

## JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract  <p>Yhdysvaltalaisesta yhteiskuntaa on sen 1900-luvulla kehittyneestä taloudellisesta valta-asemasta huolimatta jo pitkään vaivannut niin sanottu köyhyyden paradoksi: huono-osaisuuden ja epätasa-arvon ilmeneminen yhdessä maailman rikkaimmista valtioista. Tätä paradoksia on käsitelty toisinaan myös amerikkalaisessa kirjallisuudessa, josta esimerkkinä on Tom Wolfe satiirinen romaani <i>The Bonfire of the Vanities</i> (Turhuuksien rovio, 1987)</p> <p>Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee teoksen kuvausta 1980-luvun New Yorkin kaltaiseen suurkaupunkiin keskittyneestä köyhyydestä, etenkin vähemmistöjen keskuudessa. Käyttäen pohjana 1960-luvulta alkanutta keskustelua alempiin sosiaaliluokkiin vaikuttavista ongelmista niin ulkopuolisten instituutioiden kuin niiden sisäisen järjestäytyneisyyden tasoilla, tutkielma pyrkii selvittämään vahvistaako Wolfe ennestään vallalla olleita käsityksiä köyhyyden syistä ja vaikutuksista yksilöön, vai pyrkiikö hän purkamaan näitä ja esittämään uusia näkökulmia aiheeseen.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen taustalla vaikuttaa etenkin sosiologinen teoria liittyen huono-osaisuuteen yhdysvaltalaisessa kontekstissa, mihin liittyy niin taloudellisia, historiallisia, kuin yksilöllisiäkin puolia. Tärkeässä osassa ovat tietysti myös representaation ja identiteetin kysymykset, johtuen etenkin romaanin keski- ja yläluokkakakeskeisistä näkökulmista, jotka näkyvät varsinkin köyhyyden käsittelemisessä moraalisten kysymysten kautta.</p> <p>Tutkimus osoittaa, kuinka Wolfe kuvaa alempia sosiaaliluokkia sosiologiassa käsiteltyjen ilmiöiden pohjalta, ja esittää luokan vaikutuksia monella elämän osa-alueella, kuten työllisyydessä, koulutuksessa ja henkilökohtaisissa yhteyksissä. Kuitenkin näkökulmien vähäisyys, etenkin juuri huono-osaisten osalta, nähdään romaanin puutteeksi, sillä sen sijaan että se haastaisi keski- ja yläluokkaisia näkemyksiä kunniallisuudesta ja siitä, mikä on yhteiskunnallisesti hyväksyttävää, köyhyyden representaatio leimautuu kauttaaltaan näiden sosiaaliluokkien arvojen ja odotusten mukaan.</p>	
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**REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL CLASS AND URBAN POVERTY IN  
TOM WOLFE'S *THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES***

Master's Thesis

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the twentieth century, the United States has been one of the most affluent societies in the world. At the same time, however, it has been riddled with a paradoxical social problem that seems contradictory with this status. Social scientists have called this the paradox of poverty: the prevalence of economic inequality in one of the leading industrial countries in the world.

This disparity in the human experience of various Americans has from time to time been discussed in literature as well. One of the most well-known cross-sections of metropolitan life in the late twentieth century is the American journalist and author Tom Wolfe's 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Set in the 1980s New York City, this satirical novel tells the story of the downfall of successful Wall Street businessman Sherman McCoy, who is cast in the middle of a scandalous criminal investigation as a result of an unfortunate incident involving an accidental injury to a young black boy in the Bronx. In the course of the novel, Wolfe employs his brand of satire on institutions such the criminal justice system, the press, and Wall Street while delivering extremely detailed descriptions of how people live, what they wear, and how they perceive the 1980s urban society, as well as themselves and others in relation to it. The novel discusses themes such as masculinity, race, class, status, and the heightened sense of individuality in the 1980s culture.

Despite Wolfe's self-professed intention to write a novel of immense scope (Wolfe: 1989), a common criticism toward *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is its lack of viewpoints other than those of white, middle-class and upper-class males. Critics such as Kennedy (1995) and Masters (1999) have pointed out the novel's division of the city into a duality between the haves and the have-nots, who are characterized in different terms; white characters in higher social positions are animated through focalization and cultural signifiers such as dress and education, whereas the poor become subject to stereotyping and superficial observations. While the present thesis' analysis acknowledges these criticisms, it explains how like with the upper layers of society, representations of urban poverty and the underclass in the novel are also constructed using signifiers, such as clothes, bodies and the more abstract concepts of waste, excess and decency to depict and compare them to other social classes.

The purpose of this research is to examine the representations of inequality and poverty in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Using the criticism presented toward the novel as a starting point, the interest here is in examining how Wolfe constructs his representation of the disadvantaged, and whether he attempts to deconstruct or perpetuate stereotypes and expectations regarding them. The research utilizes a large sociological basis, drawing from the long-standing discourse on the so-called 'urban underclass', a concept introduced in the American context as early as the 1960s, and which by the 1980s had only increased in relevance, as societal ills such as unemployment, welfare dependency, narcotics abuse, and crime had continued to soar especially among the country's poorest people and areas. In order to analyze a fictional novel, the facts and statistical data regarding the urban poor are combined with the concept of representation; how depictions of people and institutions are constructed for both the reader and within the story itself. The real-life phenomena discussed by social scientists are compared with how Wolfe depicts the topics, and what is especially important, what kinds of viewpoints into these he presents for the reader.

In relation to studies and literary criticism on Wolfe, my purpose is to explore his depiction of urban poverty and class discourse in *Bonfire* more closely than has perhaps been done before, while being mindful of the various possible viewpoints from which one can approach issues surrounding poverty. These include conservative and liberal sociological views that place the blame for the disadvantaged position of these sections of population on different matters, and the literary examinations of the novel's themes that partially overlap with my interest. However, whereas these studies often focus on the *Bonfire's* white characters and the impression of the societal and personal themes filtered through them, this thesis aims to widen the examination of Wolfe's depiction of lower classes, while being aware of the values that the aforementioned filtration posits on them. This thesis also contributes to the array of studies on social class by discussing how prominent concepts of class and its relation to economic and moral factors can be identified in fictional class representations and how alternative forms of representation can be explored.

The analysis shows how *The Bonfire of the Vanities* does indeed include a vast variety of phenomena regarding the poverty paradox that have been discussed by social scientist during the latter half of the twentieth century. Wolfe presents individual characters whose lives are affected by larger social phenomena, such as unemployment and poor job opportunities as a result of the shifting economy, the heightened emphasis on meritocracy and attainment of cultural resources to enable one to advance in society, and the outmigration of minorities

away from city centers – the former hubs for working class employment opportunities – towards suburbs and gentrification. Regarding representations, the analysis shows how the lack of lower-class viewpoints leaves the concept of lived class experience among the disadvantaged a vague subject, as the representations of the urban poor are mostly constructed through characters who are higher up in social hierarchy. As a result of the middle-class and upper-class viewpoints, the representations of the urban poor are filtered through and saturated by the values exhibited by these classes. Because of this, the novel's discourse on lower class individuals largely revolves around concepts of respectability and validation in the eyes of others. A prominent undertone throughout *Bonfire* is the theme of morality, which is strongly related to the middle-class-oriented viewpoints the novel presents. This can be seen in how many sociological issues, such as employment or crime, are given a moralistic angle rather than approached objectively. Furthermore, this approach to sociological issues can also be seen to function at both the narrative and story-levels. As the background chapter points out, the underclass is, however, in many regards outside traditional class distinctions, and as such the novel's view of them often comes off as normalizing and does not offer much deconstruction of stereotypes regarding the poor or minorities.

The thesis begins by introducing the novel and Tom Wolfe as an author in greater detail. The Background chapter also elaborates on the theoretical concepts and terms used later on in this research. The analysis chapter then goes through the main arguments and observations in thematic groups. These sections begin by identifying a prevalent area within the underclass discourse that the novel discusses and then presents relevant research done in sociological contexts to elaborate on the phenomena, while keeping in mind a critical approach to the sociological research utilized here and the representations they also create. Next, the implications of Wolfe's depiction of a specific topic on its representational significance are discussed along with the examination of how certain scenes in *Bonfire* can be interpreted. Finally, the observations made during the analysis are summarized in the Conclusion chapter, which also rounds up the considerations of social class and representation that the novel offers.

## 2. BACKGROUND

This chapter outlines the theoretical basis of the present thesis that is utilized to perform a critical close reading of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. First, the plot of the novel is summarized briefly. Since *Bonfire* is very plot-driven and the stories of its characters tightly intertwined, it is useful to the reader of this thesis to understand how the imaginary situation where race and class come into conflict is set up. This is followed by a section about the author Tom Wolfe, with the focus being on the characteristics of his writing, as well as his employment of the literary techniques of realism and satire in the novel. A related topic is how these two seemingly incompatible registers can be used side by side in a text.

Next, I present some of the previous studies written about *Bonfire* and what other researchers have already pointed out about it. This also makes it possible to identify a gap between previous studies of the novel and this thesis. In regards to this gap and the viewpoint I aim to take, the next topic in this chapter presents discussion on social class, first from a sociological point of view, where I define the term 'underclass', which is used throughout the analysis, and later in conjunction with wider notions of social class and representation. These two subjects, class and representation, are tightly knit together in this study, and to open up this discourse, I present some concepts regarding the making of representation in popular media, especially those that take a moral standpoint in connecting class with ideas of respectability and decency. Section 2.5 also introduces the concept of social abjection, which can be similarly used to examine stigmatization of certain groups of people. Finally, I present the research questions that I seek to answer in this thesis before moving on to the analysis.

### 2.1 About Tom Wolfe and *The Bonfire of the Vanities*

#### 2.1.1 Overview and plot synopsis of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*

*The Bonfire of the Vanities* was Tom Wolfe's first published novel. It is set in the 1980s New York, during the period of economic reform instigated by the Reagan administration beginning in the early 80s, which allowed businesses in the private sector to expand their operations, and deepened the gap between the rich and the poor in the United States (Foner

2007:1037). The main character of the novel is Sherman McCoy, the thirty-eight-year-old chief bond salesman at Pierce & Pierce, a company on Wall Street. McCoy lives in a luxurious cooperative residence on Park Avenue, one of the most affluent neighborhoods in New York, with his wife Judy, who has spared no expense to renovate their apartment with lavish interior decorations. The couple have one child, the six-year-old Campbell, who is a pupil at the prestigious Taliaferro private school.

The story goes into gear in the novel's fourth chapter, which begins with McCoy giving his mistress, the attractive twenty-six-year-old Maria Ruskin, a lift from the airport in his Mercedes sports car. After missing a turn, the two unintentionally end up driving to the Bronx, one of New York's poorest neighborhoods, mostly populated by minorities, where they are forced to stop under a bridge on Bruckner Boulevard. After two black youths approach them, asking if they need any help, the duo panics, flees the scene in McCoy's car, and accidentally hits one of the boys with the car in the process.

The injured boy turns out to be Henry Lamb, a well-doing student with a dream to move away from the ghetto with his mother and attend city college. Lamb is put into a coma as a result of the incident and classified as a likely-to-die. McCoy and Ruskin opt to stay silent about the incident, but soon the media and other parties, including Reverend Bacon, a charismatic black community leader and advocate for minority rights, catch wind of the tragic story. The hit-and-run incident quickly becomes a heated topic among especially New York's disadvantaged minorities and their proponents, who use the case to attack the power structure they deem unequal. Protests are held, calling and end to "white justice", which puts pressure on especially the Bronx District Attorney Abe Weiss to find the culprit and show the people of New York that the justice system under his administration is egalitarian, lest he risk losing voters in a forthcoming election. Sherman's involvement is eventually found out, and he is cast into a long-winded trial, which causes him to become alienated from high society and the comfortable life he is used to, and exposes him to public criticism.

Besides Sherman, the story is also told from the perspectives of other New Yorkers involved in the case in one way or another. One of these is Assistant DA Larry Kramer, a middle-class Jewish lawyer in his thirties who works at the Bronx County Building and is eager to take on the prosecution against Sherman, the seemingly mythical "great white defendant". The newspaper media's coverage of the McCoy case is followed from the perspective of reporter Peter Fallow, an English expatriate who is able boost his career by being the first to bring the case into the limelight. The events of the novel take place in various New York milieus, from the lavish high-class apartments and Wall Street glass towers



on Manhattan to the Bronx County Building and its murky holding pens, as well as the derelict streets and urban decay of the Bronx and its housing projects. Prominent themes in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* include the heightened racial tensions of the 1980s, class and socioeconomic status, morality, as well as the vanities of masculinity, which in the novel is a theme deeply connected with the notion of status.

### 2.1.2 Tom Wolfe as a writer: techniques of realism and satire

This subsection begins by providing a very brief look into Wolfe's career. Most of it, however, is devoted to discussing some of the literary characteristics of Wolfe's writing, as well as his use of the techniques of realism, which the author has applied both to his non-fiction and novel writing during the course of his career. Besides these topics, this subsection also discusses how the aforementioned considerations regarding realism might clash with *Bonfire's* intentionally satirical depiction of its subject matter. All of this works in the background of the analysis, which aims to examine what kinds of representations Wolfe presents using these techniques, and what kinds of readings of the novel they enable.

Even though *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was Tom Wolfe's first published novel, the author had already had a substantial career in American journalism over the span of more than 25 years. Born in Richmond, Virginia in 1931, Wolfe graduated from Washington and Lee University in Lexington, VA, where he began his writing career as a sports journalist and also wrote three short stories (Lounsberry 1995). Since then, Wolfe has published numerous non-fiction works, as well as four novels between 1987 and 2012. In public, he has become known for his dandyish persona, his trademark white suits, and literary scuffles with other journalists and authors (Ragen 2002: 13–15).

