, similarities between the British and US economies from the mid-nineteenth century onwards helps to explain the concurrent proliferation of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' dichotomy in America during the same period, as both societies 'generate[d] comparable philanthropic institutions

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<sup>9</sup> Gareth Stedman-Jones, 'Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900: Notes on the Remaking of the Working-Class', *Journal of Social History*, 7.4 (Summer 1974), 460-508 (pp. 468-9).

<sup>10</sup> For more information on the impact of Marxist thought in the UK and Europe during this period, see Peter Singer, *Marx: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press [1980] 2018), p. 101.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1979] 1983), p. 139.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Drabble, *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* [e-book], (Faber and Faber, [1974] 2012), <[https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Arnold\\_Bennett/\\_QloTVC\\_zjYC?hl=en&gbpv=0.>](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Arnold_Bennett/_QloTVC_zjYC?hl=en&gbpv=0.>)

<sup>13</sup> Jocelyn Hunt, *Britain, 1846-1919* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 145.

which [...] exhibited an expressly cosmopolitan sensibility'.<sup>14</sup> While Christianson doesn't recall the 'deserving/undeserving poor' dichotomy explicitly, his reference to 'comparable philanthropic institutions' positions the British-borne YMCA and COS alongside later American counterparts such as the Russell Sage Foundation (est. 1907), the Carnegie Corporation of New York (est. 1911), and the various Working Girls' Societies of America scattered throughout the Northeast and Midwest. According to Laura R. Fisher, many of these societies strived toward an 'institutional commitment to friendship across the boundaries of class and station', despite often 'support[ing] and entrench[ing] social distinctions' between the classes through their somewhat naïve attempts at reform.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, while Gavin Jones suggests that *The House of Mirth* was published at a time when 'individualistic and moral theories of poverty were [being] replaced by social and environmental explanations of need', he attests that poverty in the Progressive Era was still 'a pervasive crisis that provoked a range of responses' – including the founding of 'so-called charities and settlement houses' which frequently sought to 'sanction the superiority of genteel values against the threat of [the] 'uncivilised' masses'.<sup>16</sup> He goes on to cite Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), John Hay's *The Breadwinners* (1883), Martha Louise Clark's *The Arena* (1894) and Edward W. Townsend's *A Daughter of the Tenements* (1895) as examples of turn-of-the-century America's fascination with – and often simultaneous hostility towards – the various gradations of poverty that could be found on the other side of the class divide.<sup>17</sup> While Jones himself and other critics such as Laura Rattray have convincingly suggested that Wharton frequently wrote 'against' many of the 'philanthropic assumptions' that underpinned some of these institutions,<sup>18</sup> it is important to stress

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<sup>14</sup> See Frank Christianson, *Philanthropy in British and American Fiction: Dickens, Hawthorne, Eliot and Howells* [Edinburgh Studies in Transatlantic Literatures] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 15-16.

<sup>15</sup> Laura R. Fisher, *Reading for Reform: The Social Work of the Literature in the Progressive Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), pp. 1, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 65-67.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, p. 93. See also Laura Rattray's claim that 'Wharton humanises society's outcasts' in *Edith Wharton and Genre: Beyond Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 33.

the pervasive impact and longevity of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' dichotomy in both the UK and the US at the time in which Bennett and Wharton were writing.

Indeed, although Wharton and Bennett *are* writing in and about different countries, there is clearly a distinct overlap in how the 'relatively poor' in both of their home nations are critiqued from middle-class and ostensibly charitable/philanthropic perspectives during this period. Across several of these aforementioned institutions, the moral character of the working-classes is frequently judged and regulated by politicians, observers and so-called 'reformers' who continuously and uncritically deploy language which positions poverty as a choice which only the 'deserving poor' might prove fit to overcome. Although elements of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' narrative certainly began to be challenged and undermined in some fictional texts at the turn of the century (particularly in the works of George Gissing, Arthur Morrison and Thomas Hardy in Britain, and by Edward Bellamy, Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser in the US), it is clear that both *The House of Mirth* and *The Card* were written in similar contexts in which both work and poverty (and representations thereof) were defined, influenced and informed by preexisting notions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor – a framework that proves to be of acute interest to both Wharton and Bennett in their dissection of work, labour and modes of un/employment within their respective texts.

### Unpaid Labour in *The House of Mirth*

In *The House of Mirth*, questions around acceptable or unacceptable forms of labour arise in how the impoverished but well-born Lily Bart is frequently shown trying to avoid falling into the social class immediately below wherever she finds herself – usually by aligning herself with, spending time in the company of, and essentially working for her most well-regarded and well-off friends and relations. Lily covets being rich and sees only dishonour, disgrace and a lifetime of what Wharton repeatedly labels as 'dinginess' in accepting the reality of her somewhat desperate financial situation,<sup>19</sup> – a perception that Jones recognises as the 'governing irony' of the novel.<sup>20</sup> Although Lily fails to truly comprehend 'the value of money',<sup>21</sup> she is

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<sup>19</sup> Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (London: Penguin, [1905] 2012), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, p. 95.

<sup>21</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, p. 36.

confidently affirmed as a character 'not made for mean and shabby surroundings, [nor] for the squalid compromises of poverty'.<sup>22</sup> In fact, she is frequently able to provide just the right touch to a number of material scenes in which she appears, including when she looks 'so pleasant' at Selden's apartment fingering an item 'so unsuggestive' as a book,<sup>23</sup> and later when she appears in the Wellington Bry's *tableaux vivants*, looking 'as though she had stepped, not out of, but into' a vision of Joshua Reynolds' *Mrs Lloyd* with 'unassisted beauty'.<sup>24</sup> Unlike some of her richer friends, Lily seems destined not necessarily to possess money, but to engage with it artfully and tastefully as and when the occasion demands.

To avoid the 'squalid compromise of poverty', however, Lily must work to assimilate herself into New York high society, and it is in these attempts at imparting her better taste to her friends that we begin to see how Wharton frames Lily's exploits via the vocabulary of hard work and labour. To 'escape from routine' and the dingy monotony it threatens, Lily is forced to 'pay dearly' for her leisure and maintain a constant 'structure of artifice',<sup>25</sup> acting as a smiling, pretty and distracting companion to those who are willing to take her in. Throughout the text, she is assigned various roles by her exploitative and often shameless companions, including when helping Judy Trenor to entertain guests and respond to letters and telegrams in exchange for a season at her friends' country estate; acting as Bertha Dorset's lady's maid in all but name, as they cruise around the Mediterranean with both Bertha's husband and *paramour*, Ned Silverton, in tow; modelling for the *tableaux vivants* at the Wellington Brys; and enduring sexual and romantic advances from the equally disagreeable Gus Trenor and Simon Rosedale, offering up potential social capital by being seen on each man's arm in public in exchange for promises of relatively meagre financial rewards.

