

*The Gilded Finch: An Exploration of Class Conflict*

Mattea Harrison

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Linda Cooper, M.A.  
Thesis Chair

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Neal Brasher, M.F.A.  
Committee Member

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James H. Nutter, D.A.  
Honors Director

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Date

### Abstract

Research is applied to create a play exploring the conflict between two women in the American upper class at the end of the nineteenth century. Both Mrs. Astor and Mrs. Vanderbilt's family, wealth, and relationships were researched through studying primary and secondary accounts of their lives and times. A study of the women has produced a comprehensive picture of their motivations in their lives' actions. The relationships between the women and their daughters has also been examined and applied. These two women are interesting characters in history to examine due to their family history and the families that they married into. The wealth that the women married into motivated them both to climb the ladder of society. Due to their personal differences and the differences in their husbands' families, their climbs looked very different. In examining all of the topics of research relating to Mrs. Astor and Mrs. Vanderbilt, an answer is sought for the reason to their struggle. *The Gilded Finch* attempts to answer these questions in a fictionalized view of the events and interactions surrounding Mrs. Vanderbilt's ball in March of 1883. This ball was a turning point in the polite battle between Caroline Astor and Alva Vanderbilt. The research done on the topic allows for a fuller picture to be shown in the writing of the play.

### ***The Gilded Finch: An Exploration of Class Conflict***

As the turn of the century approached in America, classes began to shift, especially in New York City. People became uncomfortable with where they fell on the social ladder and began to climb. Those who were already at the top, their position having been established the previous century, bucked against the change in tradition that they had held to for so long. There was no desire for this 'Nouveau riche' to replace the families who had long maintained positions of power and influence. Two families, the Astors and the Vanderbilts, held a position at the top. The two, however, had different sources of wealth and this caused a point of contention for Mrs. Caroline Astor, as Mrs. Alva Vanderbilt made her play to enter fashionable society.

#### **Source of Wealth**

Various people have gained wealth from different sources: investing, industry, inheritance. During the Industrial Revolution, the exponential growth of factories created the opportunity for wealth for certain people (Axelrod 6). The goods produced in those factories created other industries and necessitated the progression of railroads. Those who had not inherited a large amount of wealth were able to build wealth. They started at the ground level and established a business. When these businesses did well, they were able to leave large amounts of money to their children and established a wealth to be inherited. However, some of the illustrious families had formed their fortunes years before.

#### **Source of Wealth: Astor Family**

The first member of the Astor family to come to America and make a fortune was John Jacob Astor, a German immigrant (King 23). On his passage from Europe in 1783, he learned about the fur trade and its lucrative potential. After he made his way to New York, he quickly made progress in the furrier trade, going from someone who beat the moths from furs, to a "Fur

Merchant” in 1796. In 1808, Astor founded the American Fur Company (Minniegerode 37). Fur trading was not the only business that Astor found profitable.

Astor foresaw the city of New York as a place with great potential, so he bought up many tracts of lands, many of which were heavily mortgaged. One of these tracts of land, Eden farm, would later hold Times Square. Astor sold the land which he purchased for increasingly higher sums. This practice had accumulated for Astor twenty million dollars by the time of his death in 1848 (Minniegerode 48). His sons inherited his wealth and continued to grow the family fortune, much to the dismay of New York City. It felt as though Astor should have left more, feeling that \$400,000 to build a library was a bit stingy on his part (Minniegerode 49). With this basis of family wealth, Caroline Schermerhorn married into the Astor family in 1853 (King 29), with her marriage to William Backhouse Astor. Coming from a family that was already well established in society, Mrs. Astor decided to bring her husband’s family up to the heights. She threw parties, dipping into the family’s coffers to host them. After the birth of their son, Caroline and William did not spend much time together, only together in public quite infrequently (King 30). She focused her attention on her children for the beginning of her marriage. It was only after the death of her mother-in-law formed a hole in society, in 1872, that Caroline stepped up and established her place on the scene (King 32). Her rise to social matriarch was unpredicted. The wife of her husband’s older brother, John Jacob, Charlotte rightly had this role. Charlotte did not find society attractive. Thinking it too frivolous, she rather used the family money to add in her philanthropical acts: funding hospitals, aiding impoverished children, and supporting relief agencies for the city’s prostitutes (King 26). Caroline took this chance to reestablish a sense of ease in society for the family; something she had enjoyed with her own family before the Civil War. She would serve as the “ultimate arbiter of distinguished society” (King 32).

**Source of Wealth: Vanderbilt Family**

The wealth of the Vanderbilt family found its start in transportation. Cornelius Vanderbilt began his career as a boatman at the age of sixteen. By 1828, at the age of thirty-four, Vanderbilt purchased his first boat. He gradually built his shipping industry, and by the age of seventy, Vanderbilt was worth ten million dollars, most of which was invested in steamboats. Vanderbilt saw a new horizon for transportation and sold all of his boats and began to look to the future, which he saw as full of railroad tracks (King 40).

Vanderbilt bought out the Harlem and Hudson River lines and quickly turned them from fund draining to profitable. He “transformed railroads that had formerly been the playthings of Wall Street and that frequently did not meet their payrolls into exceedingly profitable, high dividend paying properties” (Minnigerode 127). The lines that he purchased later adjoined to the New York Central (Glover and Cornell 623) for a monopoly of the railroads into and in the city. Before his death, Vanderbilt expanded his reach in railroads into Albany, Buffalo, and Chicago (Holbrook 40). He purchased the line to Albany from John Jacob Astor III, grandson of John Jacob Astor, who lacked his grandfather’s business acumen. Vanderbilt forced Astor into selling by refusing to offer connections between their two lines. He was then able to provide a line from New York City uninterrupted all the way to Chicago (Sinclair 177). Although his wealth allowed a stepping stone into society, Vanderbilt did not take to the genteel manners that were to be expected of a man of his standing: “The commodore both enthralled and repulsed the very society that his descendants were eventually to rule. Although he was an astute businessman, Cornelius was scarcely a proper gentleman. His education had been spotty at best, and he sprinkled his talk with a steady stream of foul invectives: one social historian called him ‘perhaps the greatest master of swearing in his generation’” (King 42). These tendencies made

Alva's eventual climb in society all the more difficult, although the money that Vanderbilt left helped the rise. Vanderbilt's success in transportation left one hundred million dollars to his name when he died in 1877 (King 43). Like John Jacob Astor, Vanderbilt let his accumulated wealth to his sons, who wisely invested and grew the worth of the family name, with the exception of \$1 million, which he left to the creation of Vanderbilt University in Nashville (King 43).