Wolfe is known as one of the essential figures of *New journalism*, a journalistic style for which he himself coined the name in the title of the anthology *The New Journalism* (1973). This style of journalism blends together conventions of both journalistic reporting and fictional narration. Preston describes it as "a hybrid form of nonfiction in which novelistic techniques [are] applied to factual material" (1991). Wolfe himself has said how writing the memo manuscript of *There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* was a "kind of epiphany" for him. It was through writing this rather free-form report on middle-class teenage culture and the hobby of customizing cars that allowed him to digress from the standard methods of journalistic reporting, and to take up "a form [of

writing] that more fully captured the reality he observed" (Preston, 1991). Wolfe's journalistic writing style can be seen reflected in his later fictional work, and in Lounsberry's interpretation, the two are strongly intertwined:

As a New Journalist Wolfe applies the techniques of a novelist to factual or journalistic subjects. As a novelist he employs a journalist's exhaustive legwork to gather the rich details, and even whole scenarios, for his imagined tale. In both, the distinctive Wolfe style remains virtually the same. (1995)

The phrase "distinctive Wolfe style" no doubt refers to the author's recurring stylistic choices, such as his abundant use of punctuation, including exclamation points and dashes, as well as fragmented sentences, which Lounsberry sees as a way to emulate the often fragmentary process of human thought (ibid. 1995). This in turn allows the author to more effectively get inside the minds of his characters, and to present them as the experiencing subject. Lounsberry also mentions Wolfe's meticulous field work, which he indeed did hefty amounts of in order to accurately portray New York's various sites and social spaces in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Ragen compares this fieldwork to the realist writers of the 1800s, such as Balzac and Zola (2002:30). Just like the latter, Wolfe attended judicial hearings in order to accurately portray the legal process of the Bronx County Courthouse, and the aforementioned building ended up becoming one of the major settings of the novel.

In *Tom Wolfe: A Critical Companion*, Ragen emphasizes the significance of the fact that for Wolfe, realism is a technique rather than the subject of the text. As a journalist, he introduced four particular techniques of realistic fiction into reporting, which was otherwise still strongly characterized by the traditional objective, fact-centric telling. The first of these techniques was scene-by-scene construction, according to which New Journalist writers were to describe their topic by details, creating a scene for the reader, rather than merely reporting it. The second was realistic dialogue, which allows for a more intimate rendering of specific people, since what people say and the way they say things are among the strongest manifestations of character and personality. Third, New Journalist writers often manipulated the point of view of their writing in order to produce more vivid pictures of their subjects. The writers were often questioned about their tendency to explicitly state what other people felt in certain situations, the obvious question being how the writer could know such things. Wolfe explains that understanding what people felt and thought at a given time can be achieved simply by

asking the person about it after the fact. Using this technique, New Journalists could write from any person's viewpoint, a trait which can distinctively be recognized in Wolfe's later fictional works.

The last technique was the attention to detail that is connected to the notion of status. According to Wolfe, Americans can tell more about people based on their possessions and especially their outward appearances than they could by any vague labels, such as class. This is yet another quality of Wolfe's writing that is prominently present in his novels as well. As the analysis points out, in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* possessions and appearances carry a hefty significance as building blocks of representing social class, and specific items, such as shoes for example, can be associated with many meanings regarding social and economic status, mobility in social spaces and the knowingness of the class signifiers one emits through appearances. (ibid:45–46) Wolfe's understanding of the relationship between class and status, and its implications on interpreting these themes in relation to the novel are discussed below in 2.4.

Wolfe thus employs a selection of realistic techniques to construct representations in his writing. However, the issue becomes a bit more complicated in relation to *Bonfire*, as the novel reads out as both a realist novel and a satire of its subject matter. The question becomes then, how are the two aspects balanced in the novel, or can they even co-exist in the first place? Furthermore, is there any indication within the novel which parts of it are satire and which are not, that is, if it makes such distinctions? Realism and satire can be argued to have some common ground. Kercher connects satire with moralism, a central concern also in this study's examination of *Bonfire*, and defines satire as "forms of humorous expression that, by definition, deploy irony to criticize vice and raise awareness" (2010:1). In other words, satire can be argued to be deeply seated in realism, casting societal issues with moral angles into relief through the application of humor.

On a quick glance, the satirical elements seem to mostly apply to the novel's middle-class and upper-class characters, whose titular vanities and pretensions are poked at mercilessly. This portrayal is arguably effective for satirical purposes, since it exposes the thoughts of the focalizing characters through the aforementioned description of their fragmentary thoughts in which they build themselves up – for example, Sherman thinks of himself as a self-appointed 'Master of the Universe', and Kramer draws confidence from his muscular physique – and by doing so reveals the insecurities that the expressions of status they put on are meant to hide. However, this cannot be seen to be the case for the novel's poor characters, whose thoughts

are not expressed from their viewpoints in the same way as the white, male characters, aside from one quick switch of the experiencing subject near the beginning of the novel. Indeed, Wolfe does not seem to attempt to satirize the underclass directly, but can rather be seen to underline the paranoid preconceptions of the middle-class towards them.

## **2.2. Previous research on Wolfe and *The Bonfire of the Vanities***

After its publication in 1987, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* has been analyzed and discussed by various literary critics. The publications written about the novel which I refer to in the course of this thesis range from ones published in the late 1980s to Ragen's (2002) and Ranta's (2005) studies from the early to mid-2000s. This goes to show that even though *The Bonfire of the Vanities* attempts to capture a specific period in contemporary American history, the thematic material of the novel continues to intrigue readers, which can be taken to indicate that the novel addresses issues that span several decades. Furthermore, new research is being done all the time regarding representations of various sections of population in popular media, and class as a concept is making its way back into academic discourse after being discredited as an outdated method of explaining modern society (Tyler 2013:156) This thesis seeks to apply some of these newly developed tools in a critical reading of Wolfe's novel.

As examples of the previous studies on *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, three in particular are brought up in this section. These are Kennedy's (1997), Masters' (2004) and Kyung Jin-Lee's (2000) views on the novel. A common criticism of the novel made by all three researchers, as well as other literary critics, is Wolfe's alleged failure to include enough variation to his representation of what the author himself intended to be a comprehensive cross-section of urban life in a post-modern New York City (Wolfe, 1989). They argue that Wolfe instead spends too much time and effort focusing on the lives and inner thoughts of his white, middle-class and upper-class male characters, which leaves no room to explore the events and themes of the novel from the point of view of minorities, the poor, or women of any class or race. Kennedy also describes Wolfe's depiction of New York as that of a "dual city", divided between the extremely rich and the extremely poor (1997). Additionally, keeping close to the aforementioned characters and telling the story through them means that the representations of minorities and the poor are filtered through the consciousnesses of these characters, making the depiction of the disadvantaged normalized in terms of subjects such as class and race. Masters focuses especially on the racial implications of the novel's representations, stating

that the aforementioned qualities fetishize whiteness in the novel, while reducing the depiction of minorities into racist and animal-like stereotypes, reminiscent of colonial literature or gothic allegories (1999).

As can be witnessed in these initial summaries of the previous research on *Bonfire*, a central concept here is viewpoint. During the course of this thesis, I use especially *focalization* as a working term for exploring this facet of Wolfe's novel. This term is often used in narratology, and it was introduced by Gérard Genette in 1972. Niederhoff defines focalization as "a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld" (2009:115). Focalization was used by Genette to replace the traditional terms "perspective" or "point of view", which it substitutes with a more cognitive approach (ibid.).

The cognitive, in other words the thoughts and emotions of characters, is a particularly large part of how Wolfe presents New York City through his characters. In Lounsberry's biography of Wolfe, she mentions how the author uses unorthodox punctuation, short sentences and sometimes plenty of repetition to mimic the fragmentary thought processes of humans (1995). The novel also gives the reader insight into its characters' reactions and innermost thoughts about the events and people they come across, thus creating a very close connection to characters' personalities. In *Bonfire*, Wolfe makes copious use of focalization to deliver his satirical commentary on the vane but ultimately insecure middle-class and the rich, but as was already mentioned, this is barely applied to any other group of people at all.

Kennedy discusses *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in relation to American 20th century postnationalism, and especially the social developments of metropolitan cities in the process of globalization. One of the concepts at the background of Kennedy's article is a discourse on urban decline. He argues that the fact that cities like New York are becoming increasingly fragmented and divided into various social spaces as a result of globalization and associated economic shifts makes it more difficult to characterize an entire city as a synthetic whole. Despite this consideration, within the discourse on urban decline, the status of metropolitan cities continues to be a microcosmic symbol of the various problems in American society at large (Kennedy 1997). From this point of view, Wolfe's intention to summarize urban life in New York City at a certain point in history thus seems inherently flawed.

In reference to Wolfe's concept of status and status groups, Kennedy calls to Schwartz's comment about how Wolfe does in fact not so much seek to depict individual personalities, but rather through them various social groups (Schwarz, 1981:46). This in turn results in

Wolfe's characters appearing caricatured and stereotyped, and it also asserts ideas that the fragmentation of urbanity has brought under scrutiny (Kennedy 1997). Although Kennedy criticizes the novel quite heavily, he does mention that its flaws are not necessarily indicative only of inaccurate social commentary, but that the reasons behind these flaws also raise interesting questions, such as why Wolfe feels the need to totalize the urban space, and what conclusions can be derived from the novel's depiction of the crisis of urbanity (ibid.)

Another study on *Bonfire*, which at times references Kennedy's article, is a part of a thesis by Kyung-Jin Lee, titled *A Cultural Analysis of Masculine Identities in Racial Situations and Conflict During the 1980s in New York City* (2000). As the title suggests, the angle of Kyung-Jin Lee's study are theories of masculine identities and crises, which he identifies in a selection of fictional works and popular culture phenomena from the 1980s (Kyung-Jin Lee 2000).

Besides societal problems, the theme of masculinity is a prominent one in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Furthermore, what becomes apparent in Kyung-Jin Lee's thesis is that the theme of masculinity can be used as a thread to connect various targets of criticism in the novel. Similarly to Kennedy (1997), Kyung-Jin Lee also addresses Wolfe's portrayal of New York and its inhabitants through extreme opposites, the poor and the rich, and the different types of masculine identities associated with different social statuses. He also emphasizes the importance of the unseen interconnectedness of the lives of various characters in the novel, from McCoy to the disadvantaged inhabitants of the Bronx (Kyung-Jin Lee 2000:65). Kyung-Jin Lee sees the depiction of the black and white binaries as oppressive and stereotyping, and argues that a polycentric approach to the subject matter could be more successful in representing a modern metropolis the way Wolfe intends to in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and that this could create more complex depictions of masculine crises as well (Kyung-Jin Lee 2000:66).

In relation to the theme of masculinity in Wolfe's writing, novelist Alison Lurie, who Kyung-Jin Lee also mentions, has pointed out that despite the author's attempts to cram "as much of New York City between the covers" as possible (Wolfe, 1989:45), all the characters through which the narrative is focalized are male, with female characters being given considerably less representative attention (Ragen 2002:34). Masters has also called attention to the lack of properly realized black and female representations, which according to him results in a loss of credibility of the realism of Wolfe's novel (1999:210). This is a noteworthy argument considering the importance that minority characters like Henry Lamb or his mother

have on the story. Despite these points of critique though, Kyung-Jin Lee does point out that even though Wolfe mainly presents white, middle and upper-class characterizations, he does so successfully and with great passion, which opens up possibilities to examine the crises of masculine identities in the novel's socio-political environment (2000:70).

Finally, a previous Master's thesis written about *The Bonfire of the Vanities* at University of Jyväskylä is one by Ranta (2005), who examines Wolfe's depiction of social and moral corruption in the 1980s United States. In regard to Wolfe's journalistic career and his reportative style of using factual elements in order to capture realistic scenes, Ranta argues that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* can be examined almost as a journalistic report on "modern social behavior and [...] moral integrity", and that what Wolfe is trying to emphasize is ignorance towards the interconnectedness of the members of the American society. (2005:76). Ranta also comments on how the economic decisions made by the Reagan administration have a strong relation to the socio-economic statuses of the novel's characters (ibid:10)

Ranta suggests that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* can be read as a historical document of the time period it is set in. While it is a fact that Wolfe did a great deal of empirical research to accurately portray various sections of 1980s American city life, and that the novel certainly addresses many of the topical issues of the period, such as racial tensions and the widening gap between the rich and the poor, however in my opinion this suggestion must be approached with caution, especially in relation to the ideas presented about the novel by some of the other literary critics discussed here. In his previously discussed article, Kennedy in particular is keen to point out the flaws in Wolfe's attempted capturing of the entire social organization of New York, and points out that "this failure is evident enough at a documentary level – there is no mention of homelessness, for example" (1997). He also claims that the novel's narrative functions as a "cautionary tale for white, middle-class males", implying that Wolfe does not appear as an omniscient reporter of social realism, but imposes specific values on the narrative (ibid.).

Morality is indeed a theme that the present thesis also applies to its reading of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, especially from the point of view of middle-class-oriented representations of the working class and the urban underclass. Building on the views of these previous critics, I explore what could be called a 'moral normalization' of the behavior and lifestyles of the novel's urban poor in relation to areas of life such as employment, crime, family organization and physical appearance and clothes as signifiers of social class. The analysis showcases how in many parts of the novel, representations of the disadvantaged are

constructed through the mindsets of the more affluent characters and measured up against what they deem decent. A subject related to this is symbolic legitimation of the working-class and other poor people wishing to move upwards in social hierarchy, who become subject to being held against middle-class expectations regarding how to present oneself. This topic is discussed in the analysis especially in relation to personal appearances and tastes.

### **2.3 The poverty paradox and the urban underclass**

Today's ghetto neighborhoods are populated almost exclusively by the most disadvantaged segments of the black urban community, that heterogeneous grouping of families and individuals who are outside the mainstream of the American occupational system. Included in this group are individuals who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or are not members of the labor force, individuals who are engaged in street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior, and families that experience long term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency. These are the populations to which I refer when I speak of the *underclass*. (Wilson 1987:8, emphasis original)

The focus of this thesis are representations of the lower-class poor of New York City in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Before going into the topics of class and representation, and how these two intersect in a reading of a work of popular fiction, this section first discusses the paradox of poverty in the American society from more of a sociological perspective. To do so, I make use of sociological discourse regarding the urban *underclass*, which is represented in Wolfe's novel as well. However, the studies discussed here cannot be completely removed from the subject of representation, as research itself can be seen to construct representations. Thus, some of the considerations of the sociologists showcased here are approached with a critical mindset, mirroring the analysis' attempt to identify representations that either assert or go against prevailing typifications.

Even though there are many interpretations of the term 'underclass', and the explanations behind this twentieth-century social phenomenon can vary greatly, there seems to be a consensus on what type of people the word refers to. The above quote from the American sociologist William Julius Wilson, one of the most prominent researchers of the subject, captures the central features that can also be identified as thematic topics in *Bonfire's* representation of the poor; family structures, employment, crime, welfare dependency, and a



falling out from American workforce. By considering the historical context of a fictional work, some erroneous readings can be avoided, such as interpreting a historical novel from the mindsets of a later time period, although in the case of a novel such as *Bonfire*, which can be considered contemporary, that historical context might not be all that removed from the current day. What this consideration ultimately means for the present study is that *Bonfire*, despite some of its prophetic and speculative ideas, is not analyzed here so much as a part of a longer term of development, but rather as a depiction of a specific moment in contemporary American history, one that Wolfe could observe by utilizing his reportative approach to fiction writing.

