

Capitalism Destroys the American Social life in Wendy Wasserstein's Old Money

الرأسمالية تحطم الحياة الاجتماعية في مسرحية المال القديم للكاتبه وندي وازرستين

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مستخلص البحث

يدرس البحث كيف تدمر المجتمع الأمريكي والحياة الاجتماعية الأمريكية بسبب الرأسمالية وكيف استخدمت الكاتبة وندي وازرستين الهجاء الساخر في مسرحية المال القديم لنتقد الحياة الاجتماعية الأمريكية . تنتقد وازرستين بسخرية الاختلافات بين مدينة مانهاتن في الماضي وكيف أصبحت في الوقت الحاضر ؛ أي مطلع القرن الحادي والعشرين. منزل فايفر ، المملوك حاليًا للمليونير ، جيفري بيرنشتاين ، هو المكان المناسب للفترتين الزمنيةتين. يقارن أربعة أجيال بتركيز خاص على الاختلافات بين جيلين من الآباء والأبناء، كما تناقش قوة المال وقدرته على إعادة تشكيل المجتمعات.

Abstract

This research studies the destruction of the American social life after capitalism. Wasserstein satirically criticizes the differences between the city of Manhattan in the past and how it has become in the present; that is, the turn of the twenty-first century. The Pfeiffer house, currently owned by the millionaire, Jeffrey Bernstein, is the setting of the two periods of time. Wasserstein contrasts four generations with a specific focus on the differences between the two generations of fathers and sons. She discusses the power of money and its ability to reshape the communities.

Key words: Social life, Capitalism, social satire

In *Old Money*, Wasserstein satirizes the transition of the society and sheds light on how the society was before and after capitalism. She depicts her belief that the appearance of capitalism has led to a huge change and has reshaped societies all over the world. The Gilded Age (1865 - 1900) marked a period of incredible industrialist capitalist growth, and the completion of the transition from agricultural economy to urban industry. This transition appeared in everything within the American society. It was not limited to the economic system, but it expanded to social and political life. The gap between the rich and the poor widened. Capitalism was the direct reason for the emergence of the "captains of industry" and "robber barons" phenomena (Roark 523). The transformations continued to the twentieth century.

Capitalism caused a great and deep change in society's framework in the Gilded Age, and it has continued till nowadays. As Roark asserts, businessmen and project owners were interested only in their profits although they were financially supported by the government. There was no equality within the American society. Darwin's concept about the rich and the poor was common. Thus, social Darwinism became a very popular theory during the Gilded Age. Ideas such as the "survival of the fittest" and "natural selection" allowed the rich to be wealthy without guilt, since the poor, as was assumed, were poor because of their lack of ingenuity, laziness, or mental/ physical inferiority. Such theories also justified laissez-fair policies, politics and economics, which gave robber barons a green light to accumulate as much wealth

and power as possible (Roark 535). In 1869, it was the first transcontinental railroad in the USA that linked the east and the west. There were famous businessmen who controlled economic life, and hence, social and political life.

In *Old Money*, Pfeiffer's father and Tobias Vivian Pfeiffer are symbols of those kinds of businessmen. The most famous one, in the Gilded Age, was Andrew Carnegie and, in the play, Toby symbolizes him. He became a hero with his generosity late in life. He was raised from poverty and didn't accept speculation in business. He helped his labors and gave the active labors shares in his company as a kind of support, but he excluded the unproductive labors.

Throughout the play, Wasserstein presents the social bad effects of capitalism on America in the New Gilded Age and its corruptive effects on the family structure. She emphasizes more than once that capitalism causes and leads to familial and social disintegration and alienation. By looking at the relation between Jeffrey and his son, Ovid, it can be noticed that there is a gap between their ideologies. Jeffrey is a business man and one of those who has benefited from capitalism. Ovid says describing his father:

OVID: My dad says you can divide the world into three groups: the players, those who wish they were players, and those who have absolutely no idea who the players are. He says life would be intolerable only in the middle category. My dad also says the lesson of Tobias Pfeiffer is you become a player by making your own rules. (8)

The quotation reflects the society structure after capitalism. There are "the players" that refer to active wealthy members of the upper class. They own money and control the countries and the systems according to their benefits. There are "those who wish they were players" that refer to the middle class. They are seeking all the time to rise to the upper class but it rarely happens. There are "those who have absolutely no idea who the players are" that refer to the low class. They always consist of laborers and the poor who work hard for a living. "In spite of the development that was caused by capitalism, the gap between the rich and the poor and between the wealthy and the middle class which had been growing since the 1970s, endured" (Roark, et al. 957-958). The capitalists and upper classes don't care about others; they only think about how to increase their wealth regardless of how others' poverty increases. Materialistic lifestyles resulting from capitalism have corrupting and even devastating influences on both the individual and the society. Capitalistic methods and ways of thinking have misled and dislocated idealistic individuals.