In his seminal text *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Thorstein Veblen divided work acts into two distinct categories along class lines, and would probably have discounted Lily's various labours as examples of the 'inert exploit[s]' typically displayed by the upper-middle classes, and which most often 'result in an outcome useful to the agent' – rather than acts of 'industry' carried out by the working poor,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

which involve 'effort that goes into the creation of a [brand] new thing'.<sup>26</sup> While some critics have drawn on Veblen's work to dissect Lily's plight in the context of late-Victorian consumer culture and conspicuous consumption,<sup>27</sup> others have foregrounded how the economic backdrop to *The House of Mirth* plays a critical role in Wharton's dissection of ideas around work, un/employment and labour at the turn of the twentieth century. For Jones, for instance, Wharton's goal is to overcome stereotypes and 'assumptions' about the reality of lower-class lives 'not by displacing the poor [...] but by revealing poverty in a radically different environment'.<sup>28</sup> He suggests that Wharton showcases a 'remarkably developed psychological language of poverty' in her depiction of the unpaid and exploitative labour performed by Lily and that this, in turn, permits the novel to '[respond] discursively to the social and political debates surrounding it'.<sup>29</sup> Such debates include not only what he characterises as the Progressive Era shift away from 'individualistic and moral theories of poverty' such as, indeed, the 'deserving/undeserving poor' framework, and the move towards more sympathetic and understanding 'social and *environmental* explanations of need' that began to characterise charitable endeavours in the US in the early 1900s, but also 'the heightened impoverishment of working women' and the consequent redefinitions of work, labour and un/employment more generally.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, for American sociologists Charles and Chris Tilly, work in the age of capitalism constitutes 'any human effort adding use value to goods and services',<sup>31</sup> and according to this definition, Lily's labours clearly qualify as work by granting external and measurable 'use value' to the social lives of her friends.

While Lily's efforts cannot fairly be compared with the horrors and hunger experienced by those living in 'overcrowded tenements' and 'squalid urban'

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<sup>26</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Dover Publications, 1899), p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> See Anne-Maire Evans, 'Shopping for Survival: Conspicuous Consumerism in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Ellen Glasgow's *The Wheel of Life*', *Edith Wharton Review*, 22.2 (Fall 2006), 9-15; and Sarah Way Sherman, *Sacramental Shopping: Louisa May Alcott, Edith Wharton and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Jones, p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 100.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65 (emphasis added).

<sup>31</sup> Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), p. 22.

conditions in the US from the 1870s through the 1900s,<sup>32</sup> there is no doubting how Wharton sets up Lily as a long-suffering and hardworking attendant to those on whom she financially depends.<sup>33</sup> The protagonist confesses, for instance, to feeling a 'sense of servitude' when remaining overnight at the Trenors,<sup>34</sup> and Wharton concedes that Lily's 'naturally good temper had been disciplined by years of enforced compliance' during her stays at Bellomont.<sup>35</sup> Mrs Fisher too recognises that Lily 'works like a slave' to keep herself afloat,<sup>36</sup> and after being rejected by the Trenors and left at the mercy of Bertha, Lily inwardly acknowledges how it would be wise to 'work undividedly in her friend's interests'.<sup>37</sup> In her continuous attempts to avoid a life of destitution, Lily thus spends a fair amount of time 'working' for and 'serving' her companions as well as 'complying' with their unceasing demands, and Wharton repeatedly and increasingly deploys an accompanying sense of laboriousness to Lily's actions as she remains tied and indebted to these supposed social superiors. While the narrative opens with isolated moments in which Lily can make tea on a train with 'careless ease' or flirt with Percy Gryce with 'smiling attention',<sup>38</sup> these light-hearted diversions are reduced to a scarcity as she must cope with the constant 'buffeting of chances, which kept her in an attitude of uneasy alertness toward every possibility of life'.<sup>39</sup> As Lily herself concedes to Lawrence Selden, 'I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, when one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time'.<sup>40</sup> Here, Wharton's excessive use of commas and reliance on a multitude of synonymous verbs imbues the language with a kinetic energy that contorts the pleasure of an 'intricate dance' into the monotony of mindless and numbing factory work. Lily thus proves all too aware of the

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<sup>32</sup> Jones, p. 66.

<sup>33</sup> Adeline R. Tinter labels *House of Mirth* as a novel of the 'relatively poor', in a comparative essay alongside Gissing's *New Grub Street*. See *Edith Wharton in Context: Essays on Intertextuality* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, [1999] 2015), 111-116 (p. 111).

<sup>34</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, p. 45.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

arduousness of her chosen path, and of the effort required to keep her falling 'out of step' with the fashions and flippancies of the upper classes whom she otherwise so ardently admires.

Despite the challenges of such work, Wharton takes pains to emphasise how Lily sees the value in the duty, self-discipline and industriousness typically expected of the 'deserving poor' – particularly from her somewhat vulnerable position as an unmarried (and relatively older) woman flitting among the leisure classes of the New York social scene at the turn of the twentieth century. Critics such as Fisher, for example, have suggested that Lily's precarious class/unwed status lends her a 'fluctuating relation to an asymmetrical social world',<sup>41</sup> and requires of her both additional work and canny instincts to navigate potential pitfalls that arise from her awkward social status. After Lily is ejected from her rooms at her Aunt Julia's, for example, the author uses an intensely focalised third-person narrative voice to communicate how Lily immediately 'knew it was not by explanations and counter-charges that she could ever hope to recover her lost standing',<sup>42</sup> and that 'to linger on in town out of season was a fatal admission of defeat'.<sup>43</sup> Just as Wharton earlier acknowledges how it takes 'a mother's unerring vigilance and foresight to land her daughters safely in the arms of wealth and suitability',<sup>44</sup> here she instils in Lily an astute and perceptive recognition of the need, as a woman, to sensitively and meticulously work her way back into the company of her wealthier friends – not through pleading and enforced immobility, but via continuous and exerting plotting and machinations. Once again, then, Lily is forced to 'calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance' in line with the whims of her richer peers, her commitment to working hard being thus framed by Wharton via both classed and gendered perspectives.