As already implied, sociologists have approached the underclass discourse from different angles and presented various theories to explain the formation of the underclass. In his pivotal book *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson, who himself represents a more conservative approach to the topic, takes a step back to recount the differences between liberal and conservative views regarding America's poor. He offers no simple explanation to the poverty paradox and the increased concentration of poverty in ghettos, dismissing both ascribing ghetto joblessness to a pathological 'culture of poverty' and blaming the disenfranchisement of urban minorities on racism, two explanations often used by the political right and left respectively. According to Wilson, the formation of urban ghettos is a complex procedure, one that is connected to historical and continuing present-day discrimination, but also larger societal movements, such as shifts in the American economy. (1987:6–18)

In *The Urban Underclass*, an anthology of articles regarding the titular topic, Jencks lists four ranking schemes that can be used to define the term 'underclass': *income level*, *income sources*, *cultural skills*, and *moral norms*. The first of these, income level, functions on the observation that inclusion in the underclass is oftentimes equated with persistent poverty. Jencks points out how this category does not apply to the previously mentioned groups such as the elderly poor, the working poor, or others who are poor through no fault of their own. 'Underclass' here applies only to those families whose poverty is attributable to a violation of one or more social norm. Jencks also uses the term 'impoverished underclass', and sometimes 'the undeserving poor' to refer to this group, the latter of which can be argued to carry a very subjective connotation.

The second categorization presented by Jencks is one based on the tendency in sociology to assign people to classes based on how they earn their income rather than how much money they have. The upper classes generally receive income from capital, the middle and working

classes from regular jobs, and the lowest class from irregular work, crime, public assistance and handouts. (1991:29–30) These classifications correspond rather well with the various levels of employment and social class introduced in *Bonfire*. Wolfe describes meticulously how young urban professionals on Wall Street earn their income through capital, the middle-class works regular jobs, such as the police force or public service jobs, and although not explored in the same detailed way as the previously mentioned, various young citizens of the Bronx are mentioned to be working low-level jobs such as security guard. Selling narcotics as an illegitimate source of income is also touched upon in the novel.

One of the proposed reasons for why unemployment and lifestyles that conflict with common expectations continue to be prominent in urban ghettos is a lack of proper middle-class role models in these areas, which is often the result of middle-class families following jobs that are migrating away from city centers and into the suburbs. This is also known as the "spatial mismatch" hypothesis. Regarding the issue of educational requirements and job opportunities, Jencks presents two theories on why job opportunities for men without high school diplomas declined after 1970. The first one, the *weak aggregate demand* hypothesis claims that the overall demand for labor had been smaller than the supply of workers since 1970. Poorly educated workers are always the last to be hired and the first to be fired, which means that protracted labor surplus makes many of them redundant. The *skills mismatch* hypothesis, on the other, claims that the labor market's composition of demands had changed. Firms wanted more skilled workers and fewer unskilled workers. Although the men and women entering the workforce during the 1970s and 1980s were better educated than those retiring, the demands were still greater than their level of education. As such, unskilled and semiskilled workers had more trouble finding steady jobs, and those that did find jobs had to accept lower real wages than workers during the 1960s. (1991:53)

Finally, Jencks presents moral norms as one of the categories that define the underclass, which relates to the previous category in terms of their relation to culture and the ways people think. Americans often talk about middle-class values and the underclass is occasionally characterized as people who seem indifferent to these values. According to Jencks, three middle-class values are especially salient in this discourse: Working-age men should have a steady job, women should postpone childbearing until they are married, and everyone should refrain from violence. Jencks refers to the violators of these values as the 'jobless underclass', the 'reproductive underclass', and the 'violent underclass' respectively. (1991:29–30)

While these theories bring out important points about poverty and the realities facing people with inadequate cultural and economic resources upon their entering the job market or the academic world (if they are able to at all), one should also take a step back to contemplate the representation of the underclass produced by studies like the ones discussed here. Most notably, Wilson and Jencks both seem to write from a middle-class-oriented perspective, in which the characteristics of the poor are never examined in their own context, but rather compared to the 'normal' state of things, i.e. how the middle-class experiences the same aspects of life. This can be seen in how, for example, for both researchers, family is understood as the primary unit of society, and the importance that the two place on the so-called nuclear family and the danger of its dissolution.

Single parenthood is considered a telltale sign of pathological societal developments, even though this could very well be argued against, especially from a modern point of view. Likewise, the assumption that single parenthood is always a sign of a pathological, dysfunctional family can be contested. *Bonfire* in fact presents the Lamb family, who are headed by a single female, as some of the most morally righteous people in the novel. Indeed, morality is a theme that underlines much of these conservative theories regarding the underclass. Jencks outright lists a number of expectations which 'decent' Americans are expected to fulfill in relation to family, employment and social conduct. However, he does not contest these views in any way or explore how meeting these expectations might be viewed from the point of view of those coming from severely disadvantaged areas, but rather seems to observe and acknowledge them as a commonly accepted national paradigm. Thus, even though Wilson and Jencks bring up the hardships that poor people in America face, they also reproduce class distinctions by holding their findings up against mainstream society, instead of taking into consideration how the extraordinarily different circumstances of the disadvantaged might not be applicable in this context. This consideration of the inapplicability of common terms to the underclass is discussed further in the following sections, which explore theories of social abjection along with continued discussion on class and representation.

## **2.4 Class, status and representation**

The central thematic notion in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* examined in the present thesis is that of social class in the context of the American society, and how this relates to the

representation of the so-called 'underclass' and its position in the urban social hierarchy. As the analysis shows through examples taken from the novel, the concept of social class in *Bonfire* is a structure that is affected by a person's economic standing, as well as a host of characteristics that signify class. Besides these, class representations in *Bonfire* are informed by the notion of morality in the sense that class, as well as behavior and appearances associated with it, are bound to middle-class views of decency and respectability.

Skeggs notes how after a period lasting from the 1950s to the 1980s, during which the working class and the less affluent tended to be represented in accordance with economic factors to explain their situation, popular representations of class have since taken on more of a moral tone that focuses on the individual through observable traits and behavior (2004:113). Building on the work of previous researchers of *Bonfire* (Kennedy 1997; Kyung-Jin Lee, 2000; Masters 1999), the present thesis aims to show how Wolfe's middle-class and upper-class centric focalization creates distinctions of social class through the novel's lower-class characters that are inherently tied up with said moral connotations.

The analysis also comments on the inter-class views exhibited by the novel's characters who come from different class backgrounds, as well as the idea of advancing in social hierarchy. Before discussing these considerations in the analysis, this subsection examines the concepts of social class as well as social status – a term frequently employed by Wolfe throughout his writing career – on a more general level, emphasizing not only how social class can be 'made' through representations in popular media, but by also taking into consideration how academic studies, the present one included, might also contribute to either perpetuating or deconstructing prevailing notions of social class. Following right after this sub-section is discussion on representations; for the purposes of the present study, these two topics – class and representation – are tightly bound together to form a discussion of class representations, and thus the two topics have some degree of overlap, with ideas regarding both themes being discussed here side by side.

This study examines the so-called urban underclass and its representation in the *Bonfire*, but to understand this phenomenon, it must be contrasted with the wider strata of social hierarchy in the context of the United States. Wray and Nevitz (1997) note how in the United States, the vocabulary of class discourse is diminished, and as a result the discussion often drifts towards the issue of race. This aspect of class discourse can be witnessed in *Bonfire*, where qualities of poverty and low class are in almost every case attached to African Americans and to a lesser extent Latins. As for Wolfe himself, the author has notably eschewed traditional designations

of social class, which he has instead frequently substituted with his idea of *status*. Ragen notes how Wolfe refers to a notion of "status life", which he constructs in his writing through meticulous descriptions of people's material possessions and appearances as signifiers of status. As an example of Wolfe's ideas regarding the topic, Ragen mentions how the author considers the car a person drives, or the type of shoes he or she wears to be a more concrete sign of one's position in society than the traditional, abstract vocabulary of social class (2002:46). A central part of Wolfe's philosophy on status are so-called *statuspheres*. By these, he means social groups who have opted out from the American class competition, even if they have the resources and means to advance in this hierarchy. He sees this development to have taken place after World War II, as the United States became one of the most affluent societies in the world, and where such break-offs from communities and social classes became possible (Best 2001:7).

However, one can question whether Wolfe's designation of status is all that different from the more traditional notion of social class. The author highlights individual possessions and appearances as telltale signs of one's social position, but as theory presented later in this chapter and the analysis point out, these are also a central part of class discourse. The viewpoint of Wolfe's proposition must also be taken into account; to *whom* do possessions such as motor vehicles or clothes appear as signifiers of status? What kinds of resources, cultural and symbolic, must one possess in order to recognize and legitimate these possessions as such?

As studies on class discourse – such as those discussed below – point out, class legitimation is a practice that is usually performed from the top down, i.e. by middle-class or upper-class people towards lower ones. Furthermore, Wolfe's idea that individuals can break off from a community to form a 'statussphere', where the group makes its own rules regarding competition and inclusion – such as housing areas for older people, where no one under 50 years of age may move in (ibid.) – assumes that the individuals in question have the resources to enable and sustain this practice. The idea becomes complicated when one attempts to apply this model to those who are lacking the aforementioned resources; namely the poor. The analysis chapter shows through an example, how even though Wolfe uses this model to depict a ghetto criminal as a master of his own 'statussphere', this representation leaves unanswered the question whether those without material or cultural resources truly have a choice to distance themselves from the economic and social structures that hinder them from advancing in mainstream society in the first place, or whether this can be read as an act of protest against an unequal and seemingly antagonizing social order.

The present study also makes use of a variety of studies written in the context of the British class system, which due to neoliberal economics (a phenomenon discussed below) mirrors American class hierarchy. Besides the term 'underclass', this thesis also uses the traditional class vocabulary of 'working class', 'middle-class' and 'upper-class' to refer to the various economic levels and cultural groups within the American society. Many similarities can be recognized between the class discourses in the contexts of Britain and the US, such as gentrification, inner-city poverty, public housing, and perhaps the most interesting aspect to explore for this study is the shared discourse regarding an underclass, which is present in both cultures. What is more, researchers such as Skeggs (2004), Tyler (2013), and Hall (1999) provide many useful insights to the representation of class in popular media, such as television and film. All of the mentioned researchers have also written about class in non-literary contexts, which are of course intrinsically bound to fictional representations.

Skeggs notes how in the past, popular class relations operated by creating distance between the morally superior middle-class and the degenerate working class. However, in more recent times, popular representations and a reconfiguration of class discourse has worked to dilute this distinction, and in modern times distance can actually be drawn as a result of closeness (2004:96–97). Both of these dimensions can be seen exhibited in *Bonfire*. On the one hand, one of the themes regarding the organization of urban space in the novel is drawing territorial lines, both real and symbolic, between the rich and the poor. This theme is especially applied to Sherman, whose lifestyle is depicted to follow the idea of 'social insulation', using borders such as the private vestibule of his co-op apartment, the safety of the 50<sup>th</sup> floor of the glass tower on Wall Street where he works, and the private car service rides to and from work to keep him away from "the trenches of the urban wars" (BOTV:56).

However, the mental and moral distancing performed by the novel's middle-class male characters is never more explicit than when they are placed in close proximity with the underclass. This is evident in almost all of the excerpts from the novel featured in the analysis; most of them involve some form of proximity between the middle-class and the working class or underclass. Furthermore, Wolfe's technique of focalizing the scenes in meticulous detail through the characters lays bare to the reader the emotional responses of the middle-class toward this proximity, which brings forth aversive feelings in them, such as disgust and fear of physical violence. The former of these also functions as a mechanism of creating distance *from* the experience of proximity. Disgust can function as a way of maintaining a moral or physical distance from the object of disgust as a response of realizing

the proximity of the one experiencing it to the object (Skeggs 2004:102). In a shared public space such as the modern metropolitan city, such experiences of proximity become unavoidable, and indeed the highest points of intensity in the novel, marked by excessive mental strain on the part of the character who the scene is focalized through, are ones that coincide with the underclass coming close to the middle-class, such as the very beginning of the novel, where a public speech in Harlem by the mayor of New York is turned into a chaotic physical scuffle, or Sherman and Maria's deliriously terrifying car ride in the Bronx.

## **2.5 Class, representation and social abjection**

A key concept used in this thesis in analyzing Wolfe's depiction of urban poverty is *representation*, which is theoretically closely related to discourse studies. Representation as a term refers to the act of describing the world and its phenomena; like the word itself suggests, things are *presented again* based on previous representations and concepts regarding a specific target of representation, which are largely dependent on viewpoints and contexts involved in the act (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009:56). The interest of discourse studies is to examine how language is used to construct meaning. Pietikäinen and Mäntynen point out how discourses have a central role in representing people and the world as "real", i.e. what kinds of things are stated as facts, how they are explained to have come about as result of other events, and what kinds of values are applied to them (2009:53). Within discourses, it is possible to present a certain viewpoint above others, thus selecting certain meanings and leaving others out (ibid. 54). The previous section exemplifies this with the underclass discourse: according to Wilson (1987), many conservative researchers on urban poverty approach the discourse from the viewpoint of morality and personal choices as reasons for why economic disadvantage keeps perpetuating, while liberals on the other hand place more emphasis on the racial aspect of the discourse. Wilson himself approaches the discourse from a middle-class point of view, which inevitably leaves the underclass' conceptions of themselves in the dark. When examining discourses, one of the first points of interest should thus be who is representing who.

When studying a novel such as *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, a question that may be asked is what kinds of discourses does Wolfe employ to construct meaning within his portrayal of the underclass? Does he approach the topic from either of the previously mentioned viewpoints, or does he construct a different one based on his extensive legwork and

observations? On the topic of 'presenting again', one could also ask if Wolfe employs already existing representational concepts, and if he does, does he use them as is, or does he aim to deconstruct or turn them upside down through his satirical narrative. Besides the extra-textual level, these same questions can also be applied to characters within the novel itself; since *Bonfire* features characters from many walks of life within a specific period, many of them can be expected to have varying opinions on phenomena such as urban poverty and social classes outside their own. The interest of this research is then to examine not only how Wolfe constructs representation within the narration, but also how he presents characters from different social classes to employ discourses on issues such as employment and respectability to construct representations.