As the reform starts with the basic part of the society, the destruction also starts with the family. There is an internal corrosion resulting from capitalism and materialism inside the family, which is the smallest unit in a society. For example, the father-daughter relationship between Sid and Caroline:

SID: Why didn't you tell me Buffy the Vampire is over?

CAROLINE: How should I know where your specific interests lie?

SID: Is that how your mother teaches you to speak to me?

CAROLINE: My mother says I shouldn't speak to you at all. I only came to see this house. Oh, and Dad I have a massage for you from your wife. Something's wrong with the Breast Express van. The police won't them park in the front of the house.

Jeffery: what?

SID: Bernstein, what the fuck is going on here? A child's life is at stake! (20)

The previous conversation satirically elaborates three important ideas: divorce, motherhood and fatherhood. Wasserstein relates capitalism to femininity and masculinity by bringing Baby Boomers' age in the play and showing the difference between them and their sons. As Kimmel discusses, while Baby Boom men came to associate money, statues and power with ideal manhood through money; their sons modified definitions of ideal masculinity (*Angry White Men* 2018-2019). Caroline does not respect her father because he divorced her mother and married another woman. Sid, as a social climber, uses his second pretty wife to achieve his dreams. She also married him because he is a rich man. Sid's morals are not suitable for Caroline and her mother; he did not care about them, damaged his family and broke his daughter's heart. This is because power and financial utilities, gained in a capitalist system, always suppress the moral responsibility towards both individuals and society.

According to Balakian, this situation summarizes what Wasserstein thought of Baby Boom leftist idealists during the sixties, like Scope and Bruce, who turned into the selfish

materialists of the 1980s and 90s (*Reading the Plays* 180). As the play shows, capitalism has changed the main roles and responsibilities of the family members. These changes expand to the future. The quotation shows that the mother is busy with Bernstein and her baby is hungry. She depends on “the Breast Express van,” which is a new service for busy mothers. Everyone is busy with himself and his goals and these individual goals cause a general sense of brittleness. The woman has gotten more freedom, but she misuses it. She becomes more selfish, and she dreams to get a high social rank at the expense of her family. This dangerous effect of capitalism is an extension to the effects of the past.

Hypocrisy is another main issue in the play. Hypocrisy is used as a means to get money, which is thought to be a cause of happiness. However, money does not lead to people's happiness or peace of mind. Hypocrisy and emotional reserve are closely related in the play. Although hypocrisy is a way of coping with people, it is a kind of deception satirized by Wasserstein. The satirist, according to Arthur Pollard, “is able to exploit more fully the differences between appearance and reality and specially to expose hypocrisy. The hypocrite's skin is notoriously tenderer than that of the openly vicious” (3).

Wasserstein attacks hypocrisy in *Old Money* by giving a clear view of life in the mansion. Those, who live outside the mansion, hope to live in it and think that they will have a perfect life. Life in the mansion, as a small unit in the society, is a symbol of social life in the American society as a whole. The New Gilded Age

generation was seeking to get out the American dream as opposed to the robber barons, which are greedy, materialistic, and ambitious businessmen. Because of hypocrisy, people rarely express their real feelings freely. They adhere to hypocrisy so that they can avoid the anger of their superiors or masters. The inevitable result of this is stagnation and failure on both the individual and collective levels.

In *Old Money*, Wasserstein portrays persons who criticize every one and accuse the others but do not see their own actions. For example, as Flinty says about Sid: "I think I know exactly why Sid is showing up here tonight. He reveres real money. He's desperate to be put on that museum board, and you control it. He would sell his mother to be considered legit. Or he'd even offer to produce a picture with him. Is that right?" (11). Flinty thinks that Sid is a climber and she shows that he will do anything to get money. She also thinks that he takes advantage of Jeffrey's friendship. On the other hand, Flinty herself is a climber who praises and loves Jeffrey because of his money.

