

## 200-Level 2010 Writing Contest Winner: Literary Analysis

### Jungle Fever

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(Written for Dr. Vanderlaan's English 212 Course)

While Edith Wharton is generally considered a Realist author because of her elite subject matter, unbiased descriptive language, and criticism of societal views, she also displays characteristics of a Naturalist author, such as her strong focus on heredity. In her short story "Roman Fever," heredity is so essential that theories of natural selection are evident. Charles Darwin first suggested the idea of sexual selection as the process of choosing a mate, and the theory of female mate choice as choosing mates in order to benefit your offspring. These scientific ideas are strikingly apparent in Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley's competition for Delphin Slade and their ultimate production of inferior and superior offspring, respectively.

In *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin described sexual selection as "the advantage which certain individuals have over others of the same sex and species solely based in respect to reproduction" (216). In nature, males who exhibit superior characteristics are favored by females and thus selected as mates. Often times it is males, who display a richness of color such as in the peacock's tail, that are favored. Similarly, in "Roman Fever" Delphin is preferred by both Alida Slade and Grace Ansley because of his bright personality. He is said to be Alida's "equal in social gifts" (Baym 1713), meaning his character is "brilliant" (Baym 1713) and he emanates "vividness" (Baym 1713) like Alida. It can also be assumed he was an attractive man, because beauties such as Grace and Alida sought him out. These traits were favored because they "indicate high heritable qualities" (Paul 884). Like the full mane of a lion, or the large antlers of a deer, these traits are considered to indicate the potential success of offspring sired by the superior male. For this reason, females compete for access to these favored males. As Paul states, "The stereotype of aggressive, ardent males competing over access to essentially passive, coy females is increasingly being shown to be inappropriate" (878-9), meaning females play a larger role in mate selection than previously understood. In "Roman Fever" Delphin did not pursue Alida or Grace, rather they pursued him through two methods of competition used by animals in the wild. The first method is to "drive away or kill their rivals" (Paul 878). Grace initially attempted to drive Alida away by scaring her with the story of her great-aunt Harriet, who sent her sister out to catch malaria so that she could not steal the man they both wanted. Alida says to Grace, "And you frightened *me* with [the story], that winter when you and I were [in Rome] as girls. The winter I was engaged to Delphin" (Baym 1716). Alida then attempts to use "contest competition" (Paul

880) to remove Grace from the picture. Contest competition is attempting to “[exclude] rivals by displays or physical combat” (Paul 880). In the wild this might mean a physical fight over a male, but in Wharton’s “Roman Fever” it means Alida luring Grace into the night with a false letter from Delphin in hope of her becoming ill because of her delicate throat. She explains this to Grace when she says, “I wanted you out of the way, that’s all” (Baym 1718). The next method the girls use in order to obtain Delphin is to charm him into choosing them over their rival. Alida had obviously already charmed him because she procured an engagement from him, but Grace has continued to try to win him over. Her final attempt to excite and charm him into being her mate is agreeing to meet him at the Colosseum. This is an exhibit of “scramble competition” (Paul 880), which is trying to procure a mate before your rivals can (Paul 880). She is trying to solidify their relationship so that Delphin will commit to her and not his fiancée, Alida. The fact that they end up making love in the Colosseum is an example of “alternative mating techniques” (Paul 880), which is utilizing “inconspicuous mating behavior by sneaky copulations” (Paul 880). Grace was able to have offspring sired by Delphin because of their secret rendezvous that night, therefore she out competed Alida. According to this theory, Delphin is presumably fine with this situation because of his natural male tendencies. Paul states that males desire to “maximize their reproductive success” (878), which basically means mating with multiple females. However, in this story it is ultimately the women who select their mates, not the men.

In nature, females choose males with the preferred qualities because “male attractiveness and offspring fitness” are closely related (Paul 884). If they breed with superior males, their offspring will be viable and successful. This is the benefit females get from choosing a superior male; their offspring will have an advantage and will mate with a superior match and thus propagate their genes as well as advance the species. Similarly, Alida and Grace chose Delphin because his admirable qualities would surely transfer to his children. This is evident when Alida says, “I always wanted a brilliant daughter” (Baym 1715). However, she did not get one through her union with Delphin. In the wild, female animals attempt to mate with a male “whose genes complement her own, producing an ‘optimal’ diversity in offspring” (Paul 886). Although it is not certain whether personality traits are transferred through genetic material, this may shed light on why the daughter produced by Grace and Delphin, Babs, is so much more “brilliant” ( Bayam 1715) than Alida’s daughter, Jenny. Grace and Delphin were opposites; therefore, their offspring had “a degree of heterozygosity” (Paul 884), meaning she had a wide variety of qualities which made her superior. Babs had her mother’s beauty and her father’s winning personality. However, the “female mating preference can become self-reinforcing” (Paul 885), meaning the superior offspring will then mate with a superior individual and they will produce a child

like Jenny. Jenny was the result of Alida's poor choice to mate with an individual "equal" (Baym 1713) to herself, even though he possessed the favored qualities. Alida and Delphin produced two children: one was a boy, who "died suddenly in boyhood" (Baym 1713), and was therefore not successful, and one was Jenny, who was not lively and passionate like her mother and father. Because of Jenny's inferior nature, she will not be able to compete with Babs for the desirable young Marchese. Her mother makes note of this when she states, "Jenny has no chance beside [Babs]" (Baym 1715). This demonstrates that, just like in nature, one male may be good for one female but wrong for another (Paul 886). Evidence that having two similar parents is not advantageous is also evident in Grace and Horace's union. It can be assumed that they were incompatible because they did not produce children. Perhaps this was because Horace was a "duplicate of his wife" (Baym 1712). Whatever the reason, it is evident that female mate choice is subjective, and that though one male may possess the favored traits, he may not be the best match for every female.

Wharton's Naturalistic study of heredity in "Roman Fever" perfectly demonstrates the laws of the jungle, one of these being the cycle of heredity. It leaves the reader wondering what Babs and Jenny's fate will be. It seems as if they must repeat their mother's competition and complete the unalterable cycle that is nature.

#### Works Cited

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