While historians such as Jan Lucassen (and Veblen, among others) have attested how 'women's work' such as Lily's 'is often overlooked compared to men's',<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Fisher, p. 78.

<sup>42</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, p. 264.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>45</sup> Jan Lucassen, *The Story of Work: A New History of Humankind* (London: Yale University Press, 2022), p. 1.

Wharton also depicts her protagonist as admiring the social efforts of aspirational men in similar circumstances to her own. Bumping into Simon Rosedale (whom Wharton portrays as an ambitious Jewish outcast) midway through the narrative, for example, Lily admirably observes how her once unappealing suitor 'was gradually attaining his object in life, and that, to Lily, was always less despicable than to miss it'.<sup>46</sup> Here Lily proves impressed by Rosedale's ability to work and stick the course which he has set out for himself; like the patronising administrators of US settlement houses who valued 'practical skills training' and methods of 'cultural engagement' for working women seeking financial support,<sup>47</sup> she is taken in by Rosedale's 'reformation of character', and consequently sees him as increasingly 'deserving' of her attention. For someone not keen on the shame and 'squalid compromise' of full or even part-time employment, Lily thus spends a large portion of the text working hard and appreciating the hard work of others – all so she can barely tread water in the high society to which she so earnestly wants to belong.

Lily's ongoing commitment to working hard – and valuing hard work in others – implies that Wharton at least partially indulges in the 'deserving/undeserving poor' dichotomy prevalent at the time. Considering that Wharton was 'deeply attuned to the intricacies of [a] high society [...] characterised by social rites of acceptance and inclusion',<sup>48</sup> and that she would go on to explore rural poverty in more detail in her novellas *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *Bunner Sisters* (1916), it becomes difficult to doubt her probable familiarity with the gist of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' debate – if not the specific details surrounding its formal application. While the depiction of the poor in *Ethan Frome* has been criticised by many critics and reviewers for lacking appropriate authenticity and insight,<sup>49</sup> Rattray insists that 'the poor, underprivileged, exploited and those generally leading lives of hardship [have been] at the bedrock of Wharton's creative vision from the very beginning' of her literary career,<sup>50</sup> – and Lily's

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<sup>46</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, p. 279.

<sup>47</sup> Fisher, pp. 40, 43.

<sup>48</sup> Melanie Dawson, 'Biography', *Edith Wharton in Context* ed. Laura Rattray (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 41-51 (p. 41).

<sup>49</sup> See Note 7 to Chapter 3 in Candace Waid, *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 214.

<sup>50</sup> Laura Rattray, 'Chapter 7 - Edith Wharton's Unprivileged Lives', *The New Edith Wharton Studies* eds. Jennifer Haytock, Laura Rattray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 113-128 (p. 126).

material and economic struggles (and her status as the 'relatively poor') in *The House of Mirth* appears no exception to this rule.

It might therefore appear that Lily's willingness to work, and her admiration of work more generally, is a shrewd attempt by Wharton to mitigate the possibility that her heroine is prematurely judged for her avoidance of more traditional forms of employment; positioning Lily as an affable, spirited and proactive social climber who at least demonstrates a willingness to 'pay' for her room and board in the form of unpaid labour helps to ward off accusations of idleness that many other American authors at the end of the nineteenth century saw as a kind of 'cultural degeneration' typical of the urban poor.<sup>51</sup> Instead, Lily works hard to maintain the illusion of an upper-class social status, and even bequeaths 'three hundred dollars' to Gerty Farish's Girls' Club,<sup>52</sup> quite literally 'investing' in the notion of the 'deserving poor' herself. While Fisher stresses that 'Lily does not join her friend [...] in fully committing herself to philanthropy',<sup>53</sup> this benevolent and unexpected act of charity has the capacity to endear Lily to those middle- and upper-middle class readers whose unerring judgement Wharton so carefully anticipates – and who were likely to be engaged with similar contemporaneous charities themselves.

That is not to say, however, that Wharton celebrates unending toil for its own sake; on the contrary, she continuously and increasingly emphasises the physical and spiritual toll of this constant and repetitive hard work on Lily, upsetting the traditional parameters of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' debate by lamenting the more noticeable signs of ageing and exhaustion that overcome her protagonist before the novel's close. Games of bridge at the Trenors she can hardly afford, for example, leave Lily's head 'throbbing with fatigue', while innocuous conversation with the dull but wealthy Percy Gryce see 'her face look[ing] hollow and pale', with 'two little lines [appearing] near her mouth'.<sup>54</sup> An admonishment from Judy also sees her 'drop to the level of familiar routine', where she must endure 'long hours of subjection' answering letters to placate even her closest friend.<sup>55</sup> Even when Lily is succumbing to

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<sup>51</sup> Jones, p. 68.

<sup>52</sup> Wharton, p. 155.

<sup>53</sup> Fisher, p. 76.

<sup>54</sup> Wharton, p. 31.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Rosedale's romantic advances, her decision-making skills are reduced to next-to-nothing: she merely 'had a sense of acquiescing in this plan with the passiveness of a sufferer resigned to the surgeon's touch'.<sup>56</sup> The staid and repetitive register of persistent hard work thus evolves into a cold and unfeeling medical simile that sees Lily subsumed beneath a 'state of tranced subservience into which she had insensibly slipped',<sup>57</sup> foreshadowing the 'immense weariness' that envelops her as she passes away in the novel's final pages.<sup>58</sup>

By exposing the taxing and ultimately irreversible effects of unceasing work and monotony – a monotony that she would go on to warn against more explicitly in *The Age of Innocence* (1920),<sup>59</sup> – Wharton critiques the notions that incessant attempts at 'self-reform' and 'self-improvement' (as extolled by working girls' clubs) would lead the 'deserving' poor to physical, spiritual and material success.<sup>60</sup> Instead, Lily's commitment to working for others sees her forced into a series of increasingly perilous situations that put her in constant danger and discomfort, particularly at the hands of predatory men whose money and influence helps them to wield unchecked power. When resisting Gus Trenor's unwanted sexual advances, for instance, Lily finds herself out in the Manhattan streets at night, cast as a weak and helpless 'prisoner', and threatened by a 'shuddering darkness' and eerily 'familiar alien streets'; even the rooms at her Aunt Julia's offer only 'ugliness, impersonality and the fact that nothing in it was really hers'.<sup>61</sup> The bedroom at Gerty's (where she eventually rests) is similarly haunting, inculcating Lily with both 'a sense of physical discomfort' and a 'langour of horror' at the reality of her economic and material situation.<sup>62</sup> Once again 'her body ached with fatigue', and 'all through her troubled sleep she had been conscious of no space to toss in'.<sup>63</sup> As Lily's situation becomes desperate and she goes on to gain actual employment at a milliners, where the reality of poorly-paid manual labour once

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>59</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, [1920] 1999), p. 132.