### **Treatment of Servants by Upper Class**

The upper crust during the gilded age lived in the lap of luxury and were waited on hand and foot by their servants. The servants filled many positions from footmen, to maids, cooks, butlers, valets, housekeepers, sculleries, gardeners, grooms, chauffeurs, and more. As Americans aimed for 'elegance' which Europeans showed when dealing with servants, they sometimes struggled to establish their position (Tichi 26). Richard Wells wrote a book on the issue and others in 1891, *Manners, Culture and Dress of the Best American Society*. In it, he suggests a few rules one might follow to keep their servants in line:

1. Treat your servants always with kindness—but at the same time with firm respect for yourself.
2. On no account be familiar with them.
3. Do not scold your servants... When they need reproof, give it in a calm, firm, and dignified manner.
4. Never entertain your visitors with any narratives of your servants' improprieties.
5. Never cease to exercise a system of supervision.
6. Never allow servants to treat anyone disrespectfully. (qtd. in Tichi 27)

While ideally each servant in a household had a purpose to fulfill, some chose to employ servants as a visible signal of their wealth. This, along with the recent acquisition of wealth by the American upper class, caused schisms between the servants and their employers. Much could be said about a woman's ability to successfully manage her household by her servants. It told of both her discernment in selection as well as her treatment of servants in their retention (Rector 10). Many easily found servants among newly immigrated people from Europe, but found difficulty in ensuring their tasks were done adequately.

### **Rules of Etiquette in the Late Nineteenth Century**

The American upper class of the nineteenth century modeled their homes after those of Europe as well as their manners. As noted by a French journalist, Paul Bourget, the Americans seemed to "hunger and thirst for the long ago" (Tichi 15). Many of their rituals and rules of conduct came directly from Europe. There was a stiff formality to many of their gatherings. Some members of society who had newly risen found that they struggled with knowing all of the proper rules. They looked to books and, in some cases, people who were acclaimed to be knowledgeable in such subjects. Mrs. Astor referred to Ward McAllister, a self-proclaimed expert in societal etiquette for how to deal with many situations.

As with any society, one desires to look the part, and must, to be accepted. There were even rules concerning the colors which one wore in conjunction. *Manners, Culture and Dress of the Best American Society (Manners)* revealed the importance of appearance:

It is of importance...that you do not overstep the boundaries of good taste in the number and variety of colors which you may employ. You may display the greatest taste and judgement in the contrast and harmony of color, and yet, owing to their profusion, they



may obtrude themselves glaringly to the eye, an error that ought to be carefully avoided. (qtd. in Tichi 59-60)

Not only were colors controlled by the ‘rules’ of society, but the attire one wore was also dependent very closely on what activities were being undertaken. A lady should be careful that nothing about her appearance is ‘improper.’ A businesswoman’s dress, according to *Manners*, “Should be made with special reference to easy locomotion and to the free use of the hands and arms” (qtd. in Tichi 61). Such detailed descriptions of fitting attire were offered for each occasion. To make an appearance in something which was not fitting for the occasion would be worse than not making an appearance at all.

When one wished to call upon an acquaintance, there were a series of steps that must first be taken. It was never acceptable to make a call unless one had been properly introduced (King 71). Those who were new in the city or society would be wise to be introduced to one who was high in the acknowledged ranking of society (e.g. Mrs. Astor, at a party or ball). Regardless of whom the introduction was made to, it was polite to make a formal call at their house within a week of meeting them. There were also rules concerning calling after a dinner party or an invitation was sent. Many women had established calling hours during which close and established friends could make visits.

Though many things were conveyed in the in-person meetings that were so frequent at the time, most people corresponded heavily with their friends and family. The author of *American Etiquette*, Walter Raleigh Houghton, had very strong thoughts on letters: “By letter writing, much can be done to maintain and strengthen our social ties” (qtd. in Tichi 82). He did not stop there, adding to the beneficial nature of letters their revelation of the character of the person who wrote them: “The culture of a person is plainly indicated by his letters” (qtd. in

Tichi 82). A well-bred woman could be determined by the nature in which she wrote her correspondence. Not only was there value in writing by way of letters; many wealthy women found themselves employing secretaries to write their invitations. A properly worded invitation could result in a well-attended party or ball. Invitations were to be responded to immediately. Leaving one's host in the dark as to your acceptance or regret was considered rude (King 71). Some invitations were much sought after, such as the invitation to Mrs. Astor's annual ball in January.

### **Social Interactions in the Late Nineteenth Century**

As one may gather from the rules governing society at the end of the nineteenth century, interactions were very specialized encounters. There were many places that one could interact with others, dependent on gender. For women, there were new innovations, department stores (Tichi 42). These stores had many floors of merchandise, with areas for resting and clerks to help the shoppers. An established price eliminating the haggling that had previously been a part of shopping. Well to do women had their purchases added to a bill that was sent to their husbands' offices to be paid. Many of these department stores were in the same general area, the 'Ladies' Mile.' It was a place unimpeded by male chaperones who would rush the shopping experience. Tea rooms gave a place for women to refresh themselves and chat with their friends and acquaintances. Henry Maillard opened a "Luncheon Restaurant and Bonbon Store" (Tichi 47) aimed directly at the upper-class women. They were able to come here, unchaperoned, to enjoy an afternoon with "dainty lunches" (Tichi 47). Men were less limited in the places they could interact with each other. For men, there were smoking clubs, offices, and other places of business and pleasure.

In the case of interactions between the genders, there were always roles that one was to play. These often related quite directly to the circumstances in which many found themselves; “the rules and regulations for conduct on the street were set by this urban reality, and gender played its part, with gentlemen cast as protectors and ladies as damsels in need of assistance” (Tichi 75). Men were always to defer to a lady: “should give the preferred part of the walk to a lady, to superior in age or station, or to a person carrying a bundle” (Tichi 78). Women were handled with care, kept from shocking news and situations.