However, Flinty is right in her opinion about Sid because Sid is really a climber and hypocrite. Sid "defines wealth by whether or not someone needs to work" (Balakian 178). Sid also "wants his daughter to make a connection with the editor of the *Times* at the party. She calls him a hypocrite for showing up at a for male dinner in a T-shirt and Jacket just to show how ... above it all you are, but the truth is, you take it all much more seriously than anybody else" (Balakian 175-176).

Sid sanctifies money and he has his own standards for treating people. He only respects those who have power and money. He treats the poor arrogantly. It is very clear in his words about Vivian:

SID: Who the hell is that?

JEFERRY: Writer. Grew up in this house.

SID: Wait a minute. That guy grew up in this house? This is beyond depressing! Fuck! If you told me Jeffrey Katzenberg grew up in this house, that would make sense to me (17).

According to the previous quotation, Vivian is not an important person to Sid although he was living in the house. He sees that the first loses his power and the New Gilded Age is not his age. For Sid, people are important because of their business, authority, reputation and political positions. Thus, Vivian, who is the only person still living from the past, means nothing to Sid. As it is shown, "this conflict between authenticity and fraudulence becomes part of the conversation about old and new money" (Balakian, 176).

By going back to the Gilded Age, there words find their echo in the following conversation between Tobey and Mary:

TOBEY: He started a movie studio in California. His mother is a silent-film star. You 'd like him a lot. He is in my summer training regimen.

MARY: Your father is having Mr. Arnold Strauss, the department store owner, to dinner tonight. He doesn't seem Jewish at all. Florence De Root says Mr. Strauss is using your father to get on

the museum board. She says she can spot a climber a mile away. But I say, it takes one to know one. I never said that. (15-16)

The quotation shows that hypocrisy was also common in the past. Social life does not change for the better at the present because people still have the same morals. Florence thinks that Strauss is a social climber at the same time because she gets benefits from Pfeiffer's money and social standing.

According to Lewis Lapham, *Old Money* is "the play of wealth, energy and untutored liberty" (13). During Clinton's rule, the American economy achieved a growth spurt. He minimized interest rates to encourage economic expansion. In spite of the economic development, the gap has widened between the rich and the poor and the middle class has begun to suffer. Wasserstein was a witness of this era as a New Yorker; therefore, she satirizes the American economic system in spite of its achievements. It is clear that Wasserstein's play dramatizes both the continuity and the differences between the two centuries by discussing important issues, such as capitalism, hypocrisy and the call for change.

When dealing with characters in Wasserstein's plays, the researcher chooses the characters who play significantly satirical roles and embody. For example Wasserstein presents Sid, who is a fully hypocritical character, and Jeffrey Bernstein, who is a symbol of capitalism. One of the most special qualities of the play is that each actor/actress has two roles: one in the past and the other in the present. Wasserstein does this to clarify the strong relation between the past and the present and to show the similarities and differences between them.

Burnestein symbolizes Wasserstein's brother, Bruce. Bruce plays a very important role in her life, and he is a main reason for her to write the play. They are very different characters. Wasserstein is a fighter woman who carries her pen as her own weapon to make reform to be an effective member in the society (Salmon 45). She has a message and tries to do her best to deliver it. On the other hand, her brother, like Bernstein in the play, is a greedy man who cares for money more than anything.

Salmon speaks about Wasserstein and her cold-hearted brother differences as the same she does in the play:

Wendy lived in a series of sublets, while her brother moved from a ten - room Fifth Avenue apartment to one that had fifteen rooms (and six bathrooms, four fireplaces). She escaped to the Hamptons to write in an apartment over a garage: he bought a sixteen - acre beachfront estate, eventually becoming one of the biggest tax payers in East Hampton, a community with a disproportionate allotment of millionaires and billionaires (228).

Bernstein is the host and the new owner of the old mansion. Wasserstein describes him in the preface of the play as "a legend in high-risk arbitrage and at the pinnacle of new-money society" (xv). He lives with his son, Ovid, in the mansion. His guests reflect who the elites of the society are in the present. Jeffrey likes those Americans who were in the 1980s who valued, celebrated, and relished the acquisition and spending of wealth. In this age, billionaires like Donald Trump and yuppies like *Wall Street's* Gordon Gekko became heroes, and shows like *Lifestyles of the*

Rich and Famous encouraged Americans to indulge, if only vicariously, in the culture of conspicuous consumption (Roark et al. 927). Individuals like Jeffrey Bernstein and Bruce Wasserstein earned money not from production, but from mergers and takeovers.