<sup>60</sup> Fisher, pp. 82, 87.

<sup>61</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, pp. 172-3.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

more demands a 'vigorous exertion of her will',<sup>64</sup> Wharton describes her heroine's descent into poverty in spatially and chromatically recognisable terms that foreground the tragedy of a woman of Lily's class and social background falling so far below her expected station in life. Indeed, Lily joins an 'underworld of toilers' as 'an object of criticism and amusement',<sup>65</sup> and looks forward only to a 'future stretched out before her grey, interminable and desolate'.<sup>66</sup> Lily is thus abandoned to the inevitably 'dingy' trappings of poverty that she was earlier so keen to avoid, and her inability to engage in traditional modes of manual work see her scorned by a class of women she would have previously seen as beneath her. Despite the unpaid labour she has consistently exerted in an effort to live comfortably alongside her wealthier friends and acquaintances, Lily ultimately proves unprepared for her relegation from Veblen's turn-of-the-century leisure classes.

Such dire conclusions are foreshadowed in Wharton's shrewdly ironic tone and the dexterous handling of interactions between Lily and other characters from the novel's opening scenes. When Lily asks Lawrence Selden 'having to work – do you mind that?',<sup>67</sup> for example, Wharton clearly anticipates Lily's own fate as a future worker while simultaneously drawing the reader's attention to her protagonist's innocent outlook, as Lily does not even consider her own current exertions as a form of recognisable labour – nor acknowledge the limited opportunities available to her as an untrained and unmarried woman. Similarly, Judy Trenor fails to see the irony when she informs Lily of another guest's misrecognition of her husband; 'fancy treating Gus as if he were the gardener!',<sup>68</sup> she cries, without even a momentary flicker of acknowledgement that she herself treats her closest friend as if she were her very own private secretary. Gus too betrays a flippancy towards his workers when he complains to Lily that 'it takes a devilish lot of hard work to keep the machinery running' in business.<sup>69</sup> Here, Wharton's unsympathetic, industrial language again foreshadows Lily's fate to work at the milliners, as well as her protagonist's final

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 352.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 332, 331.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

epiphanic realisation that she was always 'just a screw or a cog in the great machine called life',<sup>70</sup> – a remorseless observation adorned with the mechanical language of modernity, but rooted in Lily's growing comprehension that any worker might be easily dismissed as 'undeserving' if it suits the more powerful parties who stand to benefit in their stead. Wharton's satire is thus squarely directed at the privileged upper-classes and their apparent incapacity for recognising not just the value of 'deserving' hard work, but for the various forms of unpaid or exploitative – i.e. 'undeserving' – labour that also go unrewarded in their vicinity.

It thus proves unsurprising that a character like Lily – so eager to belong to that class so wilfully ignorant of the true source of their success – is only briefly able to see the stark reality of her station in life, such as when 'it sometimes shocked her that she and her maid were in the same position, except that the latter received her wages more regularly'.<sup>71</sup> This kind of humorous but discerning aside becomes less frequent as the narrative progresses, and instead, Lily repeatedly represses what she knows about herself and her financial situation to be true. Nowhere is this more marked than when 'she was beginning to feel the strain' of staying with her Aunt Julia,<sup>72</sup> but takes out her frustrations at the charwoman working outside her room rather than confront the matter directly:

The stairs were still carpetless, and on the way up to her room she was arrested on the landing by an encroaching tide of soapsuds. Gathering up her skirts, she drew aside with an impatient gesture; and as she did so she had the odd sensation of having already found herself in the same situation but in different surroundings. It seemed to her that she was again descending the staircase from Selden's rooms; and looking down to remonstrate with the dispenser of the soapy flood, she found herself met by a lifted stare which had once before confronted her under similar circumstances. It was the char-woman of the Benedick who, resting on crimson elbows, examined her with the same unflinching curiosity, the same apparent reluctance to let her pass. On this occasion, however, Miss Bart was on her own ground.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 359-60.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

'Don't you see that I wish to go by? Please move your pail,' she said sharply. The woman at first seemed not hear; then, without a word of excuse, she pushed back her pail and dragged a wet floor-cloth across the landing, keeping her eyes fixed on Lily while the latter swept by. It was insufferable that Mrs Peniston should have such creatures about the house; and Lily entered her room resolved that the woman should be dismissed that evening.<sup>73</sup>

Like Gus Trenor, Lily momentarily considers the 'devilish lot of hard work' she puts into enduring her Aunt Julia's uncomfortable rooms as more taxing, more demanding and more 'deserving' of warranted sympathy than the endless (and demonstrably thankless) cleaning undertaken by Mrs Peniston's hired charwoman. Unlike at Selden's earlier in the text, she makes a point of haughtily gathering up her finer clothes to step across to her room, and 'sharply remonstrate[s]' a figure she perceives as her social inferior. Yet at the same time, Lily's 'impatience' with the charwoman betrays a subconscious awareness of how her own increasingly precarious financial situation mirrors the economic realities faced by Mrs Peniston's hired help. So fearful does Lily prove of the charwoman's 'crimson elbows', unmistakable physical markers of manual labour, and her 'unflinching stare' that threatens Lily's already unstable sense-of-self, she even settles on 'dismissing' this unwelcome vision of her potential future before she has time to consciously reckon with it. Like her wealthier companions, then, even the vulnerable and hardworking Lily is framed by Wharton as an uncritical participant in the 'deserving/undeserving poor' debate – even though by the close of the novel, she fatally succumbs to its injustices and inconsistencies as well.