The rules for society extended even into the pews of the church. These pews were often ‘purchased’ with large donations and passed through the generations of the family. A man must allow any woman he accompanies to enter the pew first, then follow. One should not sit in an empty pew without being invited to do so. One might unknowingly take someone else’s pew if they did so. When attending a church with different beliefs than one’s own, one should not deride or show amusement at any of the observances of the church and its members (Tichi 224). Many felt that their attendance was enough for their spiritual well-being, in addition to their philanthropy. Mrs. Astor’s view of philanthropy in relation to the poor was, “All my friends do a great deal for the poor, their daughters are brought up from infancy to look upon their charity work as an important part of their lives” (Tichi 225). Like social clubs, the young women would gather together to take aid to the poor and destitute of their city. It exposed them to the situations of the poor in their city, but didn’t upset the carefully laid balance of power.

### **The Relationship between Mother and Daughter**

One can learn much about the true nature of a person by the way that they interact with their family. Two sets of mother and daughter in particular will be examined: Alva and Consuelo Vanderbilt and Caroline, known as Carrie by many, and Mrs. Caroline Astor. There are many

accounts and recordings of the relationship between Alva and Consuelo Vanderbilt, but relatively few accounts of Mrs. Astor and Carrie. In the late nineteenth century, the raising of the children in wealthy families was usually deferred to staff. Many children were brought up with a firm hand and admonition of those acts which one might call 'childlike.' In their nurseries and playrooms, the children were allowed to be free, to romp and play as they pleased (Tichi 103). When in the care of a servant, a child may find themselves getting into mischief that their parents would not approve of. A level of restraint was expected of children when in the presence of their parents and guests. A desire that they would be 'seen and not heard.' Often decisions were made about a child's future without consulting the child, even into young adulthood. This was especially common in well to do families, like the Astors and Vanderbilts.

### **Alva and Consuelo Vanderbilt**

Alva became a mother in 1877 at twenty-four years old, when Consuelo was born. She had two other children, sons, in the years following (Stuart 66). Alva took great pride in the amount of time that she dedicated to the raising of her children. She made a point to eat lunch with her children almost every day, even when there were adult guests over. In this case, they would all eat together, allowing the children to have adult conversation (Stuart 69). Alva wanted her children to be able to partake in and observe intelligent conversation. She had very strong opinions on the raising of children and her part in raising her own: "I dedicated the best years of my life to rearing and influencing those three little beings who were my links with the future. I gave them an exclusive devotion. I considered their welfare before all else. I lived in their lives and cultivated no other apart from them for myself" (Stuart 66).

While this all makes Alva seem like the ideal mother, one should remember the era in which this reference should be framed. In the late nineteenth century, wealthy families employed

servants to care for and raise their children. The Vanderbilt family was no exception (Stuart 67). Much of Consuelo's childhood was spent in the care of a governess or nanny. Alva was a loving mother, but she also had no qualms in showing criticism or exercising a firm hand when necessary: "If one can judge of her own self I would unhesitatingly say that the two strongest characteristics in me are the constructive and the maternal. They are or ought to be associated" (Stuart 67). Consuelo felt this constructive tendency from Alva many times, especially in this time when children were to obey without question. She felt Alva's hold on her as a child into adulthood: "Such repressive measures bred inhibitions and even now I can trace their effects" (Stuart 69). It took Consuelo many years to buck some of the expectations that Alva had placed upon her which had presented her with negative consequences.

Alva had strong views when it came to the education of children. William, her husband, insisted that the boys attend school, but allowed her to oversee the education of Consuelo from home. As a result, Alva tried methods that she thought would warrant the best outcome for her daughter. Consuelo showed an early propensity toward languages, which both her parents encouraged: "At the age of eight I could read and write in French, German and English. I learned them in that order, for we spoke French with our parents, my father having been partially educated in Geneva" (Stuart 70). Alva employed many tutors and governesses over the years and carefully oversaw the curriculum which Consuelo followed. In her teens, Consuelo was allowed to attend 'fashionable' classes that were taught in New York City by a man named Mr. Rosa. Here she learned English, Latin, history, mathematics, and science (Stuart 82.) In her teens, Consuelo had two 'finishing' teachers. These teachers were French and English and presented conflicting styles of finishing, which Consuelo recounted having to navigate with care and tact.

The children were encouraged to learn not only the tradition classroom subjects, but also to learn how to care for themselves. Alva had a playhouse built to accomplish this purpose, ‘La Recreation.’ There Consuelo learned how to cook and keep house, something that was good practice for her later on (Stuart 71). A pond was also built for the specific purpose of the children learning how to sail. On several occasions after sailing, they came to lunch with a friend who had fallen in and was required to change. The children also learned how to ride horses, with Alva requiring Consuelo to ride sidesaddle, as riding astride was ‘too dangerous’ (Rector 84).

In raising a child who was as intelligent and independent as herself, Alva had raised someone who was willing to stand her ground and express her own opinions (Stuart 120). Consuelo spoke her own mind, even if it meant coming head to head with her mother. When recounting Alva’s negative reaction to one of her suitors, Consuelo said, “I still maintained my right to lead the life I wished. It was perhaps my unexpected resistance or the mere fact that no one had ever stood up to her that made her say she would not hesitate to shoot a man who she considered would ruin my life” (Balsan 40). Alva still celebrated in the woman that she had raised. She had created a reflection of herself, not willing to bend, smart, and able to be carefree (Rector 118).

Alva kept a tight grip over Consuelo. She felt no qualms in making large choices for her, like who she should marry. When the family went abroad to debut Consuelo to Europe, when she was seventeen, five proposals of marriage were made to Consuelo. All of these had to go through Alva, and she turned down four of them without batting an eye (Balsan 29). Only a German prince made it through, but Consuelo would ultimately marry someone else, the Duke of Marlborough, who was chosen for her by Alva.