Wasserstein satirizes the corruption and hypocritical businessmen and capitalists through Jeffrey Burnstein character. It is revealed through a satirical conversation between Jeffrey and Saulina:

SAULINA: Jeffrey, if you prefer, I could walk out of here and never see you again.

JEFFERY: Do whatever you like, I've had enough women making threats tonight.

SAULINA: Goddamn it is Jeffrey, you're so cold! I can't even find you.

JEFFERY: I'm right here.

SAULINA: No. You are hiding behind this party, this house, and these people!

JEFFERY: What's the matter with these people? Everyone in America wants to be with these people. I want to be with these people. You're out of touch, Saulina, and that's the problem with both you and your art. You're living in the past. Think about the future. (66)

In this quotation, there are two different ideologies about the society: Saulina who tries to reveal the mask, and Bernstein who believes in his ideas. He cannot see that he is fake and greedy because it has become a common idea of the upper classes. "Every American" hopes to visit his house and be with those fake people.

American society is not interested in morals and principles; it is interested in money and classes. Lewis Lapham describes the meaning of "money" and "class" in literature saying: "In the equation of American failure and success, the values assigned to the words, "money" and "class", shift. ... sometimes they serve as synonyms for freedom or beauty or truth, sometimes as surrogates for God." (*Highest price ever paid* 14). Jeffrey's ideology is parallel to Lapham's description because he measures everything with money and he is a live image to the negative side of capitalism.

Capitalism is related to hypocrisy and it is shown in the relation between Sid Nercessian and Jeffrey Burnestein. Jeffrey uses Sid's art to appear as a cultured and modern man. Also, Sid uses Jeffrey's position in society to appear as aristocratic. Sid seems to be an unfeeling hypocrite, who appears to the world as the epitome of a well-respected businessman, but who, when unmasked, is just as decadent as the rest of society. Sid's cruelty is shown in more than one conversation and his daughter, Caroline, has the same opinion about her father:

SID: I won six Oscars last year and ten Golden Globe Awards. Nobody in the whole goddamn world thinks I'm a fake.

CAROLINE: That's because they're all fakes too. (52)

The previous satirical quotation shows the difference between Sid and his daughter. It shows Sid's arrogance and the media community's hypocrisy as well. Lynn Watson argues that Sid uses art for legitimacy by producing Hollywood films based on important literary works (327). He produces important movies

with great actors using famous and important novels and plays. As Caroline expresses that makes the actor "doesn't care what kind of man you are" (53).

Caroline is an idealist girl crushed by reality. Wasserstein sends her satirical messages to her audience through characters like Caroline and Ovid. Caroline is fighting the American society with all its faults and cruelty through her father and the same is Ovid. Caroline and Ovid symbolize the call for a change aim. Satirically, Wasserstein presents a conversation between Sid and Caroline about Saulina to show his corruption and her kindness:

CAROLINE: Why did you ignore Saulina Webb?

SID: What the hell are you talking about?

CAROLINE: You were speaking about great artists in front of her, and you never mentioned her name.

SID: That's simple. She is not good. She was interesting maybe fifteen years ago. Now she is a bitter, angry, mediocre cow. That's just the truth.

CAROLINE: You have no heart. (53)

The previous dialogue shows that Caroline has the ability to uncover her father's mask all the time. Her father's connections make Caroline feel like a "fake" (Balakian 176). The sharpness of the conversation between them leads Caroline to a failed attempt of suicide. Sid practices his hypocrisy game with his girl and makes her feel that "Maybe he is right" (54). In spite of her complex life and her several attempts to commit suicide, Caroline doesn't give up. She fixes her relation with her father. Caroline's ability to get success comes from love.

Ovid is Jeffrey's son, but he is totally different from him. Ovid is an intellectual with a kind heart. If Jeffrey is a symbol of capitalism and selfish businessmen, Ovid is a symbol of change and the hope of a better future. When Jeffrey considers money "the road to liberation", "it's completely irrelevant" to Ovid. As Kimmel elaborates, while fathers came to associate money and power with ideal manhood, their sons modified definitions of ideal masculinity (218). Ovid rebels against his father's politics and lifestyle. At the end of the play, he speaks about his success as a famous novelist. The mansion is transformed into a museum of modern technology. Ovid, in this scene, moves to the future, exactly in 2043, when he writes a book about his father.

