Simon Rosedale’s Ethics In The House Of Mirth

In Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth Simon Rosedale is one of those characters that no one really knows how to feel about. Over the course of the story, his ethics change from pure self-interest to caring about Lily and back to total self-interest, all the while never really showing it. It all starts with his interaction with Lily as she leaves Selden’s apartment for a cup of tea, which he sees as lovers meeting up. Then his actions with the public after Lily leaves, spreading rumors that he knows will hurt her. Later he catches Lily on her fall into the slums of the middle class, offering her support and advice if she ever wants or needs it. Finally, he shoots her down at her question about marriage, crushing what little hope she has left, potentially leading to her overdose.

Shortly after the story starts Lily runs into her friend Selden and goes with him to his apartment to have a cup of tea. On the way out she is seen by the owner of the apartment, Mr. Simon Rosedale. Rosedale stops her before she gets on her train leaving town to talk to her. “‘Oh, Mr. Rosedale—how are you?’ she said, perceiving that the irrepressible annoyance on her face was reflected in the sudden intimacy of his smile. Mr. Rosedale stood scanning her with interest and approval (Wharton Bk.1, Ch. 1)” This quote shows his first interaction as one of not-so-casual curiosity, more or less Mr. Rosedale sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong. This leads to Lily dismissing him as just casually trying to start a conversation. ''You're very kind; but I couldn't think of troubling you,’ she said, extending her hand to Mr. Rosedale; and heedless of his protestations, she sprang into the rescuing vehicle, and called out a breathless order to the driver (Wharton Bk.1 Ch.1)” However, in reality, this was Rosedale’s questionable ethics bleeding into Lily’s life, giving him some “blackmail” even though he didn’t actually know what was going on, causing Lily troubles down the road.

After this encounter, Rosedale decides that he should tell people about this new information he thinks that he has acquired. Instead of thinking about what could happen if he told everyone what he thought happened, as opposed to what actually happened. Rosedale’s seedy morals really shine through at the beginning of the book when he only takes his own personal interest and emotions into consideration. “The worst of it was that she had always snubbed and ignored him. On his first appearance—when her improvident cousin, Jack Stepney, had obtained for him (in return for favours too easily guessed) a card to one of the vast impersonal Van Osburgh 'crushes'—Rosedale, with that mixture of artistic sensibility and business astuteness which characterizes his race, had instantly gravitated toward Miss Bart (Wharton Bk.1 Ch.2).” Rosedale spreading the rumors in the first place could be seen as him “lashing out” against Lily for denying him a chance at her hand in marriage. Lily’s reaction to the knowledge that Rosedale is spreading rumors is one of total distress. “—it would have been so simple to tell Rosedale that she had been taking tea with Selden! The mere statement of the fact would have rendered it innocuous. But, after having let herself be surprised in a falsehood, it was doubly stupid to snub the witness of her discomfiture (Wharton Bk.1 Ch.2).” She realizes what he thinks he saws and just how severely this could impact her social standing because everyone at this time period took someone’s word as scripture.

Not so soon after the party, Lily has fallen into the middle class and is struggling to get by, let alone keep up her reputation within the higher society. As she stumbles home from work one

day in a drug-induced stupor, Rosedale finds her and walks her home offering any assistance she might need in the future. “They had parted with scorn on her side and anger upon his; but all trace of these emotions seemed to vanish as their hands met, and she was only aware of a confused wish that she might continue to hold fast to him. ‘Why, what's the matter, Miss Lily? You're not well!’ he exclaimed; and she forced her lips into a pallid smile of reassurance (Wharton Bk.2 Ch.10).” From this, we can start to see the softer side of Simon, although comparable to the soft underbelly of a snake, as he begins to show support for Lily. Almost as if he feels bad for her situation he comforts her when he gets her home, assuring her that no matter the circumstances he will be there for her to rest easy if she needs it. “Rosedale remained seated, too intent on his thoughts to notice her movement. ‘Miss Lily, if you want any backing—I like pluck——’ broke from him disconnectedly.‘Thank you.’ She held out her hand. ‘Your tea has given me a tremendous backing. I feel equal to anything now.’ (Wharton Bk.2 Ch.10).” Lily graciously denies this help, either out of dignity or her mild lack of interest in Rosedale as a whole, due to both him as a person and his previous actions.

Lily continues to struggle through what is left of her life and Rosedale comes to visit her again, his main purpose just being a checkup and perhaps soaking in the satisfaction of what has happened to the woman who denied him.

“The sight stirred Lily with an irresistible sense of triumph. Rosedale, a day or two after

their chance meeting, had called to enquire if she had recovered from her indisposition; but since then she had not seen or heard from him, and his absence seemed to betoken a struggle to keep away, to let her pass once more out of his life. If this were the case, his return showed that the struggle had been unsuccessful, for Lily knew he was not the man to waste his time in an ineffectual sentimental dalliance. He was too busy, too practical, and above all too much preoccupied with his own advancement, to indulge in such unprofitable asides (Wharton Bk.2 Ch.11).”

Lily is just so far gone at this point that she is starting to take solace in his “grace” for lack of a better term. Following the initial niceties, Lily has finally “settled” despite everything that Rosedale has done to her/ and asks him if he would consider her hand in marriage. “Lily, perceiving all this, understood that he would marry her at once, on the sole condition of a reconciliation with Mrs. Dorset; and the temptation was the less easy to put aside because, little by little, circumstances were breaking down her dislike for Rosedale. The dislike, indeed, still subsisted; but it was penetrated here and there by the perception of mitigating qualities in him: of a certain gross kindliness, a rather helpless fidelity of sentiment, which seemed to be struggling through the hard surface of his material ambitions (Wharton Bk.2 Ch.11)” Rosedale essentially tells her that the roles have changed and now he is “out of her league” unless she wants to change some major things in her life, leaving her without a love interest. As far as she is concerned, she has burned every other bridge that she has had, including Selden who is the one who is by far the most devastated by her death.

Simon Rosedale’s ethics and morals throughout Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth can very rapidly change from one perspective to another at the drop of a hat, without him even showing it. At the start, he seems like a bystander interested in a pretty woman who tried to ruin her name because she shot him down. Afterward, he shows no remorse and even takes pride in what he has done to her life, He then tries to sneak his way back into her life by offering support in her time of need, taking advantage of how vulnerable she is. Finally, he crushes what little

hope she has left by denying her what she thinks is a final chance at marriage. Simon Rosedale could potentially be a stereotype of the typical jew from that era, as that seems to be the only thing he is described as throughout the book, however, based on his actions and general demeanor it is clear that Edith Wharton chose to portray him as a simply abhorrent person nothing more.

Work Cited

1. Wharton, Elizabeth. “The House of Mirth.” House of Mirth, The Gutenberg Project, 3 Apr. 2008,
2. www.gutenberg.org/files/284/284-h/284-h.htm#chap0210.