**Caroline and Mrs. Astor**

Not much was publicly recorded of the relationship between the two Caroline Astors, mother and daughter. Mrs. Astor was known as the head of society. Much like Alva, she kept a firm hand over her daughter. Both mothers had rightful cause to do so, considering the fortune that their daughters would take with them when they were married. Consuelo was worth \$10,000,000 in a marriage settlement according to the *New York World* (Stuart 2). Although there was a hand of authority over Carrie, Mrs. Astor took steps to make sure that she was pleased, as with the case of the Vanderbilt ball of 1883 (Rector 44) (elaborated on further in “The Vanderbilt Ball of 1883”). One of Mrs. Astor’s granddaughters gave insight into the relationship. Mrs. Astor “had dominated poor little Aunt Carrie completely” (King 121). Mrs. Astor forbade the marriage of Carrie to Marshall Wilson, which drove Carrie into a deep depression (King 121). Carrie’s father felt that the match was unsuitable, but Mrs. Astor began to consider that Carrie must truly love the man to be driven to physical illness. Even though she saw their obvious care for each other, the couple was forced to wait seven years until consent was given to their union, at which time Mrs. Astor said, “I felt that I could not stand in the way of their happiness a day longer” (King 122). Not much is recorded of the relationship between the two after the marriage, only that Carrie cohosted parties with Mrs. Astor several times.

**The Vanderbilt Ball of 1883**

The matriarchs of the Vanderbilt and Astor families, Caroline and Alva, butted heads for a long time. Caroline, the Mrs. Astor, was the head of society and dictated those who were to be accepted into the top tiers. Mrs. Astor refused to accept the Vanderbilts. This may have been a matter of pride, or perhaps due to the incident between the two families concerning the railroad line in New York state (See “Source of Wealth: Vanderbilt Family” for elaboration.) Alva came

up with a course of action to force a societal acknowledgement of the Vanderbilt family by Mrs. Astor. Ignoring the family members who caused disgrace; the suicide of an uncle, leaving unsettled debts (Stuart 60), which might make the timing seem improper, Alva proceeded. She used the curiosity of the elite of New York concerning her newly built house at 660 Fifth Avenue to throw a large ball. The official purpose of the ball was to honor Alva's old friend, Consuelo Yznaga, the Viscountess Mandeville (Stuart 60), who was visiting from Manchester, England.

Alva saw this ball as the opportunity to gain an acceptance out of Mrs. Astor. Some of this need that Alva felt was due to the push that her mother had made upon her to make a place in society: "Phoebe Smith...would probably have been able to find a way of hacking through the social jungle and steering her daughters towards Mrs. Astor" (Stuart 38). Alva neglected to send invitations to the Astor residence, most seem to think that this was intentional. This caused tension for the Astors, as Carrie had been planning to dance in a quadrille at the ball. Word came to Mrs. Astor that this omission was intentional. She had never visited the new house at 660 Fifth Avenue and left her calling card. Her negligence in this matter was cause for Alva to see fit to not include her in the initial round of invitations. This oversight was amended and the invitations were sent (Tichi 4).

The ball was held on Monday, March 26, 1883. It was to begin at 11:30 p.m., but guests began arriving an hour early. The ball was a costumed event, with guests showing up as famous historical and fictional characters. Several quadrilles were performed. Of note were the hobby horse quadrille, planned by Alva, in which the dancers wore costumes that made them seem as those they were riding hobby horses. Another quadrille of note was the Star Quadrille, which Carrie Astor and her friends performed (Stasz 85). Catherine Hunt, an attendee, recalls the ball: "It was the best of its kind" (Stasz 86). The ball cost a quarter of a million dollars at the time and



was reported on far and wide (Stasz 86). Much of this was due to Alva's attention to detail. She oversaw every step of the process and ensured that every piece was up to her standards. If her intention was to make a large impact, she was successful. The *New York Times* reported of the event:

The Vanderbilt ball has agitated New York society more than any social event that has occurred here in many years. Since the announcement that it would take place...scarcely anything else had been talked about. It has been on every tongue and a fixed idea in every head. It has disturbed the sleep and occupied the waking hours of social butterflies, both male and female, for over six weeks. ("All Society in Costume")

### **Application of Research**

The research that has been gathered above will be applied in a one act play, *The Gilded Finch*. This play will explore the relationship between both sets of mothers and daughters. The main purpose is to examine the conflict that one could find in the American upper class at the turn of the century.

Gathering research allows for a fuller picture of the facts of a history to be told. The research into the social interactions and rules of society allows the interactions to be written in a way that is more accurate to what may have happened in real life. In the process of researching the Vanderbilts, the Astors, and the Gilded Age (1870-1900), information that aids in the telling of the story have come to light. These range from personal quirks that various people demonstrated regularly to the habits employed by people of society in leaving calling cards. Many first-hand accounts were also examined, from Consuelo and others of the era. These provide insight into the mindset of the time. Some also provide quotes that have been used directly or indirectly as lines in the play.

Some liberties have been taken in turning the facts of history into a play which flows in an active and dramatic fashion. The most notable of changes is the aging up of Consuelo Vanderbilt from her actual age of five years old in 1882 and six years old in 1883 to thirteen years old in 1882 and fourteen years old in 1883. *The Gilded Finch* is a dramatic retelling of actual events, but should not be taken as historical fact.

## THE GILDED FINCH

## SCENE 1

AT RISE:

It is a brisk October afternoon in 1882. A grand living room comes into view. Windows along the back wall show Fifth Avenue, a bustling thoroughfare. Long curtains frame the windows, puddling to the floor. The style of the room changes from one side of the stage to the other. One side more cluttered, almost gaudy, yet expensive in appearance. The other side is also decorated quite expensively, yet with more elegance and taste. A settee and several chairs surround two tables. There are servants bustling back and forth.

(EDITH comes in carrying a tray of tea service and begins setting the table. MAY enters from the other side and begins setting the other table.)

EDITH

The new china just came in this morning. Careful not to chip it.

MAY

Everything in this house is new. I take care with all of it.

EDITH

Don't dawdle. They'll be down any moment.

MAY

Wonder if they'll dress for tea today. The ball ended after sunrise.

EDITH

Best not to speculate.

MAY

I'd rather be living my life than theirs. Seems as flat as stale champagne. Pondering over it keeps my mind busy though.

EDITH

We are here to serve and be paid. Your nose'll get slammed in a door if you keep putting it where it don't belong.

(Both women work in silence for a moment.)

MAY

Jenny told me they used four hundred bottles of champagne last night.