For Patrick Mullen, 'the seeming weaknesses of Lily's character' are actually 'key strengths which allow Wharton to frame possibilities for critical thinking from within the forces of capitalism'.<sup>74</sup> Lily's 'weaknesses' – her vanity, her naivety, her indecisiveness – are thus conduits by which Wharton is able to expose the fallacies of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' dichotomy that persisted at the time in which she was writing. While the author utilises the debate's existence to justify various characters' drives and motivations, and to protect her protagonists against readers' early judgements, Lily's constant deferral of recognising the practical reality (rather

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Patrick Mullen, 'The Aesthetics of Self-Management: Intelligence, Capital and The House of Mirth', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 42.1 (Spring 2009), 40-61 (pp. 40-41).

than the pervasive mythos) of her situation is what ultimately puts her in harms' way; her propensity for working hard – minus her poor hat-making abilities – has little to do with her demise. Wharton details how to eventually 'find some means of earning her living' proves a 'severe shock to [Lily's] self-confidence',<sup>75</sup> but in the novel's conclusion, Lily also lambasts the society which fails to recognise her worth or the hard work she has been performing all along: 'what debt did she owe to a social order which had condemned and banished her without trial?'.<sup>76</sup> As the voices of protagonist and author begin to coalesce, Wharton rallies against the stereotypes underpinning the schema of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' that might leave her heroine otherwise wanting. In her critique of New York high society and Progressive Era philanthropy, the author is instead eager to expose the inconsistent application of the popular notions of (or attitudes toward) work, un/employment, and the 'deserving/undeserving poor' that see Lily mortally succumb to economic destitution, despite working hard throughout the narrative. Such an ending suggests that, at the very least, Wharton believes some form of alternate social order and almsgiving is both possible and desirable, if not clearly essential – particularly for those workers in even more dire financial straits than a character so fortunate as Lily Bart.

### Insecure Employment in *The Card*

In *The Card*, Arnold Bennett offers a similar – albeit more light-hearted – critique of Edwardian notions of work, labour and un/employment through the endeavours and misadventures of his working-class hero, Henry 'Denry' Machin. Described by Frank Swinnerton as 'an extravaganza portraying a typical Five Towns adventurer',<sup>77</sup> *The Card* introduces the reader to Denry by candidly describing him as 'not intellectual, [nor] industrious',<sup>78</sup> yet Denry's exploits throughout the text are rooted in what might easily be viewed as his 'intellectual' manipulation of those around him and his 'industrious' pursuit of a supposedly 'workless' life. After undertaking dancing lessons at the start of the narrative to win around a local Countess, Denry successively

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<sup>75</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, p. 311.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

<sup>77</sup> Frank Swinnerton, *Arnold Bennett* (London: British Council and the National Book League, 1950), p. 19.

<sup>78</sup> Arnold Bennett, *The Card* (London: Penguin, [1911] 2016), p. 1.

assumes a variety of roles and occupations that dwarfs even Lily's impressive résumé; in rapid succession, he works as a rent collector, shipwreck tour operator, chocolatier, Thrift Club President, newspaper magnate, town councillor and football club owner, and eventually becomes the Mayor of his hometown of Bursley. Such a list hardly qualifies as the flippant undertakings of a work-averse or 'undeserving' scrounger, and although early on Bennett does concede that 'Denry would have maintained the average dignity of labour on a potbank had he not [...] won a scholarship from the Board School to the Endowed School',<sup>79</sup> he also insists that 'the thrill of being magnificent seized' his protagonist, and Denry was 'determined to be as sublime as anyone'.<sup>80</sup>

From the outset, Bennett thus neatly introduces an ongoing tension between privilege and hard work that underpins several narrative outcomes in the text, in addition to a number of narratorial asides. While Denry – like Lily – is clearly meant to be viewed as an individual unsuited to traditional notions of full-time employment, Bennett – like Wharton – repeatedly describes his protagonist's activities in the vocabulary of hard work, asserting that while Denry may be considered 'undeserving' by some, 'chiefly, [it was] his poverty [that] was against him'.<sup>81</sup> These descriptions of hard work are evident not only in early scenes where Denry must overcome some obvious markers of poverty – including his 'neat and shabby' attire and his inability to 'say [...] things naturally',<sup>82</sup> – but in almost every pursuit he undertakes. This suggests not only that insecure and constantly revolving forms of employment do little to dampen Denry's appetite for ongoing mental and physical engagement, but that the consistency with which he applies himself to his work refutes the very notion that he – and others like him – are somehow 'undeserving' of a middle class reader's sympathy, either by virtue of his birth, his social background, or his un/employment status.

Problems faced by those who suffer from a (relatively) impoverished birth are confronted by Bennett in the novel's very first chapter. Tricking his way into a scholarship 'by audacity rather than learning, and [through] chance rather than

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-52.

design',<sup>83</sup> Denry is depicted as exercising a natural but non-academic 'curiosity' when he surreptitiously adjusts his entrance grades for the Endowed School, the author subtly indicating how more advantageous opportunities are beyond Denry's reach due to the 'design' of a society so heavily contingent on class, income and social background.<sup>84</sup> Unsurprisingly, Bennett's outspoken narrator refuses to pass judgement: 'Of course it was dishonest [...] but I will not agree that Denry was uncommonly vicious. Every schoolboy is dishonest, by the adult standard'.<sup>85</sup> Bennett's unnamed narrator thus exhibits an open-minded and even-handed moral outlook that clearly contrasts with the more damning views of those supposedly philanthropic advocates of the Poor Law Reforms and members of the COS who insist upon distinguishing between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor even into the early years of the twentieth century. By deploying an authoritative tone and confident first-person declarative so early in the text, Bennett signals a clear but drastic break with the prevalent opinions around labour and social justice of the era; instead of instantly capitulating to the idea that we as readers must beware of 'being hoodwinked by the cunning poor' – to borrow Robert Humphreys' expression,<sup>86</sup> – we are invited to consider how 'it was inconceivable' that an individual as audacious and wily as Denry 'should work in clay with his hands'.<sup>87</sup> From the very start of *The Card*, Bennett therefore dismantles the overarching philosophy underpinning the 'deserving/undeserving poor' debate, breaching the usually causal links between deceitful behaviour and punishment, and between honest hard work and success.

The language of labour nonetheless imbues nearly all Denry's efforts in business, suggesting that – having set out on such an unorthodox and potentially offensive start – Bennett recognises the importance of cajoling his middle-class audience by yielding to some of their more conventional perspectives around work and un/employment. Initially, such coaxing is playful rather than severe, with the narrator situating Denry's behaviour squarely in the anti-heroic picaresque tradition, teasingly describing how 'nothing was easier' for Denry than to insert his own name

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Humphreys, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> Bennett, *The Card*, p. 2.