Context, a key concept in analyzing representations, is an important factor here as well, since potentially volatile topics like poverty and personal characteristics of certain groups of people are to a great degree dependent on the context surrounding them, as well as existing conceptions based on earlier representations of these topics. On a related note, one of the ways the analysis examines how representations are made is to analyze the concrete words from which they are built. The analysis highlights parts of the novel where class distinction is performed verbally, such as by likening underclass people to excrement and the descriptions of people's clothing and bodies, which according to Masters (1999) are described using vocabularies of bestial, colonial-era imagery and modern fashion styles depending on whether the subject is an individual from the underclass or higher classes.

Like the previous section on sociology pointed out, a recurring motif in middle-class-oriented representations of the working class, and by extent the underclass, is attaching ideas of morality and decency to these lower social layers, which has replaced earlier practices of depicting the lower classes through their economic position as industrial workers (Skeggs 2004:113). Besides question of morality, *Bonfire* features plenty of discussion on matters of taste in things such as clothes and other possessions, interior decoration and restaurants, all of which is very reminiscent of the discourse on class and taste instigated by Bourdieu (e.g. 1979). The last subsection of the analysis explores these considerations in particular, mostly through the motif of clothing.

Skeggs explains how especially in a British context, the working class is often represented through the abstract qualities of excess, waste and disgust. Out of these, excess is especially one that can be recognized in Wolfe's depiction of the urban poor of New York City, most prominently in the form of outlandish fashion styles and loud, pervasive behavior, which are contrasted with the delicate fashions of the upper-class and the how various people



from lower classes tend to grasp the fascinated and bewildered attentions of the focalizing characters, for example by causing a scene at a court hearing or engaging in a drunken brawl in the middle of the street in the Bronx. This is in contrast with the depiction of middle and upper-class characters, who are constructed through inner cognition as a result of their position as the focalizers.

Of note is also the contrasting *lack* of excess exhibited by the character of Annie Lamb, a poor working-class female; even though her character is bound to a variety of working class qualities – she is a black single parent from a ghetto, who is in trouble with the law because of parking violations – in all of her appearances in the novel she is always characterized by her meek and unassuming appearances and conduct, which earns her legitimation as a 'decent person' (BOTV:217) in the eyes of middle-class characters. Considering her son's depiction as similarly 'civic-minded', one can argue that the novel implies statements about family background and one's parents' influence as determining factors in how a person growing up in working class or underclass environments turns out later in life.

A concept similar to the underclass discourse, and which overlaps with it to a degree, is social abjection. This phenomenon is discussed by Tyler in her book *Revolting Subjects*, in which she examines how abjection and abjectionification can be witnessed in the context of the United Kingdom and the political idea of neoliberalism, which has been embraced in various English-speaking countries during the late twentieth century. In the United States, this fiscal policy was spearheaded by the conservative administration of president Ronald Reagan, who was in office between 1981 – 1989 (Steger and Roy 2010:21). Focusing on the effects of this form of governance on the organization of social structures, Tyler argues that neoliberal governance is used to promote social developments and programs which increase inequality and undermine democratic principles (2013:5). One of the key aspects of her book is examining how *stigmatization* works as a form of political governance, and allows these inequalities to be constituted (ibid.:8).

Tyler draws on David Harvey, another critic of neoliberalism, who has stated that despite its seemingly egalitarian nature, neoliberalism is in fact a "class project", with the intention to enforce prevalent power relations between social classes. A feature that he sees as common in many forms of neoliberal governance is the creation of an abject underclass within sovereign states (2005). Another researcher whose work functions at the background of Tyler's book is Loïc Wacquant, who has examined the symbolic and actual violence directed toward abject population groups. These types of violence include deprivation of finance and other resources,

personal hardships and a segregation into disadvantaged neighborhoods (Wacquant 2008:24–25).

One of the oldest works on the topic of abjection is Georges Bataille's definition of the concept from the 1930s. Writing in the context of the political turmoil and emergent ideologies of the period, Bataille states that abjection functions as a sovereign force which excludes parts of the population as outcasts, and presents them as "dregs of the people, populace and gutter". What characterizes many of these groups is the observation that while they can be technically considered a class, they are on the other hand disenfranchised from even the lower end of the working class to the point where they find it difficult to consider themselves a class at all. (1993 [1934]:9). However, a central part of abjection within any society is how even though higher social classes seek to distance themselves from the vilified and outcast group physically, ideologically and morally, they still find a need for the abject masses to function as boundaries of state sovereignty and to allow power relations to be reconstituted (ibid:10).

Many of these considerations regarding representations and abjection chime with the themes of *Bonfire*, which is set against the backdrop of the Reagan administration's neoliberal governance of The United States during the 1980s. Wolfe's depiction of the ghetto poor in New York City, and especially the physical and moral distancing performed by the novel's white characters is undeniably recognizable as a form of abjection, with many of these poor characters appearing as either threatening or detestable to the novel's focalizers. The theory of abjection can offer a reading of a novel like this some interesting points of comparison with the moral attachments made in representations of these so-called "dregs of the people" in not only works of popular culture, but also in sociological research like those of Wilson or Jencks discussed previously. In other words, instead of taking middle-class values regarding employment or family structures and applying them to the underclass as is, we can question whether the underclass is in a position where such considerations apply to them at all, and whether attempting to do so can be seen not as a way of explaining the formation of economic deprivation but rather a mechanism of creating distance and distinction between layers of class that legitimate the power relations between the middle-class and the underclass.

## 2.6 Background summary and research questions

The purpose of this chapter has been to outline the background for the following approach to Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, including a number of theoretical considerations regarding social class, the underclass and representations of the aforementioned in popular culture. What I hope has been made clear regarding the viewpoints of Wolfe's novel are its alleged middle-class and upper-class-oriented focalization and the difficulties that can be assumed to arise from combining the seemingly contradictory mechanisms of satire and social realism. Other researchers of *Bonfire* (Kennedy 1997, Masters 1999, Kyung-Jin Lee 2000) have highlighted its lack of scope despite the author's self-proclaimed intention to cover all levels of American urbanity at a specific point in time. However, due to the centrality of the novel's white, male viewpoints, these studies have also been fairly focused on analyzing the characters the story is told through, namely Sherman McCoy, Larry Kramer and Peter Fallow, as well as the theme of masculinity.

What the present thesis aims to accomplish, then, is a reading of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* that focuses on its representation of the urban working-class and underclass – the have-nots of the American society – through these lenses. My attempt is to apply the various considerations regarding social class into an examination of the novel that looks at not so much the allegorical meanings of Wolfe's allegedly fetishized cautionary tale for the white middle-class (Masters 1999), but which rather approaches it as a realistic novel written against the backdrop of the changing economic climate of the late twentieth century, which brought about with it significant changes in the organization of urban space, leading to new developments in racial and class relations within shared city spaces. More so than the previous studies of *Bonfire* discussed in this chapter, I also utilize sociological research for comparing the novel with sociological observations from the time period the novel is set in. However, the sociological studies presented above must be taken with a grain of salt; as was pointed out, sociological research is not outside the realm of writing that creates and perpetuates representations. The standpoints of Wilson (1987) or Jencks (1991) can be recognized to measure the underclass against middle-class value systems. Despite their heavy use of statistical data, these studies need to be approached critically, and their implications on what constitute societal ills and remedies thought about in relation to what has later been written of e.g. social abjection and symbolic and corporeal segregation of sections of population into the edges of society.

With these considerations in mind, I aim to answer the following research questions:

- How does Wolfe construct representations of the difference in social class within the urban landscape?
- Does *The Bonfire of the Vanities* attempt to deconstruct or reconstitute contrasts of class difference through its narrative?

The analysis examines these questions in thematic wholes, including topic areas such as crime, employment and class signifiers. Excerpts from the novel are used throughout to showcase examples of Wolfe's representation-making and how the viewpoints of the characters are utilized to do so. The various sections of the analysis also compare the representations within the novel to the sociological theories and statistics regarding the underclass here, as well as with more detailed figures and observations from research conducted during the 1980s. As said, these qualities of the urban poor, along with Wolfe's inclusion of them in *Bonfire*, are approached critically, highlighting what viewpoints they are seen from and whether there would have been opportunities for contradictory representations to widen the scope of the novel.

### 3. ANALYSIS

Building on the previously presented research questions and earlier studies, this chapter examines the depiction of urban poverty and social class in *Bonfire of the Vanities*. The first section describes the novel's depiction of New York's ghettos, in particular the Bronx, as locales for living and raising a family in. Since a large part of the novel's depiction of ghetto life is seen through the eyes of Larry Kramer, an Assistant DA in the Bronx County courthouse, the theme of crime is especially prominent in the novel and is thus addressed in particular. This section examines how the underclass is constructed as menacing, immoral and indecent – i.e. as the 'undeserving poor' – especially through crime, but also in relation to concentrated living areas such as housing projects. A point is also made about *making* representation in popular media, explored through the character of Peter Fallow.

Next, the analysis focuses on ghetto family structures. As the Background section pointed out, the dissolution of black families was one of the core issues within the underclass discourse since the 1960s. This section examines especially the depiction of the Lamb family as an example of an impoverished, female-headed household, and how this dynamic is represented through the viewpoints of middle-class characters.

The third part looks at education in public ghetto schools, using what the novel states about Henry Lamb's attendance at a fictional ghetto school to examine how the abjection of the urban underclass is seen affecting the quality of education, which is reflected in ghetto students' projected academic and career paths. This naturally leads us to the matter of employment, which is the focus of the next section. This section discusses the connection between employment as a signifier of social status, and how it is linked to the notion of respectability in the eyes of the imagined and real other. Finally, following the discourse of taste and fashion in relation to social class as instigated by Bourdieu, the last part of the analysis focuses on *Bonfire's* representation of personal details regarding the underclass, and how qualities such as bodies and clothes are used as class signifiers. Using some of the novel's poor minority characters as examples, the analysis looks into how meaning is constructed by these external attributes, and how characters from higher social classes respond to them. The issue of respectability is brought up again, this time in relation to more personal and abstract aspects of the urban poor's lives.

### 3.1 Inner-city ghettos and underclass crime

One of the most common properties used in theories explaining the formation of an urban underclass is location. This part of the analysis first provides details of the kind of social reality that inner-city ghettos and within them especially public housing projects are, and what kinds of milieus they were for growing up and living in during the 1980s. The emphasis is on the prevalence of crime, as well as the perceived threat of it on the part of the non-poor, which is one the major themes of *Bonfire* in relation to its depiction of the Bronx and the underclass. On the topic of representation, this section also discusses how the real and imagined nature of the ghetto is reflected through the focalization of the novel's white characters, through whose eyes these places and people are portrayed. An important consideration here is how representations can be *made* in order to serve certain purposes, such as legitimating one's own position in relation to others, or to build upon pre-existing conceptions of otherness in order to create an understanding of it to fit one's own point of view.

Like the works of researchers such as Wilson (1987), and Jencks et al. (1991) highlight, the poorest sections of the population in the United States are largely situated around the country's large urban centers. America's large cities, including New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit, all have areas which can be classified as ghetto neighborhoods by using various criteria of measurement. Jargowsky and Bane describe ghettos as census tracts with a poverty rate of more than 40 percent (1991:239), thus building on a previous measure presented by Wilson (1987), who set the number at 30 percent. Ricketts and Sawhill present a classification of ghetto neighborhoods, stating that areas are considered as such when they are one standard deviation below the national standard in four categories; high school graduation, male employment, welfare dependency, and single parent families (1988:316–325).

In other words, people living in urban ghetto neighborhoods are characterized by largely the same properties that Wilson uses to define the term 'underclass'. There are of course other variations of the definition of ghettos, but in the context of the United States, these are the properties which are most commonly highlighted. It is also common for the populations of ghetto neighborhoods to consist mostly of minorities. Jargowsky and Bane note how in the poorest census tracts in Memphis and Philadelphia, the percentage of minority residents during the 1980s could be as high as 85 or 90 percent. In their research, they include blacks and Hispanics as minorities. In non-poor neighborhoods, i.e. census tracts with less than 20

percent poverty rate, the racial composition according to their studies was in turn the opposite, with Non-Hispanic whites making up the majority of the population (Jargowsky and Bane 1991:245–246). A good portion of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is set in the Bronx, one of New York City's poorest areas, characterized by its ghetto neighborhoods. As the narration in chapter four of the novel points out, the composition of the Bronx during the time of Wolfe writing the novel in the 1980s was "70 percent black and Hispanic" (BOTV:39). Another part of the city mentioned in the novel that has ghetto neighborhoods is Harlem, which serves as the setting for the novel's prologue, as well as some other scenes.

Many ghettos in American cities have so-called housing projects, low-rent accommodations which are intended, as is mentioned in *Bonfire*, as affordable housing for working people (BOTV:217). *Bonfire* features the fictional Edgar Allen Poe Towers, which is where the Lamb family, among others, live in an affordable apartment. Though originally meant for residents with steady jobs, by the 1980s many housing projects in America's large cities came to be emblematic of the underclass and the plethora of social problems associated with it. In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson writes about two public housing projects in the Chicago area, the now-decommissioned Robert Taylor Homes and the Cabrini-Green projects. The residents of these housing projects were predominantly – and in the case of the Robert Taylor homes completely – populated by African-Americans. Although official records of people living in these projects were kept, housing authorities at the time estimated that in addition to the thousands of registered residents, the projects were also home to several thousand unregistered occupants.

Wilson also notes that in Chicago, as much as 69 percent of the residents were minors, indicating a very young age structure. Other notable characteristics of the families living in Chicago's housing projects were a low median income, the overwhelmingly common tendency for families to be recipients of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), high numbers of female-headed households, high unemployment, and what Wilson focuses on especially in his account of housing projects, a high concentration of violent crime; despite consisting of less than one percent of Chicago's total population, around 10 percent of the entire city's violent crimes during the year 1980, including murder, rape, and aggravated assault, happened around the Robert Taylor homes. Wilson also points out that these phenomena were not limited specifically to the housing projects, but that they were amplified within these spaces and thus made more publicly visible as a result. (Wilson 1987:25–26, 38)

This type of social reality functions as one of *Bonfire*'s locations, the Bronx and the Edgar Allan Poe Towers, serving as an extreme contrast to the exquisite lifestyle of the upper-class WASPs (White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants) living on Park Avenue or Fifth Avenue. Wolfe's depiction of the realities of life in the Bronx take into account many of the real-life phenomena discussed above: the Poe projects, as well as other locations in the Bronx, are described as run-down and dilapidated, mirroring the economic disenfranchisement of the neighborhood caused by the outmigration of jobs, and along them, more economically stable minority families. At the center of the plot is a crime that takes place in the Bronx, and multiple other crimes committed in the Bronx, including killings and a sexual assault, are mentioned as well.