EDITH

Never seen the kitchen so full with strange dishes.

MAY

Do you think that they taste good? Or they're just there for the other rich people to look at and be impressed?

EDITH

Well, judging by the smell—

(ALVA enters and sits at the table, ignoring both women. EDITH and MAY both silently finish setting the tables and leave. MRS. ASTOR opens the newspaper and begins to read it. CONSUELO sweeps in and sits.)

CONSUELO

Good morning, Mama.

ALVA

Good morning. Did you sleep well?

CONSUELO

Yes, quite.

ALVA

Do you have anything planned for today?

CONSUELO

I had hoped that Willie and I might take the boat out on the pond.

ALVA

That sounds like a lovely use of your time. Remember though, you must be ready in time for your afternoon lessons.

CONSUELO

Yes, Mama.

ALVA

Don't forget your morning penmanship.

(CONSUELO begins writing on a piece of paper. She fidgets.)

Stop fidgeting.

CONSUELO

Must I continue with these exercises every morning?

ALVA

You know what I have always said to you, "It is as great a violation of propriety to send an awkward and badly written letter, as

ALVA and CONSUELO

It is to appear in the company of people with swaggering gait and unkempt hair."

CONSUELO

I know. I must be drilled in penmanship almost as much as soldiers are drilled in marching. A well-bred woman must be able to correspond almost as a poet, with a fluid grace of speech and pen.

(CARRIE and MRS. ASTOR enter and sit at the other table.)

ALVA and MRS. ASTOR

You know that your father and I have expectations for you.

CARRIE

Yes, Mama.

MRS. ASTOR

I only tell you because you are a reflection of the Astor name. Your great grandfather worked hard to raise this family to the level that we currently sit at.

CARRIE

I am aware of that, Mama.

MRS. ASTOR

I did not intend to make you sad.

(Pause.)

Your dance last night was lovely.

CARRIE

Thank you, Mama.

(MAY and EDITH reenter with tea pots and biscuits. They begin tea service.)

MRS. ASTOR

Thank you, May.

(CECELIA enters with a letter on a tray. ALVA takes the letter and opens it as CECELIA exits.)

ALVA

Thank you, Cecelia.

CONSUELO

Who is it from?

ALVA

Your namesake, my old friend Consuelo Yznaga.

(MAY and EDITH exit.)

CONSUELO

The Viscountess of Mandeville! How is she? Is she still touring? The last she wrote; she was in Rome.

ALVA

She writes that she is well. She has made her way back home to Manchester.

CONSUELO

Shall we see her soon?

ALVA

She is coming to New York in the spring. I am sure that she will stay with us for a time.

CONSUELO

I would enjoy that very much. I always learn so much when I spend time with her.

ALVA

I am glad that you benefit from her visits. She is sailing over in February. Perhaps by then all will be in order here and just as I want it.

CONSUELO

She will be the first guest in our new house!

ALVA

I am sure that she is not the only one who would love to see it.

MRS. ASTOR

I would very much like to see the inside of that monstrosity the Vanderbilts are building down the street.

CARRIE

Mamie told me that Mrs. Vanderbilt employed Mr. Hunt to build the house.

MRS. ASTOR

If Alva is like I suspect she is, it was more of a joint effort.

CARRIE

I would enjoy designing a house.

MRS. ASTOR

Why would you need to? You can hire someone to do that for you.

CARRIE

I feel that I may enjoy such a hobby.

MRS. ASTOR

Surely you are content with your needlepoint and dancing.

CARRIE

There are other things I would be interested in learning. Or do you protest my choices in hobbies as well?

CONSUELO

Mr. Rosa is teaching us about the Punic wars this week.

ALVA

Am I to have a warrior rather than a daughter?

CONSUELO

No, Mama. I enjoy history, but I do not wish to recreate it.

ALVA

I would not prefer to be alive at any other time.

CONSUELO

Not even at during times of fashion and glamor?

ALVA

Though I love to see the beautiful dresses of bygone eras, I would not wish to live in a time when I was not able to speak my mind or be an equal to my husband.

CONSUELO

I hope that I find a man like Papa, who allows me to make choices about my own life.

ALVA

I will make an appropriate match for you.

MRS. ASTOR

I only want you to make an appropriate match and be a happy wife.

CARRIE

I think that you are misunderstanding me.

MRS. ASTOR

Carrie, this is the not a suitable match. Mr. Wilson does not come from a family that is worthy of you.

CARRIE

They are just as fashionable as we are.

MRS. ASTOR

That is not the only problem dear. You are much too young.

CARRIE

Mother, that is what you have been saying for the last five years.

MRS. ASTOR

I will say it for the next five. Your father and I are in agreement on this.

ALVA

We want you to have the best possible match. Someone who is not marrying you just for your Vanderbilt money.

CONSUELO

I feel as if I am stifled by my name. I cannot do this, that, or the other simply because I am known by sight and will be talked about.

ALVA

Your name is not something to be ashamed of. It will allow you to meet a greater number of eligible men than I was introduced at your age.

CONSUELO

But, have I met anyone thus far that you would consider approving of? Or will you and papa select someone for me?

ALVA

Nonsense. You will meet many eligible young bachelors. That is what balls and parties are for after all.

CONSUELO

The only types of fitting balls are those hosted by Mrs. Astor.

ALVA

I can change that. I will hold one.

CONSUELO

But you can't host a ball just to find me a husband. Especially not yet, I am too young.



ALVA

I do love a good ball though.

CONSUELO

How long will it take you to plan one?

ALVA

Well, I think that the spring would be best. Perhaps when the viscountess is here. That would give us a good reason.

CARRIE

You know that I have good reason for the things that I do and the decisions I make.

MRS. ASTOR

What reason can you find to walk home from church every Sunday on Marshall Wilson's arm is beyond me.

CARRIE

We just chew the fat.

MRS. ASTOR

Carrie! That language. You know how I feel about slang. It is all vulgar. It cheapens you. Someone may mistake it for thought.

CARRIE

I am sorry, Mama.

MRS. ASTOR

I accept your shortcomings as a reflection of myself.

ALVA

The only shortcomings I see are in limiting the guest list itself.

CONSUELO

Is there a rule that you must?

ALVA

No rule, only a norm.