'inconspicuously' onto the list of invitations for the Countess's upcoming Ball; how 'nothing was easier' for Denry 'than to lose the original lists, inadvertently'.<sup>88</sup> While Bennett courts the risk of outraging readers who would contest that such a socially advantageous invitation should be so 'easily' come by, the humorous tone belies the subsequent efforts that Denry will eventually have to go to secure a dance with the Countess, including being forced to attend 'Miss Earp's evening [dance] classes' to bring him up to speed,<sup>89</sup> and his difficulties in acquiring the appropriate clothing for a ball that goes beyond Denry's budget: 'He now knew that acquiring a dress-suit was merely the beginning of anxiety. Shirt! Collar! Tie! Studs! Cufflinks! Gloves! Handkerchief!'.<sup>90</sup> Here, Bennett's exclamatory list of material objects highlights the cumulative effort undertaken by Denry in addition to the initially 'easy' acquirement of his ticket. Indeed, in lieu of a new purchase he can ill afford, Denry decides 'that his church boots must [also] be dazzled up' for the occasion, but even this seemingly innocuous task is fraught with unforeseen difficulties: 'The pity was that [...] he forgot to dazzle them up until after he had fairly put his collar on and his necktie in a bow. It is imprudent to touch blacking in a dress-shirt, so Denry had to undo the past and begin again. This hurried him'.<sup>91</sup> Actions are repeated in a frenzied cycle of activity, culminating in the internalised admission that Denry 'had lavished an enormous amount of brains and energy to the end of displaying himself in this refined and novel attire'.<sup>92</sup> In these initial scenes, at least, Bennett thus conforms to middle-class notions of work and social justice, humorously demonstrating how deceitful actions often come with unexpected consequences. If they are to ever warrant a chance at redemption, the 'undeserving' poor such as Denry are expected to atone for their 'crimes' through 'enormous' hard work and continuous exertion – in spite of (or alongside) their ability to otherwise mildly amuse.

Later depictions of Denry 'working hard' see the protagonist himself adhering to the very values and ideals that underpin the 'deserving/undeserving poor' framework. When acting as the tour guide of a Llandudno shipwreck, for instance, his

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

actions take on a frantic and hyperactive demeanour, suggesting that he experiences genuine but isolated moments of joy in putting himself to ostensibly 'good' use. Over the course of a single morning he goes about hiring crewmen, organising a trip schedule, producing handbill copy, and advertising across town. Bennett describes how, 'instead of waiting for the nine o'clock boarding-house breakfast, [Denry] hurried energetically into the streets' to get started,<sup>93</sup> emphasising the character's boundless spirit in the face of a potentially lucrative capitalist enterprise. When 'his first idea was to make that income larger and larger still', Denry's 'fertility of invention' also sees him '[reprinting] his article from the *Staffordshire Signal* descriptive of the night of the wreck, with a photograph of the lifeboat and its crew, and [presenting] a copy to every client of his photographic department' in a bid to increase his profits.<sup>94</sup>

By the time he is working as a chocolatier, Denry's penchant for hard work goes even further, with Bennett substituting unceasing kinetic energy with the more thoughtful and sensitive deliberations of an astute business acumen: the protagonist admonishes himself for 'preparing the [chocolate] himself in his bedroom', and for failing to see that the situation 'needed the close attention of half a dozen men of business'.<sup>95</sup> Despite earlier considering his own good fortune a result of 'magic' or something akin to a 'miracle',<sup>96</sup> Denry is depicted here as a naturally evolving capitalist, learning from his earlier mistakes all so he might gain greater financial rewards. He stops veering wildly from one scheming enterprise to another, and recognises when undertaking the labour 'of half a dozen men of business' sees him exhausted to the point of making 'silly' mistakes and working harder than had he been engaged in full-time employment.<sup>97</sup> Such a development is foreshadowed when Bennett earlier concedes that Denry was 'always his finest in a crisis',<sup>98</sup> – hardly a phrase to describe the inactivity and idleness so often associated with the 'undeserving' poor.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 91-93.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

Like many members of the business and merchant classes of turn-of-the-century England, Denry considers himself 'unequal' to or 'undeserving' of fruitful economic opportunities if he finds himself working harder than is absolutely necessary, and Bennett utilises this epiphany to begin satirising and unravelling the bedrock of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' debate otherwise lurking at the fringes of the text. Seemingly adhering to John Stuart Mill's philosophy that investing capital is still just as 'deserving of reward as [...] productive labour',<sup>99</sup> Denry abandons his confectionary racket, and goes on to manipulate the Countess of Chell into financing his 'Five Towns Universal Thrift Club' so that 'he acquired wealth mechanically now'.<sup>100</sup> The thrift club proves to be his greatest success to date. Hard work is no longer required of him, and yet Bennett still depicts Denry as 'simply tingling with pride' at his apparent accomplishments.<sup>101</sup> Like Gus Trenor, whose work is also described in the language of automation, Denry comes to (temporarily) believe in his own 'deserving' status by virtue of the wealth that now surrounds him; he bags himself a motorcar – which Bennett calls the 'supreme symbol of swagger' in the Edwardian age,<sup>102</sup> – marries the beautiful Nellie Cotterill, and decides to honeymoon abroad based on the advice of his now more affluent and sophisticated companions: 'The destination, it need hardly be said, was Switzerland. After Mrs Capron-Smith's remarks on the necessity of going to Switzerland in winter if one wished to respect one's self, there was really no alternative to Switzerland'.<sup>103</sup> Here, Bennett explicitly ties notions of self-respect with the kind of lavish expenditure Denry was previously unfamiliar with, repeating the European destination no less than three times to spotlight its innate foreignness to – and incredible distance from – the more modest and provincial Five Towns. Somewhat paradoxically, Denry becomes symbolic of several conflicting attitudes towards wealth and work at once: he is a shining example of a successful and humorously appealing – yet so far, unpunished – grifter; a model for social mobility, demonstrative of how hard work might eventually lead to economic

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<sup>99</sup> Dale E. Miller, *John Stuart Mill: Moral, Social and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 157.

<sup>100</sup> Bennett, *The Card*, p. 198.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

prosperity; and an affluent businessman who now uncritically accepts typical Victorian attitudes around pride and self-respect that underpin the 'deserving/undeserving poor' dichotomy.