Crime among the underclass is in *Bonfire* depicted mostly through the Bronx Assistant DA Larry Kramer, whose view on the topic could be described as cynical and disillusioned. In the novel's fifth chapter, Kramer and two of his fellow colleagues discuss the various cases that come through the criminal justice system in the Bronx. In their oftentimes crude and hardboiled work slang, the typical crime cases are called "pieces a shit", and Kramer explains how he considers the word 'criminal' to be lost on the defendants he sees:

[...]the poor bastards behind the wire mesh barely deserved the term criminal, if by criminal you had in mind the romantic notion of someone who has a goal and seeks to achieve it through some desperate way outside the law. No, they were simpleminded incompetents, most of them, and they did unbelievably stupid, vile things. (BOTV:111)

This excerpt along with the aforementioned equating of ghetto criminals to excrement is in line with Skeggs' observation on how the working classes in British and American cultures are associated with the idea of 'waste'. By this she refers to popular representations of the lower classes in which they are depicted as vulgar and grotesque figures characterized by excessive behavior and appearance, and who represent a threat to moral society (2002:103–104). Thus figuratively comparing the criminals to bodily waste perpetuates this type of representation from the perspective of the middle-class Kramer. 'Waste' also takes on another, more symbolic meaning here, as Kramer's comment about the unsuitability of the term 'criminal' on the defendants implies that the word is *wasted* on them. The idea of 'waste' here is then two-sided; on one hand the criminals themselves are symbolically lowered to the level of trash or excrement, creating a pejorative, disgusted representation, while 'waste'



simultaneously takes on a more ideological connotation – the poor are incapable of living up to the moral ideals of the middle class, even if said idea is no more than fulfilling the role of how a criminal is usually imagined. The societal roles cast on the population by those with the symbolic power to do so are thus 'wasted' on the underclass.

The issue of race in relation to crime is prominently addressed through Kramer's focalization. His motivation to pursue the McCoy case as the seemingly mythical "Great White Defendant" is linked to what the attorneys at the courthouse call "the doubts", a professional disillusionment and a sense of guilt stemming from continually prosecuting minority criminals for very similar kinds of crimes. The crimes that are mentioned in the narration include shootings over petty arguments, a fatal stabbing over a portable radio, armed robberies, and drug dealing. The arguments that are reported to have led to shootings include matters such as two friends jokingly abusing each other escalating into violence, and a man whose collection of suits was stolen killing another man who he thought might know something about the incident.

Fryer (1984) notes how in colonial representation structures, blacks were often depicted as animal-like in order to create a sense of legitimacy for violent and oppressive colonial practices. In other words, belittling the other also makes a comment about oneself. By simplifying the crimes committed by ghetto residents into senseless acts of stupidity, and in the same breath degrading the criminals into 'incompetents', Kramer creates a sense of legitimacy for his profession to combat the feeling of unease he gets from it. By making the defendants "unworthy" of the title of criminal, which he associates with putting intelligent thought into fulfilling a goal, Kramer is able to legitimate the apathetic and disillusioning attitude the County Building's employees take toward the ghetto community.

At plot level, the stories of these 'incompetents' function as tragicomic foil for Kramer's later interest to pursue the McCoy case, as well as to highlight his sense of the job's lack of meaning and possibilities of advancement. Since many of these cases are relayed to the reader in the form of anecdotes between Kramer and his fellow Assistant DAs, and at one point between him and a police officer, the impression seems to be that the even though the crimes that happen in the Bronx involve serious matters such as aggravated assault and homicide, the criminals themselves are often laughable, and their actions almost incomprehensible in their stupidity. At the same time though, the presence of crime in the Bronx rouses a very serious fear in Kramer and his colleagues, who are afraid to even go out to any of the local diners for lunch. In other words, when physical and social distance are present, the underclass becomes

laughable and disheartening to deal with, whereas proximity with it rouses feelings of fear and unease among higher classes, as the following examples showcase.

Does *Bonfire* provide any contrasting viewpoints on the perceived degradation and criminality of the underclass and the ghettos? Are there any representations of especially the Bronx within the novel that offer a different kind of portrayal? On February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1988, *The New York Times* featured a short article called *The Wolfe Isn't at Our Door* by Howard Fast, a novelist from New York City. In the article, he tells the story of how he and his wife found themselves in a situation very similar to that of Sherman and Maria in *Bonfire*, having accidentally driven into the Bronx and being forced to stop by Bruckner Boulevard after damaging their car on a large pothole, when two strangers, a black man and a Latin man approached them. As it turned out, however, the men ended up helping Fast change the tire, explaining how they were waiting by the pothole to help anyone falling victim to it, and taking in compensation whatever the person was willing to hand out. The two men also directed the couple to a body shop, where the car was fixed. Fast ends the article with a message of solidarity, emphasizing that despite the ghettos' reputation as a "jungle", New York is still a "city of people" (1988:23).

There is only one part in *Bonfire* where the focalization is essentially taken outside the novel's white, male characters. This occurs near the beginning of the novel, where Sherman has stepped outside into a rainy Park Avenue to make a phone call to his mistress Maria. Lost in his thoughts, he accidentally phones his home phone number instead and asks for Maria, only to realize that the person on the other end of the line is his wife. He hangs up and starts wondering in disbelief what to do, when a young black man suddenly appears on the street, walking towards him. What follows is an intense internal monologue, ripe with anticipating horror, as Sherman suspects a confrontation with the youth. Instead, in the climax of the scene, the viewpoint suddenly shifts outside his head, and the situation is depicted from a different perspective:

Not once did it dawn on Sherman McCoy that what the boy had seen was a thirty-eight-year-old white man, soaking wet, dressed in some sort of military-looking raincoat full of straps and buckles, holding a violently lurching animal in his arms, staring, bug-eyed, and talking to himself. (BOTV:17)

The idea here is clearly to poke fun at the pretensions of upper-class, white people like Sherman, who exhibit an irrational fear towards otherness, especially in terms of race and

class. However, the young black man's viewpoint is a rather shallow one, which stills keeps the focus of the scene on Sherman. Instead of making the reader privy to the thoughts of the young black man, we are only told what Sherman looks like to him. Unlike in Fast's article, where what seemed like a threatening situation to a person in a similar situation as Sherman here was dissolved by hearing what the minority men had to say, the "threat" in this scene is never explicitly subverted. Indeed, it is entirely possible to interpret this part of the novel to say that there really was an actual danger to Sherman in the form of the approaching stranger, but it was only his unusual attire, far from the expensive suits he usually wears, that saved him from being labeled as a target for mugging or other forms of physical violence. This could then be interpreted not so much as satire of the upper-class, but as a reaffirmation of white fears, reminiscent of what Masters (1999) argues about the fetishization of whiteness; the threat *is* real, and Sherman is only saved by his "disguise" of clothes below his status. On the other hand, demanding a moment of subversion, where Sherman's paranoia is dissolved contains a racialized notion in itself: it assumes that young black men are guilty until proven innocent and that it is only through the act of legitimation that they earn they same assumptions about decency and lawfulness which white, middle-class people are assigned naturally.

Some comments can also be identified in *Bonfire* regarding ghetto communality. In the novel, the few mentions of ghetto communities present a picture of people who are isolated from each other, and are either apathetic or antagonistic toward other people of equal social status, once again making the allegory of a jungle an apt description of this portrayal. This is evident in the novel's eleventh chapter – which is discussed in more detail below – where Peter Fallow relays a story about how people in the fictional Edgar Allan Poe projects would steal furniture from those moving into the towers if they left them between floors and turned their backs for a short while. Bringing forth the prevalence of violent crime in the Bronx, which Kramer sums up as "poor people killing poor people" (BOTV:113) also implies a deterioration in the solidarity of disadvantaged black and Latin communities.

Apathy toward people from within the same community can be witnessed in chapter thirteen of the novel, which depicts a protest in the Bronx against the way Henry Lamb's case is being handled by the police and other investigators. The protest, which is organized by Reverend Bacon and his people, only manages to get a few of the local Bronx residents to observe indifferently. When the man leading the protest tries to rouse the locals to take part in his chant, he receives no response apart from unaffected looks and some giggling. It is not

until TV cameras arrive on the scene that the local people come out of their houses to observe the commotion, and even then they seem to be more interested in getting to be on television than actually showing support for Henry Lamb, thus exemplifying Wolfe's satirical look into the individualistic nature of the 1980s society.

What this representation of ghetto activism, or lack thereof, seems to suggest is that people in impoverished urban areas do not feel strongly about injustices befalling its individual members. Perhaps this is because of the dangerous nature of the ghettos, where young people meeting tragic fates is an ordinary occurrence. What separates the case of Henry Lamb from the hundreds of other victims of the ghettos, which we get a glimpse of through the chapters following Larry Kramer's work in the Bronx County Building, is that the perpetrator here is a white couple and the victim a young black man. Thereby, a possible interpretation of the whole phenomenon throughout the novel is that the fates of the underclass go unnoticed until they can be politicized to serve an agenda. One person doing so is Reverend Bacon, who Wolfe presents as an opportunist who uses his militant social activism as a front to gain influence in city politics and to advance his business enterprises. As such, there is hardly a character in the novel who shows an interest toward the injustice suffered by Lamb purely out of impersonal reasons. All of the characters sympathetic to his plight have something other than a sense of justice motivating them, ranging from political causes, like those of Reverend Bacon or District Attorney Abe Weiss, to personal opportunities, like Kramer and Fallow seeing a chance to boost their own careers or personal lives.

Another reason for the lack of sympathy for Lamb could be that since he is mentioned to have mostly spent his leisure time at home and was not involved in street life, the community does not feel strongly about him as one of their own. There is thus a seeming element of segregation among the community, which could be intentional, as the same kind of phenomenon occurs later in the novel when Sherman's involvement in the Lamb incident becomes public knowledge. Just like Lamb differs from the norms of the underclass by following middle-class values and trying to assimilate in order to move upwards in society, Sherman becomes ostracized by his building co-op and work community as a result of his crime. The two characters cross the boundaries of expectations and norms set for their respective social positions, and become removed from their social spheres. Following this interpretation, the story makes a comment on the abject nature of the urban underclass: whereas in higher society Henry's conduct would be taken for granted as the kind of behavior someone his age is expected to exhibit, in the ghetto, values are turned upside down and

higher society is antagonized to a point where trying to assimilate with it leads young people to become alienated from their peers. It also implies that there is pressure on such individuals to join their peers in street life, which is exemplified in the relationship between Henry and Roland Auburn, the latter of whom is hinted to have pressured the meek Lamb to join him in approaching Sherman and Maria.

The novel's eleventh chapter provides interesting insight into the question of the representation of otherness in relation to the Poe projects and its residents, as well to the idea of *making* representation. In this chapter, journalist Peter Fallow has been to interview Annie Lamb regarding her son's incident, and the occasion marked the upper-class Fallow's first ever visit to a ghetto milieu such as the Bronx. The chapter takes place at the office of *The City Light*, the mostly British-run New York tabloid publication Fallow writes for, where he recounts his experience in the Poe towers for the amusement of his colleagues and his managing editor Steiner, who is likewise British. The narration describes Fallow's oration as a "tale of the lower depths" (BOTV:273), and in Fallow's eyes his manager becomes "the enlightened baron of British publishing who had summoned him to the New World" (ibid.:274). The imagery here is thickly and consciously colonial and reminiscent of the popular representations of the times of imperialist expeditions to Africa that made heroes out of the men undertaking these explorations (Hall 1999:163). Some of the earliest accounts of historical travels to the Americas, such as those of Sir John Mandeville or Marco Polo, were often a combination of factual observations and fantasy, all of which contributed to creating a framework of representations that the people back in Europe perceived as facts regarding the cultures of the Americas (ibid.:108–109). In *Bonfire*, Fallow replicates this embellishment of the factual by proceeding to add completely made-up information to the story of his visit to the projects.

Through his focalization, the reader is informed that after Annie Lamb advised Fallow to go straight for the elevator on his way down instead of taking the stairs, as they are used by the residents of the building as places to hang out and sell drugs, Fallow did indeed follow her advice. However, being inspirited by the exhilarated response from his coworkers, Fallow decides to lie about having been to the stairwell and makes up the details based on his own ideas about what could take place there: "In his intrepid trip down the stairs he encountered every sort of vice: fornication, crack smoking, heroin injection, dice games and three-card monte, and more fornication" (BOTV:275).

This passage showcases the strategy of stereotyping, of simplifying otherness into easily understandable, solidified conceptions that mark the boundaries between what is acceptable and unacceptable within the norms of a society (Hall 1999:190–191). Furthermore, it is a prime example of *making* representation, in this case through constructing a narrative using these stereotypes. By making up the details of his story as he goes along, working off his own preconceptions and limited knowledge of the ghettos, Fallow quite literally constructs a representation that is heavily filtered through his own understanding and imagination. Interestingly though, this applies not only to the subject matter of his story, but to himself as well; as already mentioned, Fallow's tale makes himself feel like some sort of adventurer or explorer of "the lower depths" recounting his exploits to his own kind back home, reinforced by the "baronial" British qualities he suddenly perceives in his manager. This way, the representations being made not only affect the target of them, but also the one making them, and the two are dependent on each other to create a certain dynamic, in this case that of an explorer and a foreign soil, or 'jungle'. Fallow's fictitious description of the events is also wrought with opposing qualities that he assigns to both himself and the ghetto environment. He takes on the role of the aforementioned explorer in this dynamic, taking on qualities such as 'sophistication', 'bravery', and 'morality'. The ghetto in turn is assigned with properties such as 'vice', 'disorder', and 'immorality', thus exemplifying the notion that representations highlight some aspects of their targets from a certain position, while ignoring alternative interpretations (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009:54).