CONSUELO

Rules are meant to be challenged.

ALVA

I am glad your education is beginning to show itself.

CONSUELO

May I go now and sail with Willie?

ALVA

Yes. Make sure that you change first.

CONSUELO

Yes, Mama. Thank you!

(CONSUELO kisses ALVA on the cheek and then exits.)

CARRIE

I am sure one day I will thank you mama.

MRS. ASTOR

You know I only want the best for you because I love you.

CARRIE

I know. May I go to work on my needlepoint?

MRS. ASTOR

Yes.

CARRIE

Thank you, Mama.

(MRS. ASTOR leans up for a kiss. CARRIE exits without giving her one.)

MRS. ASTOR and ALVA

This spring will be very interesting.

(MRS. ASTOR and ALVA exit opposite sides of the stage, crossing each other.  
EDITH and MAY enter and begin clearing the tables onto rolling carts.)

EDITH

Be careful with the china.

MAY

I know, it's new.

EDITH

How many do you think this house'll hold?

MAY

For what?

EDITH

The ball in the spring.

MAY

What about minding our own business?

EDITH

Has gossip ever hurt someone?

(EDITH and MAY both exit, rolling their carts offstage.)

END SCENE

## SCENE 2

AT RISE: A gathering of ladies is forming. They mill about the stage, being attended to by several maids.

(EDITH enters with a tray of pastries. She crosses to MAMIE Fish and the group of women.)

EDITH

A petit four, Mrs. Fish?

(MAMIE takes a pastry. EDITH offers the tray to the other women, who accept.)

MAMIE

Yes, thank you, Edith. As I was saying, talent and intellect should open the portals to society. That is where other countries show understanding and where America displays snobbishness.

ELEANOR

Do you not think, Mrs. Fish, that allowing anyone into society would defeat the purpose?

MAMIE

America is too new and too big for that sort of narrowness. It is not typical of the American principles; it does not do justice to the American ideal.

ELEANOR

Do you not find the model set by the European aristocracy to be one to be followed?

MAMIE

Not at all, Lamb!

ELEANOR

I am sure that we stand on quite a different field in this aspect.

MAMIE

I will admit that we are different from the Old World and there is no way in which we could equal them, so we ought to enjoy what we have here.

(EDITH and MAY begin to move the tables, to allow for several women to sit around them. They begin to set them with tea service.)

There will always be classes in this country. We are coming more and more to have an aristocracy and a common people. I do not believe in being too democratic.

(MRS. ASTOR sweeps in.)

MRS. ASTOR

Mrs. Fish, what a lovely gathering.

MAMIE

Thank you for coming. Make yourself perfectly at home, and believe me, there is no one who wishes you were there more heartily than I do!

MRS. ASTOR

How is your family?

MAMIE

Never better. Stuyvesant is ever my ardent admirer. Marian seems to find no end of enjoyment in tormenting everyone in this house, from the basement to the attic.

(MAY enters with a cart with several pots of tea and sets them on the tables.)

Our family expansion seems to be coming along quite nicely.

(MAMIE pats her stomach, clearly pregnant.)

MRS. ASTOR

Lovely.

(EDITH enters and crosses to MAMIE.)

EDITH

The tea is set in the parlor, Mrs. Fish.

MAMIE

Thank you, Edith. Ladies, let us move to the parlor for tea.

(EDITH and MAY exit as the ladies move to sit at the tables. ELIZABETH sits next to MAMIE.)

ELIZABETH

Mamie, have you had a new set of dresses made for this season?

MAMIE

I have commissioned a few, I do not think that I will be making many appearances this season, even less than I usually do.

ELIZABETH

Did you take a trip to the house of Worth? They creates the most beautiful, fashionable gowns.

MAMIE

Well they should, with the prices they charge.

ELIZABETH

Charles Worth said that American women are the best customers he has—far better than queens. There is something about us.

MAMIE

American women should wear American gowns and not patronize the Parisian makers.

MRS. ASTOR

Who then do you propose we go to, Mrs. Fish?

MAMIE

Madame Osborne does very nice work. I frequent her shop.

MRS. ASTOR

Do you not think that the Parisians have a special quality about their designs?

MAMIE

I truly do not care where my dresses are made, as long as they are fitting and well made. Is it much more convenient for me, however, to visit the dressmakers that we have in New York, rather than taking a trip across the ocean for a few frocks.

(MAY enters, followed by ALVA.)

MAY

Mrs. Vanderbilt, ma'am.

MAMIE

Greetings. Find yourself a seat, there are several that are open.

(ALVA sits. MAY exits.)

Have you read the most recent volume of *Town Topics*?

ELEANOR

Mrs. Fish! I don't know if that is an appropriate topic for conversation.

MAMIE

I do not limit my literature by what is appropriate. I read what is interesting. What shall we talk about?

ELEANOR

I do not pride myself in being an accomplished conversationalist.

MAMIE

Mrs. Astor? Would you consider yourself an accomplished conversationalist?

MRS. ASTOR

I think that anyone can be an accomplished conversationalist if they are bright enough to follow the conversation.

ALVA

You pride yourself as accomplished, Mrs. Astor?

MRS. ASTOR

I do.

ALVA

Have you passed this on to your children?

MRS. ASTOR

I believe that my children are accomplished in many things, especially conversation. Their education allows for discussion on many topics.

ALVA

I have raised my daughter that she might be a fine conversationalist.

MAMIE

What way have you done this? My Marian is a conversationalist, but her line of speech could not be followed by most.

ALVA

I talk to my children as though they are adults. They are encouraged to contribute to any conversation that is had at our dinner table with adult guests.

MRS. ASTOR

It is here that we part ways in concern to our children's education. It is best left to professionals. My children have always had access to the best tutors that America and Europe have to offer.

ALVA

They rely on textbooks, do they not?

MRS. ASTOR

What other method of transferring information would you propose?

ALVA

I could not learn from impersonal pages. I want the contact of mind with mind. I like the friction of thought that it engenders.

MAMIE

Ladies, this gathering was not meant to be a debate.

ELEANOR

I feel as though I have been sitting in a seminar, but have been educated.

MRS. ASTOR

It may be best not be so outspoken about things that you do not understand, Mrs. Vanderbilt.