In the flashback, Tobey, who looks like Ovid in the past, also refused his father's life. He did not accept his father's desire:

PFEIFFER: You're returning to St. Paul's School Presidential orders. And you know what that cost me? I agreed to testify in congress at an antitrust hearing. Idiots! Best thing that ever happened to this country were trusts!

TOBEY: You had no right to do that to me. (61)

The quotation shows the similarity between the past and the present. It also shows how Jeffrey and Ovid characters look like the characters of Pfeiffer and Tobey. Tobey hated capitalism and the division of society. Wasserstein depicts the upper-class life in many ways to show the gap between them and other classes. As Balakian explains, the play shows the aristocratic lifestyle. It is

about "knowing how to dress, speak, socialize, attend the cultural events, read the right books, and go to the right school" (167).

Wasserstein uses stylistic and technical devices satirically to explain her opinions and attack social life in America. She uses most of the satire techniques, such as monologue, humor, reductive language, contrast, parody and irony. For example, the play starts with Ovid's monologue speaking about his family. Ovid shows that his father is a social climber:

OVID: My parents bought this house in 1998; one year after my father's bank went public. Well, it's not really my father's bank; it doesn't have our name, but my father pioneered fixed - income arbitrage into the largest trading desk in the world. At least that's the story according to the Wall Street Journal. When the bank went public, my father suddenly became an expert on Beaux Arts painting, Gulfstream jets, and Victorian lacquer lamps and furniture. Shortly after that time my mother and father's marriage broke up, as did the marriages of five of his managing partners. (7-8)

Satirically, Wasserstein uses the monologue technique to declare that corruption is overwhelming, engulfing and everlasting in America. Ovid's words reveal that his father, Jeffrey Bernstein, is a social climber; he was not born as a rich man. He has transformed from a teacher to a businessman. He has been interested in culture after entering the world of the wealthy. As Balakian states:

The play explores the connections between real estate, money and the power. As a high-risk arbitrageur, Burnstein buys the stock of a company being acquired in a merger, while selling short the

stock of the acquirer. Arbitrageurs, then, make a profit from the difference between market prices. With these profits, Bernstein can afford the old Pfeiffer mansion, and he wants the power that it confers. (*Reading the Plays* 172)

Ovid's language has a kind of denunciation about his father's life. Bernstein buys fame and origins by buying this historical house. In his parties, he invites only famous persons who will increase his fame and improve his reputation. It reflects the upper-class lifestyle in America. The more events and parties mean the more hypocrisy and morals duplicity. Ovid has a satirist role in the play and he calls for change. There is not the least hope of reforming or improving the decadent conditions not only in America but also in the world in general. Corruption resulting from adopting capitalism policies has reached the point of no return. The play also ends by Ovid's monologue speaking in the future.

Old Money aims to satirize "new money culture, which purports that wealth can buy happiness and that cash can supersede classes" (Bryer 571). That is why Wasserstein prefers a happy ending to Caroline and Ovid. She proves that money does not bring happiness.

Although the class in the play is the upper one, they usually use dirty words in their speaking. For example, the words "fucking" and "fuck" are repeated throughout the play, especially by Jeffrey, Sid and Pfeiffer. Sid uses the word "fucking" constantly.

To conclude, *Old Money* is a social satire play. This paper illustrates how satirical comedy's styles and techniques are used to heighten and articulate the social content of the play. It becomes clear that Wasserstein moves from feminism to social issues and she has become nearer to the serious issues within the American society. She discusses important issues, such as hypocrisy, capitalism, and the call for change. She collides past and present to compare the two ages. Wasserstein shows that the upper classes are arrogant and hypocritical, and do not actually care about the suffering of the poor. In fact, they use their money and power to identify themselves. The social climbers, who can do anything even if it is immoral and illegal, have existed all the time, but they have increased in the present. The rich people in the play act as if they were happy, honest, simple and virtuous. Everyone has his own story. There is separation, suicide, death, selfishness, injustice and hypocrisy. The characters in *Old Money* are divided into two groups: the first are hypocrite, fake and selfish; and the second are satirist, truthful and real.

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