What makes Fallow's account of himself in this situation satirically humorous is his hypocritical lifting of himself above these properties. In reality, he himself is an alcoholic, regularly cons his coworkers into buying him dinners, and frequents trendy nightclubs. In other words, he himself engages in vices similar to those he here takes a moral high ground on. As a social satire, this conflict of morality also presents a more serious dilemma, as Fallow is a newspaper reporter, a person who is expected to represent people and events truthfully. Fallow's morality regarding his work as a journalist is likewise put into question in an earlier chapter in the novel, where he interviews Henry Lamb's public school teacher. This part is discussed in more detail in section 3.3 of the analysis.

### 3.2 Lower-class family structures

Growing up and raising children in the ghettos was already briefly mentioned at the beginning of the previous section. It also made it clear that in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, the view of the underclass is largely associated with the theme of crime, and many of the individuals in it who come from disadvantaged backgrounds are indeed criminals. The following then, presents a further look into the backgrounds of these characters, and examines what is said about their families and upbringing. The Lamb family are especially highlighted here, as their representation as a family living in economic deprivation is an interesting fictional depiction of a ghetto household. This topic is a prominent one in the underclass discourse, since as Wilson (1987) acknowledges, many sociological theories, especially conservative ones, present family and personal characteristics stemming from one's upbringing as an explanation for the cycle of deprivation that riddled minority communities in the 1980s. Traditional conservative arguments concerning ghetto families are also often closely connected with morality; what is considered acceptable and respectable in terms of how one should raise his or her family, and what lifestyles are considered pathological and seen as detrimental to communities or ethnic groups at large. As the following exhibits, questions of morality crop up in *Bonfire's* depiction of ghetto families as well, functioning as building blocks of representing characters in ways that fit certain ideas. These representations are also intrinsically bound to the characters who make them, as well as Wolfe himself as an author, further emphasizing the subjective nature of morality as a theme when discussing societal issues.

The core argument of Moynihan's controversial study *The Negro Family* (1965), which came to be a point of reference for conservative sociologists and politicians alike, was that the dissolution of the black family structure is the leading cause of the economic disenfranchisement of black communities. It focused especially on the increase in the number of female-headed black families, which according to Moynihan contributes to a cycle of deprivation where family stability affects education, education affects employment, and employment again mirrors family stability and reliance on welfare recipience. He also refers to earlier arguments about the inability of broken families to allow children to adopt the proper tools for socializing, leading to juvenile delinquency and the failure of young black men to take on the role that the American society expects them to as breadwinners and fathers. Moynihan's proposed actions to combat the problems facing black communities were

to establish government aid programs that aim to strengthen the structure of black families, putting a stop to the cycle which, if left alone, would continue to feed itself. (1965:47–48)

In the 1960s, many federal assistance programs were in fact implemented in an effort to fight the war on poverty in the form of the Great Society programs that were introduced by the Johnson administration, and continued later on in the 1970s by the Nixon administration. This period saw a transformation of a broad range of social welfare programs, which included low-cost medical services and improved retirement benefits to the elderly, cash assistance to the blind, deaf and disabled, and relaxed eligibility restrictions on aid given to needy families with dependent children. (Jencks 1991:5). Despite these programs, however, the aforementioned social problems continued to expand especially among impoverished minorities. The percentage of poor blacks living in female-headed families increased from 25% in 1960 to an estimated 40% in 1987, even though it must be noted that the amount of female-headed families increased from 1970 to 1987 across all levels of society, not just among poor minorities. Jencks notes that since the 1960s, the risk of poverty became greater among "Hispanics, children, residents of urban areas, and those living in female-headed families" (1991:8).

Despite the prevalence of female-headed households as a topic of debate within the underclass discourse, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* seems somewhat ambivalent on the subject. It does introduce the reader to the Lamb family, consisting of middle-aged mother Annie and teenage son Henry, who despite their economic and cultural disadvantages are portrayed as respectable in a moral sense. This quality, respectability, is also what makes their representation noteworthy, as it is closely connected to the perceived class status of a person, and in the novel it can be seen to morally elevate the Lambs above other ghetto residents.

As already mentioned on a number of occasions, representations in *Bonfire* are mostly filtered through white, middle-class focalization. Because of this, respectability is measured against what the people the reader experiences the story through deem respectable. Even though the Lambs are a poor family headed by a single mother, Wolfe's depiction of them is mostly devoid of the properties of ghetto families that conservative sociologists often deem pathological, or from a more subjective viewpoint, immoral. The mother Annie is employed at New York City Hall, the son Henry has been doing well in school, and the two are planning to move out of the ghetto so that Henry can attend city college. In other words, the two meet all the tenets of middle-class values; employment, striving for the cultural resources that are



available to them, and upward mobility that improves on previous generations instead of reproducing the same economic and cultural trajectories as one's parents have had.

Annie's position as a female head of household is elaborated on by mentioning that her husband, a working man, was killed by a mugger. In this way, her situation as a single mother is legitimated as a case of being one of the so-called "deserving poor", and the circumstances behind her position are spelled out into a humane story detailing the events that have made her a single mother. In a way, one could even argue that her position is 'excused' in front of the characters from higher social classes, as well as the reader. This naturally raises questions about the intended audience of the novel and Wolfe's intended effect on them by writing her character this way. If the above interpretation about Annie Lamb being portrayed as sympathetic to middle-class readers is to be followed, one might ask if the effect would be different if her background was not explained in such a manner. The implications of this legitimation of her character are discussed in more detail later in the analysis in relation to her employment status and how it functions as a class signifier at both the level of the story and the narration.

Aside from the Lambs, the topic of female-headed underclass households is merely implied in a scene where judge Mike Kovitsky is giving a talk to a young black defendant in court. When asked about whether the youth lives with his mother and what she has to say about her son's situation, the young man's eyes nearly tear up and he responds with silence and a look of "live hatred" (BOTV:128). The narration then states "It was very touchy business, talking to these boys about their mothers" (ibid.). However, no further comment is offered on why the topic is so taboo. With the information provided to the reader, one could assume that this is because many young black men like the defendant in this scene have troubled family backgrounds that they would rather not talk about. Just as well though, the reason could be that as they try to keep an antagonistic attitude towards authority, steering the conversation to be about a person's family rather than themselves or the criminal charge being processed leads them to feel defensive and that their private matters are being unnecessarily intruded. Of course, the particular defendant in this scene having a unique reason to resent questions about his mother cannot be ruled out either, but this angle is spoken against by the broad generalization presented in the narration.

Since this scene occurs fairly early into the novel, it could have been utilized to provide some kind of insight into the family lives of the ghetto youth, either from the viewpoint of the defendant himself, or even by someone on the other side of the law. This could have later

served as a point of reference when Henry Lamb and his mother are introduced as another kind of example of a poor, female-headed family. As it is, the mention remains very ambiguous, and can be used to support multiple different interpretations about the topic. Perhaps this is according to Wolfe's intention, but it also stands out as a missed opportunity to expand on the representation of ghetto life in the novel.

In all, *Bonfire* features two families from the ghettos. The first are the Lambs, and the other one is the family of a black Muslim named Herbert Cantrell, introduced in chapter five, whose wife and two young children come to observe his trial following an incident where he accidentally killed a bystander in a shooting that he intended as self defense. As previously mentioned, neither family is depicted as markedly underclass, but come closer to being working class, and they even exhibit qualities that are in line with what Jencks recognizes as middle-class values. These include that working-age men should hold a steady job, and that women should not have children out of wedlock (Jencks 1991:30); whether the mothers of these two families in *Bonfire* had their children in wedlock is of course not explicitly stated, but nothing to the contrary is implied either.

Interestingly, what both families have in common, though, are violations of the law, ranging from the Lambs' smaller crimes of failing to pay parking tickets and in Henry's case, himself not even having done anything other than socializing with a criminal, to Herbert Cantrell's accidental killing of a father of five. Perhaps this is to serve as social commentary on the realities of everyday life in a ghetto like the Bronx, and how because of the prevalence of crime and economic deprivation, avoiding crime becomes exceedingly difficult even for "good" families. What further connects Annie Lamb and Herbert Cantrell is that both of their crimes are work-related; as Reverend Bacon explains, Lamb needs her car for work, and can be assumed to have earned at least some of the parking tickets while traveling to and from her place of employment. Cantrell on the other hand works as a driver for a not completely legitimate alcohol distributor in the Bronx, and carries an unlicensed handgun with him, which he explains he needs for protection; quite justifiably even, as the events that led to him accidentally shooting his victim started with his truck being hijacked.

In the case of both characters then, their crimes are related to their employment. Though the acts are of course illegal, Wolfe posits an interesting moral dilemma for the reader regarding the justification of the acts, and highlights the nature of an urban ghetto such as the Bronx as a world where questions of right and wrong are far removed from the commonly held values exhibited among higher social classes. He also seems to suggest that petty crimes

and digressions from the norms of common society are so prevalent in a ghetto neighborhood such as the Bronx that even a family like the Lambs, who attempt to stay on the right track, cannot completely avoid breaking some of them, possibly out of necessity. Furthermore, the fact that Annie Lamb is afraid to go to the police because of her problem with parking tickets, and rather chooses to speak to Reverend Bacon hints towards a lack of trust in authority that disadvantaged minorities might have. A dynamic of 'us' and 'them' can be identified here, and this antagonism is suggested to be profound enough that even a person like Mrs. Lamb, who tries her best to live by commonly accepted values, feels insecure about reaching out for help in a time of crisis that should outweigh petty crimes in importance.

As already brought forth in this section, an underlying theme in the depiction of ghetto families in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, even if it is not mentioned outright, is morality. Ragen calls the novel the work of a moralist (2002:149), and indeed many aspects of the family lives of poor people in the novel are held up against middle or upper-class moral norms. Wolfe maneuvers cautiously around the issue of female-headed households, presenting an explanation for Mrs. Lamb's position as one, possibly in order to build her up as a character who middle-class readers could reasonably be expected to find sympathetic due to the so-called legitimacy of her disadvantaged economic and social position. One may ask if her character would be read differently if there was no background provided for her, or if she was told to have had Henry out of wedlock, or that the father had not been around. From the perspective of middle-class morals, her character would most likely be less respectable, as she would then represent the qualities that from a middle-class point of view are signs of underclass pathology. The perceived moral nature of middle-class family values functions to add weight even to the case of Herbert Cantrell; at the core of Kramer's case against him is that the man Cantrell accidentally shot was a respectable member of the community, a father of five. While in court, though, seeing Cantrell's warmhearted interaction with his own children makes Kramer again feel "the doubts" (BOTV:131). This is because what he witnesses goes against his view of ghetto defendants as "simple-minded incompetents", a depersonalized representation that he has constructed in order to legitimate his job.

These considerations are also what makes Wolfe's choices of representation interesting. Would the so-called moral dynamics of the novel be any different if Henry Lamb had been written as a stereotypical example of a young black thug, or if the Lamb family showed no willingness to advance in society? After reading the novel, one can certainly argue that the plot would probably not be possible if this was the case; the power of the Bronx incident in

shaping the course of the story lies in the multitude of representations it makes possible. This is especially evident when we are shown how Peter Fallow and the media use the imagery and conceptions built around terms such as "honor student" and "hit-and-run" to construct a representation of the actual events that explains them from one perspective but leaves other interpretations in the dark. A follow-up question that these considerations raise is also who the potential reader of the novel is supposed to be. If the novel is assumed to have been written primarily for middle-class audiences, making Henry a hardened street thug would have arguably resulted in him being a less sympathetic character and thus his role as the sacrificial lamb would have been less effective. On the other hand, one can question whether a young black teenager playing this part needs to be the very embodiment of middle-class assimilation; doing exemplarily well in school and desiring to go above and beyond his position in society. Interpreted like this, the qualities that make Henry Lamb into a morally just character appear very middle-class-centric.

### **3.3 Public education in disadvantaged neighborhoods**

This section looks at education in relation to the underclass, an issue that is closely connected with employment and job opportunities later in life. *Bonfire* offers a brief glimpse into public education in poor urban neighborhoods through the character of Henry Lamb, who prior to the accident involving Sherman was attending the fictitious Colonel Jacob Ruppert High School in the Bronx<sup>1</sup>.

The quality of education in particular is very prominently juxtaposed in the novel. Sherman is mentioned to have received expensive private education at institutions such as Buckley School, St. Paul's School and Yale University (BOTV:27), whereas Ruppert is on the completely other end of the scale in terms of the quality of education and the kinds of preparation for further academic and professional careers it provides. As the section on employment covers in more detail, in the 1980s the inner-city labor market was going through a transitional phase, which saw a dwindling of jobs with lower educational requirements, whereas those that required more than a high school degree were conversely on the rise. In order to compete for these job opportunities, minority groups needed the immaterial resources – or *cultural capital* as described by Bourdieu (e.g. 1979) – that education provides, and a

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<sup>1</sup> From here on referred to as 'Ruppert'.

lack of academic credentials could greatly hinder the chances of the poorest sections of society from moving up in social hierarchy.

While the schools Sherman for instance has attended are private ones, Ruppert is a public school. Therborn notes in relation to educational inequality how private schools generally provide better quality education at primary and secondary levels, since they are selective and better equipped (2013:96). Although Sherman's schools are only mentioned by name and their prestige and quality are thus only implied, the many shortcomings of public education in the Bronx on the other hand become apparent during a scene in the novel's ninth chapter. In this chapter, while researching the Lamb case by interviewing various people connected to the victim, journalist Peter Fallow calls a teacher at Ruppert High School, called Zane J. Rifkind. During the phone call, Fallow tries to coax Rifkind into calling Lamb an honor student so that he could quote his exact words for a more dramatic story, but as Rifkind tries to explain, the definition of an 'honor student' at Ruppert is very different from how Fallow understands the term:

[Rifkind:] "[...] I know it must be difficult for you to understand, Mr Fallow, being from England. Am I right? You're British? [...] Naturally — or I guess it's natural — you're used to levels of excellence and so forth. But these kids haven't reached the level where it's worth emphasizing the kind of comparisons you're talking about. We're just trying to get them up to a certain level and then keep them from falling back. You're thinking about "honor students" and "higher achievers" and all that, and that's natural enough, as I say. But at Colonel Jacob Ruppert High School, an honor student is somebody who attends class, isn't disruptive, tries to learn, and does all right at reading and arithmetic." (BOTV:240)

The above extract depicts the abject nature of the urban underclass with high school students as an example; even though the urban poor are technically part of the larger society, in this case the education system in general, they are so far at the bottom of social hierarchy that they can be seen constituting a category of their own.