ALVA

I do have three children, Mrs. Astor.

MRS. ASTOR

You should defer to those who are older and more experienced than you. Such impudence is not attractive and will not gain you anything.

MAMIE

I believe that you two should meet at some point and lay out your plans for a child's education.

MRS. ASTOR

I have better things to do than debate something on which I know I have the proper stance. I will take my leave. It is colder here than I had anticipated.

(MRS. ASTOR exits.)

ELIZABETH

Sometimes I think that Mrs. Astor thinks New York will not be able to get along very well without her.

ELEANOR

To her, society has become not a recreation and enjoyment, but a profession.

ALVA

What other profession is there for women in our position to have? I know of no profession, art, or trade that women are working in today as taxing as being a leader of society.

MAMIE

Let us then relish in our profession! Edith, bring the finger sandwiches.

(EDITH comes out and begins clearing the tea service as the ladies exit.)

END OF SCENE



## SCENE THREE

AT RISE: Two weeks before the ball. The entryway of the Vanderbilt house, bustling with activity. Maids are crossing back and forth throughout the scene. They carry decorations: lamps and mirrors. Everyone is preparing for the ball. The attendees of the ball are preparing their dances.

(Eight girls are circled upstage, practicing a quadrille. Mrs. Vanderbilt sweeps in carrying a large stack of invitations, with Consuelo scampering in behind her.)

ALVA

These all will go out this afternoon. I am sure that we will have received all the replies by the end of the week.

CONSUELO

Do you think it was wise to invite so many people, Mama?

ALVA

I invited those who have taken the time to call upon us in this house.

CONSUELO

All of them? Some of our guests have not been the most fashionable people.

ALVA

Fashionable or not, it takes a lot of people to fill a ballroom meant for twelve hundred.

(CECELIA crosses, carrying a vase of flowers.)

Cecelia, make sure these go out with the afternoon post.

CECELIA

Yesum.

(CECELIA exits.)

ALVA

I believe that we have our last fitting for our costumes in a few moments.

CONSUELO

I wonder if anyone else will be dressed the same as me.

ALVA

Even if they are, you will be the prettiest shepherdess of them all.

(ALVA and CONSUELO exit. The dancers make their way downstage. MRS. ASTOR enters.)

MRS. ASTOR

It's coming along quite nicely, ladies.

CARRIE

Thank you, Mother.

MARIAN

Shall we do it once more?

(The girls circle up and begin to perform the quadrille again. MRS. ASTOR sits on a settee and watches, clearly enjoying the performance. EDITH enters, a small stack of invitations in hand. As the girls turn through the dance, EDITH hands each of them an invitation. As she is about to hand the last to CARRIE, she looks at the name and then retracts her hand. EDITH exits. The dancers each twirl off with their invitations.)

CARRIE

Mother?

MRS. ASTOR

Yes, Carrie?

CARRIE

Are you not going to say anything about the snide that Mrs. Vanderbilt has shown you?

MRS. ASTOR

What Mrs. Vanderbilt does is no concern of ours.

CARRIE

It is of concern to me. We have been preparing our quadrille for weeks. The new dress you ordered for me for the ball. I want to go.

MRS. ASTOR

It would be rude of you to go somewhere that you are not wanted.

CARRIE

Am I not invited because I am not wanted? Or am I not invited because you are my mother?

MRS. ASTOR

Carrie—

CARRIE

You do not understand, Mother. Do not try to explain my life to me. I know. You don't know what the position of an heiress is. You can't imagine. There is no one in all the world who loves me for myself. I cannot do this, that or the other simply because I am known by sight and will be talked about.

MRS. ASTOR

Your father and I love you, Carrie.

CARRIE

Your love is stifling to me. Do you not think that I want to experience life like other girls my age?

MRS. ASTOR

Like going to this ball?

CARRIE

Yes, and marrying a man I love, rather than making a match to advance your position or strengthen father's business alliances.

MRS. ASTOR

Are you asking this of me, Carrie?

CARRIE

Don't make me your chess piece, mama. I am your daughter. Do this because you love me.

MRS. ASTOR

Edith!

(EDITH hurries in.)

EDITH

Yes, ma'am?

MRS. ASTOR

Fetch my hat and wrap. Have the carriage brought round. I am making a call.

(EDITH nods and leaves.)

CARRIE

Oh, thank you, Mama!

(CARRIE embraces MRS. ASTOR. MRS. ASTOR exits.)

END OF SCENE

SCENE FOUR

AT RISE:

The entryway of the Vanderbilt house. There is a table sitting by the front door. The bustle of servants from the previous scene has died down.

(MRS. ASTOR enters, wearing her visiting coat and hat. She briefly surveys the hall.)

MRS. ASTOR

Hmph.

(MRS. ASTOR withdraws a calling card from her handbag and places it on the silver tray on the table. She exits. ALVA enters. She picks up the pile of mail and cards from the tray.)

ALVA

Finally. May!

(MAY scurries in.)

MAY

Yesum?

ALVA

The Astor's invitation may now be sent.

MAY

Is that all?

ALVA

Yes, you may go.

(MAY exits.)

We've made it.

(ALVA exits, in exaltation.)

END OF SCENE

## SCENE FIVE

AT RISE:

The Vanderbilt mansion. The night of March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1883, the ball. There are guests scattered everywhere, all in increasingly intricate and gaudy costumes. ALVA presides over it all like a queen at the top of a dais. She is attired like a noblewoman. Beside her stands CONSUELO YZNAGA. A quadrille is being performed.

(MAMIE enters.)

ALVA

Mrs. Fish, I am so glad you were able to join us this evening.

MAMIE

You know I love a party, Pet.

ALVA

May I introduce you to my good friend? This is the Viscountess of Mandeville. Consuelo, my friend, Mrs. Mamie Fish.

CONSUELO YZNAGA

It is a pleasure to meet you.

MAMIE

Likewise. I hope you are enjoying our little city. It surely is not as grand as some of the places that you are used to.

CONSUELO YZNAGA

It feels more like home than some of the palaces that I have visited.

MAMIE

Alva, you must bring the viscountess to my house for tea some afternoon. I am sure that you have the most fascinating stories.

CONSUELO YZNAGA

That would be most delightful.