Upon arriving in Switzerland, however, it quickly becomes clear that Denry and Nellie's social backgrounds work to their disadvantage. In the Alps the pair prove 'outclassed by the world which travels', and 'try as they might [...they remained] morally intimidated'.<sup>104</sup> Despite having 'ten times plenty of money' for their trip, husband and wife find that 'the [present] company was imposing', and that these new companions 'were constantly saying the strangest things with an air of perfect calm'.<sup>105</sup> Here, Bennett's awkward, hyperbolic description of Denry's newly-acquired wealth clearly anticipates the atmosphere of 'strangeness' which the lower-class married couple struggle to translate abroad, betraying how hopelessly out of place they are among their wealthier peers – a fact emphasised later in Nellie's humorous but undeniably awkward attempts at skiing.<sup>106</sup> After being caught-out lying about the length of their marriage, the couple are also forced to endure the 'insinuation, disdain, and lofty amusement' of their fellow hotel guests, and while Bennett concedes that 'the fault was utterly Denry's', the protagonist's repeated attempts at humiliating the snobbish Captain Deverax see him treated with 'a haughty and icy ceremoniousness' in return.<sup>107</sup> Before Nellie can admonish her husband, Denry quickly responds with his own haughty and somewhat defensive rebuttal of the pride and self-respect he was earlier craving: 'I can't stand uppishness, and I won't. I'm from the Five Towns, I am'.<sup>108</sup> Just as Lily reaches a final state of indignance towards New York society at the end of *The House of Mirth*, Denry proves insulted by 'a social order which had condemned and banished' him on the basis of his inexperience and social ineptitude.<sup>109</sup> At the close of his trip, he thus refutes the apparent hard work and unquestionably 'deserving' status of the Captain and the other, wealthier guests whose company he has attempted to infiltrate. Instead, through repetition of the first-

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., pp. 219, 229.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>109</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, p. 349.

person pronoun, he reclaims his working-class background and impoverished birth, and wears his modest social origins as a badge of honour.

In *The Card*, Bennett thus exposes the malleability and hypocrisy of an economic and moral philosophy that is, in reality, founded on and fuelled by class-based prejudice and discrimination. Despite initially exemplifying the 'unemployed' and 'morally suspect' figure who Moran believes constitute the 'undeserving poor',<sup>110</sup> Denry goes on to achieve the economic success that both the YMCA and books such as *Self-Help* posit as only attainable through honest hard work and righteous self-discipline – two attributes the protagonist additionally complicates by working hard *dishonestly* and enacting self-discipline *without* excessive moralising. At the same time, Denry's social background frequently mars him as 'undeserving' in the eyes of the rich and socially 'superior', even in the eyes of someone as destitute as the newly-bankrupt Mr Cotterill. Despite Denry proving himself 'dutiful' and 'gainfully employed' and therefore 'deserving', as outlined by Moran,<sup>111</sup> Bennett depicts how his working-class hero's financial success does little to permanently endear him to his richer peers. As historian Paul Thompson explains, 'in the early [years of the] twentieth-century, the open display of wealth was an essential element in the upper-class style of life', but 'class was [also] the backbone of social organisation', and 'to be upper-class was to wield social authority'.<sup>112</sup> While others, such as K. W. W. Aitken, observe how in the final years of the Edwardian era the 'belief in self-reliance was [slowly] being displaced by a belief in collective action for the relief of the less fortunate',<sup>113</sup> Denry's awkward interactions with the upper-classes explicitly demonstrate how flourishing his newly-acquired wealth and finally abiding by the rules which govern the 'deserving' poor still fail to see him accepted into the upper echelons of English society. It doesn't really matter how much money he has made, how hard he has worked, or how 'deserving' he has proven himself – the rich will never accept him. Although the 'famous Royal Commission [on the Poor Law and Unemployed] of 1905' began 'calling for the

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<sup>110</sup> Moran, p. 27.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London: Routledge [1975] 1992), pp. 3, 191, 194.

<sup>113</sup> K. W. W. Aitken, *The Last Years of Liberal England, 1900-1914* (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1972), p. 75.

destruction of the old system and [for] an extensive overhaul of the nation's welfare administration',<sup>114</sup> prevailing attitudes of social snobbery were clearly, in Bennett's eyes, much more difficult to overthrow. As Kinley E. Roby details, 'Bennett felt intense compassion for the poor and disenfranchised', and it was 'probable' that the author's 'growing sympathy with the Labour Party and his initial support of the Worker's Revolution in Russia were products of his early life in the Potteries'.<sup>115</sup> Having originated from a class-background not so dissimilar to Denry, Bennett complicates and distorts attitudes around the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor which are governed by middle-class propriety and prejudice. Within *The Card*, questions over who exactly might be considered 'un/deserving' and what activity constitutes proper 'employment' and/or 'hard work' are consequently called into question.

The final, most outrageous contortion of conventional attitudes towards work occurs on the final page of the text, when Denry not only takes up ownership of the local football team in his role as Mayor of Bursley, but is positively celebrated by the local community for his 'adventurous spirit' and unlikely social ascent – celebrated for 'the great cause of cheering us all up'.<sup>116</sup> Described as drawing on the English 'picaresque' tradition in *The Card* by multiple critics, including Walter Ernest Allen,<sup>117</sup> Reginald Pound,<sup>118</sup> and Jonathan Duke-Evans,<sup>119</sup> Bennett imbues Denry with the mischievous charm and roguish appeal of earlier literary picaros (such as Tom Jones or Tristram Shandy) in an attempt to win over his middle-class readership. As Duke-Evans asserts, there has 'always [been] a space' in English culture 'to celebrate the skills of the trickster',<sup>120</sup> and for Bennett, it is the very *unlikeliness* of someone of Denry's modest background making it to the top that sees the novel become a celebration of social mobility – regardless of how such an ascent was obtained, or

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<sup>114</sup> Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry, 'Introduction', *The Edwardian Era* eds. Jane Beckett, Deborah Cherry (Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1987), p. 17.

<sup>115</sup> Kinley E. Roby, 'Arnold Bennett's Social Conscience', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 17.4 (Winter 1971-72), 513-524 (pp. 514, 520).

<sup>116</sup> Bennett, *The Card*, pp. 231, 246.

<sup>117</sup> Walter Ernest Allen, *Arnold Bennett* (London: Folcroft Press, [1948] 1969), p. 89.

<sup>118</sup> Reginald Pound, *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1953), p. 52.