At the end of the quote, Rifkind mentions reading and arithmetic, two of the so-called 'three Rs' of educational standards, the last one being writing. Fallow's next question about Lamb's writing performance elicits a particularly stupefied response from Rifkind: "Written work? There hasn't been any written work at Ruppert High for fifteen years! Maybe twenty! They take multiple-choice tests. Reading comprehension, that's the big thing. That's all the Board of Education cares about." (BOTV:240) Wilson comments on how even though the rising qualification standards for employment during the 1980s often asked for higher

education credentials, in reality many jobs could be done by most people who had a decent commandment of the three Rs. However, since this mastery was more commonly associated with job applicants who had received education beyond high school, employers tended to favor these applicants over less educated ones, which created a standard for job requirements (1987:102–103). In other words, receiving higher education, like Henry Lamb was planning to in *Bonfire*, would significantly increase one's chances of finding a job within the new industries. For ghetto residents, this also meant a possibility for upward social mobility, which for many was synonymous with moving away from the inner-city ghettos and towards suburbs into which jobs were migrating during the 1980s.

Researchers have pointed out how the economy and future job opportunities of students are occasionally mirrored in the quality and focus of formal education. Tatcho et al. note how Hispanic and African American US citizens are 'tracked' into vocational educational programs, which according to them leave students without the proper qualifications for college education. They go on to comment how some educators and institutions similar to the Board of Education mentioned in the excerpt, presumably that of the state of New York, justify the lacking quality of education for these citizens with the fact that statistically, not many of them continue on to college. This way, the stereotype that Hispanics and African Americans are generally undereducated continues to perpetuate itself (2002:21–22).

Bowles and Gintis present similar views of ghetto schools; according to them, inner-city public schools have internal organizations that are 'repressive, arbitrary, and generally chaotic' and that they place a hefty focus on authority and offer fewer chances of advancement for students, all of which does little to prepare them for the kinds of expectations that the growing information and service industry has for job applicants (1976:132). Rifkind's response implies an indifference towards properly preparing students for their academic paths, which is attributed to the Board of Education's low standards for students in public city schools such as Ruppert. Even though the mention is brief, Wolfe does refer to a deep-set institution of educational tracking based on the backgrounds and possibly the ethnicity of citizens, and showcases through Rifkind the lack of influence that individual educators have working as a small part of larger societal institutions.

Furthermore, the scene provides another example of *making* representation. Like the scene where Fallow embellishes his experience in the Poe towers while visiting Mrs. Lamb, he is here seen seeking validation for his own preconception of Henry Lamb rather than an

objective account of the latter's school performance. For the sake of his reportage, Fallow is set on the idea that Lamb is an honor student, and the problems he and Rifkind have with finding an understanding stem from this clash of expectations and context. Throughout the scenes featuring Fallow and his work with the Lamb story, Wolfe takes jabs at sensationalist media, presenting them as opportunists who do not shy away from twisting stories through various half-truths to make them more dramatic. In doing so, he highlights the propensity of representation-making in popular media, and how certain representations can be used as a means to affect political discussions and even people's careers.

This scene is in line with many other parts of the novel in that the representations being made in it are again limited in scope. What is being described is education in ghetto schools, and any information regarding the topic is received from a teacher, meaning that at best, the representation here can only answer the question "what is it like to teach at a ghetto school", and not "what is it like to study in a ghetto school?" Of course, perhaps more so than making a point about the quality of public education, the purpose of the scene is to illustrate what kind of a character Peter Fallow is. It points out his lack of integrity as a journalist, as his methods differ markedly from what Wolfe and his New Journalist colleagues value; if Fallow was after a well-rounded report of the conditions Henry Lamb studied in, he could have visited the school itself to get a first-hand view of them. He could have also heard what Henry's classmates had to say about him. Instead, rather than seeking the truth, Fallow seems fixated on his own preconceptions of the people involved in the story, for which he seeks validation. In fact, a later chapter in the novel shows how in the end, Fallow seems to have made up most of the quote he attributes to Rifkind in the story he wrote.

With these considerations in mind, the scene as a whole seems to provide an idea of ghetto schools that is based on common facts about the level of education being considered suitable for children from disadvantaged neighborhoods. While the perspective on underclass issues is again that of an authority, it seems in this case to serve a distinct purpose, as rather than attempting to depict ghettos as closely as possible, it can be seen making a point about representation-making and how partial representations can be made to serve one's own preconceptions.

### 3.4 Respectability and class identities: employment as a measure of decency

Building on the previous section's comments regarding education as a resource, this chapter analyzes how employment is portrayed in *The Bonfire of Vanities*, and how this topic relates to the larger themes of respectability and social class. The analysis here examines what kinds of jobs and employment possibilities the underclass characters of *Bonfire* have, and how employment status affects characterization in the novel, both on the level of the story, i.e. how the characters within it perceive employment, and how this is presented to the reader as a part of characterization. The themes of morality and using employment as a measure of social inclusion are also examined here.

In *Bonfire*, employment is discussed as a part of the representation of the entire class spectrum, but there is a notable change in tone when the topic is applied to discussion about ghetto residents. Whereas views and opinions on jobs that the middle-class Kramer or upper-class Sherman have are often comparative, and usually boil down to how much money a person makes, in the context of the underclass the essential question instead becomes whether a person is employed at all. Like in the case of the dismal standards of ghetto education, this seems to be another way in which the abject nature of the urban underclass can be witnessed within the novel; instead of employment being taken for granted – that all working-aged people should have a job – common norms again do not apply, as joblessness in the ghettos can be almost equally as common as employment. As the analysis points out, this then affects the notion of individual respectability by making employment an issue of class identity and to an extent also morality. To become legitimated by the judging middle-class and upper-class, one must fulfill a certain role that involves meeting a host of qualities that are linked to the notions of respectability and decency.

As mentioned in the Background chapter, during the twentieth century, American cities began undergoing a transformation from centers of production and industry into operational hubs for the service and information industries. This in turn brought about a significant change in what kinds of jobs were available in America's large cities, as well as an overall heightening of the bar for educational requirements for accessing these new jobs. In New York City, for instance, the number of jobs with lower educational requirements went down by a total of 492,000 between the years 1970 and 1984, while jobs with higher requirements on the other hand increased by 239,000 (Wilson 1987:40–41). However, despite the loss of jobs in America's northern cities, there were in fact new jobs added in low-wage industries



nationally, but these increases mostly happened outside northern cities, in the suburbs and exurbs, which made many of them inaccessible for the minority poor who tended to be concentrated in the inner cities (ibid.:42)

The changing nature of the American labor market is touched upon in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in chapter ten, in which Sherman's six-year-old daughter Campbell asks him to explain what he does for a living, causing Sherman to have tremendous difficulty explaining what bond trading means in terms a child could understand. This is contrasted with the father of Campbell's friend who owns a printing business. Whereas the children can easily understand concepts like 'making books' for a living and having a certain number of people working under Campbell's friend's father, Sherman's desperate balancing act of trying to explain his job to a child while still clinging to his self-proclaimed status of a 'Master of the Universe' and trying not make himself seem like a simple businessman eventually results in a fight between him and his wife Judy after Sherman derides the importance of her interior decorating work. This prompts her to verbally attack the seeming vagueness of Sherman's occupation: ". . .it's [interior decorating] something *real*, something describable. . . something you can at least explain to your children. I mean, at Pierce & Pierce, what on earth do you tell *each other* you do every day?" (BOTV:250)

Besides hinting towards the changing job market and the more information-focused jobs that began to take precedence over traditional industrial ones, Judy's comment sets up a counterpoint for the representation of working-class jobs mentioned and talked about in the novel. As examined below, the idea of respectability is in *Bonfire* attached to middle and working class jobs as a form of validation from peers and class superiors, whereas Judy's lines express a criticism that relates to the heightened importance of individuality in 1980s culture. In contrast to traditional jobs, which could be easily explained to make some kind of impact in society and one's community, such as "making books" or "being a policeman", the only tangible result of working on Wall Street is the money and material possessions one accumulates. By extent, the comment can be interpreted to present an idea of a middle-class or working-class identities through employment by emphasizing the importance of jobs that contribute to society. In comparison, the individualistic occupations of Wall Street businessmen and the non-contributing joblessness or criminal activities of the underclass – the two ends of the "dual city" that researchers like Kennedy (1997) have criticized *Bonfire* for – are pushed into the boundaries of the novel's spectrum of representation, where they become either the target of satire or an issue that is judged morally.

The idea of inclusion into general society through employment resonates throughout *Bonfire*. The novel's outlook on also this subject arguably comes across as middle-class-centric, since the characters that most discuss the topic are from this group. In short, employment seems to be a normalized issue, which the novel's middle and upper-class characters take for granted, and it is used as a means of validation by the upper classes toward lower ones, as is exhibited in a number of passages. The first of such can be found in the novel's prologue. When the white mayor of New York is holding a political rally at the mostly African American-populated borough of Harlem, the crowd abuses him verbally and the event eventually devolves into a chaotic melee. While being under fire from hecklers, the mayor glances at a black political activist called Mrs. Langhorn:

In the front row, through the haze, he catches the eye of Mrs Langhorn, the woman with the shingle hairdo, the head of the community board, the woman who introduced him just — what? — minutes ago. She purses her lips and cocks her head and starts shaking it. This look is supposed to say, 'I wish I could help you, but what can I do? Behold the wrath of the people!' Oh, she's afraid like the rest! She knows she should stand up against this element! They'll go after black people like her next! They'll be happy to do it! She knows that. But the good people are intimidated! They don't dare do a thing! Back to blood! Them and us! (BOTV:4)

The mayor, who in his internal monologue comes across as xenophobic, and as he himself later admits, paranoid (BOTV:6), clearly sees the non-white population divided in two: the “good people” and what can then conversely be assumed to be his idea of “bad people”. His internal monologue also strongly implies a perception of black communities being divided between the more successful and progressive middle-class blacks, those who adhere to prevailing cultural and class values, and the less affluent, who become increasingly separated from the other group economically and as an indirect result of this division also geographically. It also suggests that in a tense situation, even a person such as a mayor, who would otherwise be expected to act in solidarity and to appeal to people from all kinds of backgrounds due his political position, is quick to fall into a defensive, simplified, and racialized manner of thinking, in which people can be divided into good and bad.

To continue this distinction of ‘them’ and ‘us’, the mayor goes on to berate the ‘good people’ for their unwillingness to stand up against mob rule: “Do you — you hardworking, respectable, God-fearing people of Harlem, you Mrs Langhorns, you civic-minded people — do you really think they're your *brothers*!” (ibid.) In this one clause, the mayor mentions a variety of middle-class values, and simultaneously implies a set of beliefs about the nature of

ghetto neighborhoods. Respectability, which the mayor mentions outright, becomes yet again an important part of class identity. Hard work, religiousness (which in a traditional middle-class context is often related to communality, e.g. gathering and socializing at churches), and "civic-mindedness" are mentioned in the mayor's internal monologue to be among the qualities that one should aspire to represent.

Skeggs (2002) notes how so-called legitimation by higher social classes is a crucial part of working class individuals rising up in social hierarchy and assuming middle-class identities. In other words, one's class status cannot be validated simply by comparing oneself to others from the same class, or even by being acknowledged by them, but rather by those from higher classes. This type of middle-class legitimation can be seen performed here by the mayor, as he provides a clear list of qualities he sees representing one's status as a valid part of the community, or the 'good people', thus forming another group from the people who do not meet these standards.

While the mayor sees a division of the black population exhibited by the crowd, at the same time though, a different kind of communality can be seen taking place. Like Annie Lamb, who in her time of crisis turns to Reverend Bacon – who also orchestrated the chaos happening in this scene – the people of Harlem band together to express their dissatisfaction and anger toward the way the city is being led. However, this coming together of people is not an organic one, as the protest is staged. Questions of social division and race are again presented as tools of political strategy, as later in the novel the reader is told that Bacon organizes his supporters to rally at high-publicity events in order to increase the visibility of his political agenda and to undermine white establishment.

The idea of coercing unemployed people to take up work and to integrate with society is evoked in chapter five, in which the Bronx County Building judge Mike Kovitsky talks to a young black offender<sup>2</sup> and advises him to accept the sentence he is being offered instead of burdening the judicial system with a trial, and so that the defendant might return to a normal life as soon as possible: "You've got a job, you've got a home, you're young, you're a nice-looking, bright young man. You've got a lot going for you." (BOTV:126). The personal qualities that Kovitsky mentions bear resemblance to what Wilson calls the "Male Marriageable Pool Index" (MMPI), a statistic of the ability of black males to act as

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<sup>2</sup> These are the same scene and character as the ones discussed in section 3.2 in relation to young black offenders and their mothers.

breadwinners of a family, that functions on the assumption that in order to provide for his family, a man of marriageable age needs to be employed. In the 1980s, this index showed a declining rate of eligible men in relation to women from various age groups among urban minorities, pointing to a correlation in the increases of both male unemployment and female-headed families (Wilson 1987:95–96). The index is arguably very middle-class-focused, which again might be a problem when being applied to the ghetto underclass. As comments on the abject nature of the underclass emphasize, the same standards that are used to measure societal phenomena in relation to higher social classes might not be as useful within the underclass discourse. As such, listing qualities that a middle-class person would take as a compliment might not mean much to a person from the ghetto, where the valued ideals can be wholly different, and middle-class expectations regarding employment and marriage as ways of following the common habits of one's community can seem beyond reach or even pressuring.

In Judge Kovitsky's aforementioned line, Wolfe presents the kinds of qualities that are seen as beneficial for a life that follows the norms of the general society. Throughout the scene, readers are also shown the young offender's stone-faced demeanor while listening to the judge trying to convince him to stay away from street life. What the reader is not told, however, is why young men like him, who despite having a family and a job, are still not able to stay away from criminal activities. Once again, a lack of viewpoint from the underclass characters leaves much to interpretation about what Wolfe intends to say about underclass youth.

Taken in a negative way, the part could be read saying that 'despite having all the prerequisites for a normal life, young black men often succumb to impulsive and violent behavior that denies them the possibility of social advancement', which would comply with conservative views of poverty being related to personality and individual choices. If the backgrounds of these youths were explained in more detail, and the circumstances leading them to commit crimes explained, the message could then for example be that 'because of the deficiency of social resources and antagonizing contact with authorities, many black youths resort to criminal activities as a means of validating their social status and to seek thrills that their normal life cannot offer them'. As it is, both interpretations of the scene – among many others – are equally possible. By including an underclass viewpoint, either that of the young offender himself or anyone closely affiliated with him, Wolfe would have been able clear some of the difficulties with interpretation regarding his minority characters, which has led some critics to point out the racializing effect this lack of scope results in.