ALVA

Some time next week perhaps?

(ELEANOR enters.)

ELEANOR

Good evening, Mrs. Vanderbilt. What a lovely party.

ALVA

Thank you. May I present my dear friend, the Viscountess of Mandeville. Mrs. Smith.

ELEANOR

It is an honor.

CONSUELO YZNAGA

It is a pleasure.

(ELIZABETH enters.)

ALVA

Another one of my dear friends.

(ELIZABETH crosses to the other ladies.)

ELIZABETH

What a lovely evening you have created for us to enjoy, Mrs. Vanderbilt.

ALVA

May I introduce you to the guest of honor. This is the Viscountess of Mandeville. Mrs. Fields.

ELIZABETH

It is lovely to meet someone who I have heard so much about.

CONSUELO YZNAGA

I have much looked forward to meeting all of Alva's fashionable friends. None, as of yet, have disappointed.

(ELIZABETH, ELEANOR, and MAMIE move from CONSUELO YZNAGA and ALVA.)

Are there many more?

ALVA

I am only expecting one more of any note, the queen of society herself, Mrs. Astor.

CONSUELO YZNAGA

Is she usually late?

ALVA

She arrives in her timing. No one ever knows what thoughts passed behind the calm repose of her face. To question her motive is to question God, you will get nowhere in the end and feel stupid while doing so.

CONSUELO YZNAGA

Will you hold dinner until she arrives?

ALVA

I doubt I will have to do that; she has an hour until we begin the first course.

(MRS. ASTOR enters and crosses to ALVA and CONSUELO YZNAGA.)

Welcome, Mrs. Astor.

MRS. ASTOR

Thank you for having me. You have created quite the house here.

ALVA

May I introduce you to my close friend? This is the Viscountess of Mandeville. Consuelo, Mrs. Astor.

CONSUELO YZNAGA

I have heard much about you Mrs. Astor.

MRS. ASTOR

Am I so well known?

CONSUELO YZNAGA

Alva and I stay in correspondence and your name has been mentioned several times.

MRS. ASTOR

Ah.

(MAMIE crosses to the group.)

MAMIE

Viscountess, can I steal you away? You'll have to accept my apology for taking your guest of honor Alva, I want to pick her brain a bit.

CONSUELO YZNAGA

Of course. If you don't mind, Alva?

ALVA

Not at all.

(MAMIE and CONSUELO YZNAGA cross to another group.)

MRS. ASTOR

You must have been doing a lot of planning recently. This party seems to be quite the undertaking.

ALVA

I delight in planning.

MRS. ASTOR

It must be easy to make oversights when coordinating a large event.

ALVA

No, I try to stay focused on the task at hand. Everything has a purpose.

MRS. ASTOR

I am not vain enough to think New York will not be able to get along very well without me. Many women will rise up to take my place. But I hope that my influence will be felt in one thing, and that is in discountenancing the undignified methods employed by certain New York women to attract a following. They have given entertainments that belong under a circus tent.

ALVA

I don't believe I understand what you are saying, Mrs. Astor.

MRS. ASTOR

Don't be coy. I realize that my time will come. I can feel the anticipation for that moment.

ALVA

What does this have to do with me?

MRS. ASTOR

I have always thought that, as a society, we have no right, to exclude those whom the growth of this great country has brought forward, provided they are not vulgar in speech and appearance. The time has come for the Vanderbilts. The next time you are at the opera, stop by my box.

(MRS. ASTOR walks away from ALVA, toward the dancers. CONSUELO approaches ALVA.)

CONSUELO

Are you alright, Mama?

ALVA

I feel wonderful, darling. This evening has been the grandest of successes. I have attained my goal. Let us now enjoy these festivities.

(CONSUELO and ALVA embrace.)

END OF SCENE

END OF ACT

END OF PLAY



### **Reflection on Process**

During the process of applying the research in the creation of a play, several questions arose. These questions are addressed and answered below.

When writing a play, one question comes to mind first: “Does doing research allow for an effective play?” In a short answer, yes, research allows for an effective play. Researching creates a fuller body of sources to pull information from. Rather than having to clarify single facts or instances, doing the bulk of the research before allows for these questions to be answered all at once. In writing a historical play, this research will have to be done for historical accuracy. Some audiences find the inaccuracies to detract from the story being told. While these members of the audience are the minority, the goal is for the largest number of audience members possible to enjoy the show.

After one has determined the story they wish to tell, another question arises: “Can a narrative be accurately created without research?” In the story that is told above, the narrative could not be accurately told without research. Similar to hearsay in court, telling a story without looking at accounts from people who lived it takes away the validity and accuracy. With a story that is not very far removed from the present, it is more important that it is told accurately, as some may be alive who remember it happening. This is not quite the case with this story, but it is recent enough that there are many written accounts to source information from. While there is no way to know all of the information from research and some blanks have to be filled in, research builds the framework.

As characters and their relationships are the basis of most plays, another question comes to the surface: “Does knowing the history of characters and their interactions allow for more successful character development and implementation?” In researching the two pairs of mother and daughter, a large amount of information came to light about who Alva and Caroline were as

people. This translated to a more accurate representation of them on the page. Being able to read first-hand accounts of people who interacted with them and reading their quotes revealed their personalities in ways that simply reading a historical account would not. The lack of information on the relationship between Caroline and Carrie Astor informed the relationship that was presented in the script. The plethora of information on the relationship between Alva and Consuelo Vanderbilt informed the relationship that was presented in the script.

In the writing of *The Gilded Finch*, a question was presented: “Was there anything revealed in the process of writing or researching that was unexpected?” Most of the information that was revealed was expected. There were more details in some areas than expected. Due to largely male focused history of the period, not all books that initially seemed helpful actually were. It was interesting to find the quotes that various authors found important and were included in multiple books.

As with most research projects, questions arise during the process that need to be answered with additional research. Did additional research need to be done after the initial research to fill in gaps? After the initial research was completed and the writing began, most of the gaps were filled with the initial bulk. There were several points when sources had to be revisited to find specific answers. Sometimes in revisiting these sources, additional information that helped continue an existing train of thought was found. Researching to write a play was not a one and done approach. It began with a large chunk of the research done before the writing process began and then returning to researching when questions arose that were unanswered.

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