<sup>119</sup> Jonathan Duke-Evans, *An English Tradition? The History and Significance of Fair Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 5.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

what unorthodox or even unscrupulous methods were deployed to propel him there. Overcoming the status quo and defying his Edwardian betters proves 'cheer' enough, and in this conclusion, Bennett diverges from Wharton's more tragic approach to non-traditional modes of work and un/employment at the turn-of-the-twentieth century. Whereas Lily's hard work goes unrewarded (ostensibly for being non-traditional, but partly due to her precarious status as an unmarried woman among the American leisure-classes), Denry's unexpected success (buoyed by the advantages of his masculinity) makes for a joyful, unruly conclusion to his misadventures. 'Undeserving' as he might be considered by the average, middle-class Edwardian reader, such a conclusion undercuts and disavows the legitimacy of 'deserving/undeserving poor' dichotomy which Wharton partially indulges, and suggests that Bennett, in a more radical manner, sees at least some limited but promising potential for shifting attitudes around debates on social, political, and economic reform towards the end of the Edwardian period – at least for young men as wily, charming and fortunate as Edward Henry Machin.

## Conclusion

Throughout *The House of Mirth* and *The Card*, both Lily and Denry's attempts at avoiding, redefining and/or adapting to proper modes of employment are frequently described in the language of labour and hard work that categorised individuals as 'deserving' at the close of the nineteenth century – both in the US, in which charity was dispensed by a plethora of settlement houses and working girls' societies, and in the UK, which was still in thrall of the Poor Law Reforms and the strictures of the COS. Despite some Edwardian and Progressive Era shifts in attitudes toward work and poverty (as defined by Jones and Aitken above), the non-traditional nature of both Lily and Denry's un/employment nevertheless sees them struggling to obtain the respect and admiration of their peers, especially when they are at the most economically vulnerable. Within their respective texts, Wharton and Bennett thus complicate the boundaries between what constitutes 'deserving' and 'undeserving' labour in the early years of the twentieth century, particularly by viewing the monotonous drudgery of work and its accompanying financial hardships from new and unexpected perspectives – perspectives situated outside the working-classes and beyond traditional forms of employment.

Yet in their vastly differing conclusions for their protagonists, these authors also betray contrasting perspectives on the strength and durability of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' dichotomy. While the question of intent is left deliberately vague and ambiguous by Wharton, Lily's death by overdosing on a sleeping draught, for example, sees the author capitulate to some of the common prejudices about the poor that were pervasive at the time of writing (including, as Jennie A. Kassanoff asserts, that 'the sale or abuse of drugs [was] usually a sign of class inferiority').<sup>121</sup> Despite critics such as Carol J. Singley and Hermione Lee defending Wharton's critique of Gilded Age New York and her own family background,<sup>122</sup> Lily's fate is undeniably depicted using the conventional vocabulary of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' debate – particularly when she is cast out into the streets by her judgemental and domineering Aunt Julia. When Lily herself insightfully confesses to Selden that 'one of the conditions of citizenship [among the higher classes] is not to think too much about money, and the only way not to think about money is to have a great deal of it',<sup>123</sup> Wharton both outlines the hypocrisy of her peers and emphasises the solidity of the status quo, failing to imagine an alternate social order in which Lily might genuinely thrive, and feeding 'directly' into what Wai-Chee Dimmock sees as the 'the mechanisms of the marketplace'.<sup>124</sup> Instead, Lily's 'sense of servitude' is described as a 'tax she had to pay',<sup>125</sup> and while Wharton does recognise the effort Lily pours into her continuous exploits among the rich, and is not completely unsympathetic to her protagonist's plight, she proves content merely to critique the 'deserving/undeserving poor' dichotomy – rather than dismantle and reconfigure it altogether.

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<sup>121</sup> Jennie A. Kassanoff, *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 178.

<sup>122</sup> See Carol J. Singley, 'Introduction' in *Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth: A Casebook*, ed. Carol J. Singley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 3-4; and Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Pimlico, [2007] 2013), p. 152, respectively.

<sup>123</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, p. 80.

<sup>124</sup> Wai-Chee Dimmock, 'Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*', *PMLA*, 100.5 (October 1985), 783-392 (p. 790).

<sup>125</sup> Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, p. 45.

In contrast, critics such as Arlene Young find that Denry's adventures in *The Card* challenge 'class stereotypes more directly'.<sup>126</sup> While others, such as Roby and John Lucas, are more guarded in their assessments of the novel – the latter even labelling it a 'vulgar and complacent' and 'boorish and philistine' text only suited for the 'magazine public',<sup>127</sup> – Bennett's jocular refusal to indulge in the prejudices and unyielding parameters of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' debate reconfigures the beguiling picaro for a brand new century in an effort to recontextualise debates around un/acceptable notions of labour and un/employment that had been stifled by the Poor Law Reforms and the activities of the COS for far too long. Although 'Bennett's father [...] was a man of drive and ambition who had raised himself and his family above their impoverished origins before Arnold had reached his teens',<sup>128</sup> in *The Card* Bennett avoids the pitfall of considering characters like his father or his own family as somehow more 'deserving' than the less successful friends and neighbours he grew up around. Whereas, in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton's tragic ending and moral ambivalence imply a subconscious and somewhat reluctant investment in popular and prejudiced notions of work, poverty and un/employment that would have been pervasive among her social milieu, Bennett's *The Card* possesses an objective willingness to celebrate the exploits of an anti-hero with no real moral quandary or debate about his 'deserving' or 'undeserving' status. As a result, the humour and warmth of the latter text proves more subversive than the sharp and insightful social satire for which Wharton is so well known. Where Wharton proves constrained by social and moral convention, Bennett opts for a kind of anarchic transcendence in response to the 'deserving/undeserving poor' debate, exhibiting a readiness to discard the prejudices around work and poverty that were pervasive through the long nineteenth century.

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<sup>126</sup> Arlene Young, *Class, Culture and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents and Working Women* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 86.

<sup>127</sup> See Roby, p. 522; and John Lucas, *Arnold Bennett: A Study of His Fiction* (London: Methuen Press, 1974), p. 123.

<sup>128</sup> Young, p. 101.



BIOGRAPHY: John D. Attridge (he/him) is an independent researcher in literary modernism and working-class studies, currently teaching academic skills at Regent College London. He earned a PhD from the University of Surrey in 2023, with a thesis centred on the relationship between class and identity politics in the novels of E. M. Forster. He has previously published in the *Journal of Working-Class Studies* and *The Modernist Review*, and his research interests include Marxism, cultural studies, Edwardian literature, and the interplay between class and teaching pedagogies in twenty-first century literary studies. At Surrey, he achieved the Lewis Elton Award for Innovation in Teaching.

CONTACT: [johndavid.attridge@rcl.ac.uk](mailto:johndavid.attridge@rcl.ac.uk)