Employment as a concrete building block of respectability comes up in a later chapter, in which Detective Martin, talking about Henry Lamb's parents, describes the father, who was killed some time ago, as a "working stiff" (BOTV:217). He also talks about Ms. Lamb, and how mentions how "[s]he works, don't take welfare, sends the kid to church, keeps him in school – she's all right" (BOTV:217). Finally, Detective Martin speaks from his experience of working among people from poor areas of the city: "there's a lotta decent people in the projects, people that show up for work" (ibid.), thus connecting the idea of 'decency' – a close neighbor of respectability – with employment.

The expression "show up" is an interesting choice here, as it suggests that the people in question are expected to go to work, and thus comes across as authoritarian. It also hints at a perceived division of the poor into the decent and the immoral; as Detective Goldberg elaborates, the projects were originally meant as affordable housing for working people such as the Lambs, but had as of the 1980s instead become increasingly riddled with unemployment and poverty. Martin's comment seems to suggest that for the poor, employment is also a moral choice: one can either "show up" for work, thus legitimating their residence in the projects, or ignore expectations and receive income from welfare benefits or even crime.

Despite being a prevalent topic within sociological arguments regarding the American underclass, in *Bonfire*, welfare recipience is mentioned only a few times. The few mentions it does receive posit a moral aspect on it, as is evident in Kramer's views on the impoverished neighborhoods of the Bronx:

Did you want an apartment on the Grand Concourse? Today you could have your pick. The Grand Hotel of the Jewish dream was now a welfare hotel, and the Bronx, the Promised Land, was 70 percent black and Puerto Rican. (BOTV:38-39).

Worth noting here is that the word 'hotel' implies a negative view of welfare assistance, of relying on it out of unwillingness and laziness instead of genuine need, thus associating the topic with a moral connotation. However, what this notion fails to take into account is again the abjection of the underclass and the economic situation of the time. As was mentioned in section 2.3 of the Background, the reality of jobs markets during the late twentieth century was that even if one were to take up work in a disadvantaged area, it was likely to be an entry-level job that paid little more than what one could make off of welfare benefits. Detective

Martin's views highlight a point that Wilson (1987) makes about the various explanations presented for the underclass' struggle with joblessness; while conservative notions pathologize the individual, and liberal theories are keen to bring out the racial aspect, a point which both often neglect are the economic shifts that by the 1980s had greatly affected the labor market in which the disadvantaged were expected find work.

As already discussed, employment in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* functions as a part of a person's class identity. However, as Skeggs (2002) points out about her observations of British working class women, social class can be constructed not only through identifying with specific properties of it, but also by disidentifying with them. In the case of her study, these class disidentifications take the form building an ideological distance between the poor who are unwilling and unable to improve, and taking on the habits and values of the middle-class. A similar kind of disassociation can be seen in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in relation to employment and welfare as opposites that define the respectability of the underclass.

As the excerpts featured in this section showcase, being employed is a quality that in *Bonfire* is at times attached to individuals from the underclass to improve their credibility in the eyes of others. Interestingly, this strategy is used in the novel by characters from various backgrounds and with different motivations, including the white, middle-class detectives Martin and Goldberg, judge Mike Kovitsky, as well as the African American Reverend Bacon, who especially places emphasis on the fact that Ms Lamb is employed as a strategy to build up a case for her; "This lady *works*" (BOTV:167). This seems to suggest that employment is a quality that all of these characters seem to recognize as a positive one, and it is directly linked to a person's respectability. The previous section commented on how education in the context of the ghetto underclass is in the novel explained to not function by the same set of standards as with higher social classes. In a similar way, employment in relation to the underclass is made out to be not a question of "where are you employed and how much money do you make", but rather "are you employed at all?"

Thus, in *Bonfire*, it seems desirable for characters to disassociate themselves from the stereotype of the unemployed and unwilling urban poor – the "culture of poverty". This bears resemblance to a sociological example of similar behavior recorded by Jones (2011), which is commented on by Tyler in *Revolting Subjects* (2013). Jones set out to examine the British figure of the 'chav', and more specifically the stereotype regarding teenage girls having children out of wedlock. Tyler notes how one teenage mother of two children, while being interviewed about her willingness to take up work, was keen to point out first of all that her

older child is from her partner's previous relationship and comments "in case you thought I had him really young!" (Jones 2011:189) She also makes it clear that she is willing to take up work as soon as her younger child is old enough (ibid.). What Tyler points out is happening in this case, is that the young mother is attempting to disassociate herself from negative preconceptions regarding women in her situation. What results from this is an identity that is not an "authentic working class identity", but rather one produced by distancing oneself from negative stereotypes. By questioning the person about these associations, the moral distinction is reproduced instead of combated (Tyler 2013:169). The same type of phenomenon can be seen occurring in *Bonfire*, where distancing oneself from the underclass stereotype of unemployment and welfare dependency serves as a way to validate one's deservingness in the eyes of higher social classes, bringing to mind the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor that is occasionally brought up in the underclass discourse. As can be seen from these excerpts, employment is an issue that in *Bonfire* comes up in relation to how a person from a disadvantaged area is perceived by especially those who are part of the working populace, reminiscent of the contrast between "inclusion/exclusion" and "work/worklessness", which Tyler considers a result of neoliberal policies in the organization of public housing (Tyler 2013:161).

Finally, the practice of using employment status to construct characters in *Bonfire* seems to function at both story level and in the narration itself, similarly to how family structures were identified in the previous section to associate certain characteristics of the poor with the theme of morality. The Lamb family are arguably among the most morally just characters in the novel, and they or their lifestyles do not receive the same kind of satirical treatment as do many of the other characters, especially those in higher social positions. Even though according to Ragen's interpretation of *Bonfire* as the work of a moralist (2002:149), and that Henry's ill fate is caused by his association with the known criminal Roland Auburn (ibid.), he is still depicted, as his name suggests, a sacrificial lamb for setting off the events that the plot from there on revolves around. Wolfe clearly depicts the Lambs as the victims of both society and Sherman and Maria's actions, and in doing so, uses the parents' employment, as well as Henry's diligent school attendance and college plans as admirable, commonly acceptable qualities to boost their credibility in the eyes of the reader.

Since this is done through the characters mentioned previously, all of whom have fairly similar opinions on the matter, and since no observational satire is offered on the subject, construction of the Lamb family characters as 'model citizens' among the urban underclass

can be seen happening at both story-level and at narrative level. This could be considered another way in which Wolfe's white, upper-class focalization shows in the novel, a matter which Kennedy (1997), Masters (1999) and Kyung Jin Lee (2000) see as racializing, and as a failure to fulfill Wolfe's intention of providing an observational, multifaceted depiction of the city. It also raises again the question of who the intended reader of the novel is; why do the disadvantaged positions of underclass characters need to be 'excused' to make them sympathetic to the reader? If this is indeed what Wolfe is interpreted to be doing by drawing these moral distinctions, it would suggest that the novel adheres closely to middle-class values at the level of narration, and does not seek to contest these views, which could be achieved by offering representations that work to deconstruct commonly held ideas about employment or schooling. To do so, Wolfe would have inevitably needed to step outside the middle-class-centric mode of writing, which on the other hand might of course have resulted in a rather disjointed narrative whole.

### **3.5 Appearances and clothes as class signifiers**

After examining the depiction of the underclass in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* from the point of view of larger social developments in the previous sections of the analysis, this section now turns to look at the more subjective and personal aspects of the topic through questions of style and taste. Many of the considerations here build on the discussion on taste originally introduced by Bourdieu in his book *Distinction* (1979), in which he connects taste to the way class is experienced and produced within a society. In similar fashion, this section examines how the style-conscious focalizers of Wolfe's novel create distinctions of class through taste, both in relation to their own and others' social positions.

Since *Bonfire* is a social satire, the imagery, behavior, and attitudes of ethnic and social groups in the novel can be expected to be somewhat exaggerated, and some of the novel's characters can be read as caricatures or archetypal representations of their respective groups. Through focalization and by keeping the narrative close to his male characters, Wolfe offers poignant observations on the lifestyles, values, and appearances of the 1980s "yuppie" culture and the urban middle-class' pursuit of similarly comfortable lives during the 1980s. However, since the urban poor and non-white characters mainly appear seen from the eyes of the white characters, they, even more so than the rest, become subject to stereotyping based on appearances and public behavior. This section of the analysis starts by examining what kinds



of imagery and common characteristics Wolfe attaches to his depiction of the urban poor. It focuses especially on clothes and bodies as signifiers of class and status, which Wolfe uses to construct representations within the novel.

In *Bonfire*, Wolfe attaches distinct imagery to people from all levels of society especially in terms of the clothes they wear. As Ragen points out about Wolfe's use of the techniques of realism that stems from his background as a New Journalist, the author utilizes meticulous descriptions of people's possessions, in this case clothes, to build characterization that avoids traditional labels such as lower or upper-class (2002:46). However, as can be seen from some the examples presented below, it is impossible even for Wolfe to completely eschew these designations, and in some cases the connection between social class and attire is prominent. What must be kept in mind, of course, is that unlike the realist writers of the 1800s, who would act as commentators on the stories and the characters they themselves created, Wolfe's brand of realism instead means stepping into the minds of the characters and describing the world of the story through them, thus distancing the writer from the text. Even though characters such as Larry Kramer and Sherman McCoy are acutely aware of their own and others' class statuses, throughout the novel Wolfe finds ways to undermine these distinctions by finding common grounds between them in terms of status.

Masters argues that there are differences in how the appearances of characters from different classes are portrayed in *Bonfire*. According to him, because of the novel's "narrow, privileged, masculinist perspective" (1999:212), non-white characters are constantly constructed by their inherent physical qualities that set them apart from whites, whereas white characters are defined by possessions and appearances that are indicative of their social status, and appear as "race-neutral" (ibid.). As examples, he mentions the descriptions of Pollard Browning, the president of Sherman's co-op building, and Kramer's old law school friend Andy Heller, both of whom are described by the way they dress and what their attire signals to others, which is exemplified in a rather literal fashion in a passage from near the beginning of the novel, in a scene where Kramer spots his old friend on his way to work: "He [Heller] was wearing a covert cloth Chesterfield topcoat with a golden brown velvet collar and carrying one of those burgundy leather attaché cases that come from Mädler or T. Anthony on Park Avenue and have buttery smoothness that announces: 'I cost \$500'" (BOTV:35, Masters 1999:213).

Masters argues that descriptions like these are in stark contrast with the physical and oftentimes bestial terms that are attached to other ethnicities, such as a group of black

eyewitnesses in a homicide case in the Bronx who are alluded to as 'germs' (BOTV:235). Masters finally states that in Wolfe's narrative, white characters are defined by the semiotics of dress, implying there to be no qualitative differences between them, whereas non-whites are defined by their physical qualities (Masters 1999:213). However, close examination of *Bonfire* shows that non-white underclass characters in it are also often defined by their fashion choices, and that various clothing items and styles, such as shoes, function as symbols of status, although not always in a positive way.

The symbolic differences posited in articles of clothing are discussed in a scene where Larry Kramer takes the D-train to his job in the Bronx. On the train, he sees several passengers wearing cheap sneakers, which are described to be emblematic of the lower-classes:

This [wearing sneakers] was not for reasons of Young Fit & Firm Chic, the way it was downtown, where you saw a lot of well-dressed young white people going off to work in the morning wearing these sneakers. No, on the D-train the reason was, they were cheap. On the D-train these sneakers were like a sign around the neck reading SLUM or EL BARRIO. (BOTV:37)

In this passage, Wolfe's idea of clothing as a way for people to indicate their belonging to a certain status group is again realized in a very explicit way, although unlike with the expensive clothes and accessories worn by Andy Heller in the earlier example, the significance of apparel is here flipped to become stigmatizing rather than admirable. The author recognizes a piece of clothing common to various levels of society, and shows how its meaning can change when the social status of the wearer is taken into account; in the case of the upper-classes, sneakers signify a certain fashion choice that goes along with the individual's lifestyle. Among the lower classes, however, wearing cheap shoes is dictated by necessity rather than by choice.

The upper classes' ability to dress low-key is a concept that Skeggs (2002) describes in her analysis of the British class society. She notes how middle-class people who dress in bohemian, unkempt manners can do so without relinquishing their status because appearance is only one of their class signifiers. Others, such as bodies and movement in social space still continue to validate their position and distance them from the lower classes who seek to 'pass' among higher classes by way of putting on appearances. In a similar way, Wolfe implies how young, successful people occupy a certain social space, in this case downtown New York, thus already signifying through their environment their distance from the lower classes – both

in an abstract and a territorial sense – and how within this space they then have the freedom of choice to put on appearances that in other contexts could be understood as a symbol of lower status.

Worth noting here is also the use of the fashion term "Young Fit & Firm Chic". A part of middle-class re-appropriation of working class culture is naming styles and trends that for the working class are something they seem to exhibit naturally. Terms like *kitsch* imply a knowingness by the person giving a name to a working-class phenomenon that by itself can be construed as tasteless, thus creating symbolic distance between speaker and the subject (Skeggs 2004:107–108). This act of naming can be seen performed here, where the users of a shared cultural item are polarized very distinctly; those who have a name for it are imagined as 'well-dressed', 'young' and 'white', whereas poor people wearing sneakers are determined by their attachment to places that symbolize immobility; namely the slum, which is also given a racial connotation through its Spanish equivalent 'el barrio'.

Most of the underclass characters featured in *Bonfire* are African Americans, and many among them are young males. In the novel, young African Americans are assigned with several common forms of wear and behavior, which function to create a 'type' that is associated with these characters. This typing bears resemblance to the stereotypical representations of African Americans in early 20th century cinema as described by Bogle (1973), including both character types who followed the norms of whites and served them and ones that rebelled against them. Hall adds to this list new types that have emerged later in the century, such as the "drug baron" or the "mugger" (1999:177), the latter of which he has written of extensively, especially from the viewpoint of the moral panic that media representations of the type created among the British population (1978). Among the traits that make up the conduct of the ghetto youth in *Bonfire* is wearing sneakers, which in the previously featured quotation is established as 'emblematic' of the lower classes, windbreaker jackets, walking with a pumping gait known as the 'Pimp Roll', and also showing a detached, indifferent demeanor towards authorities and the legal justice system throughout the scenes taking place in the Bronx County Building.

It should be noted that this archetype of underclass youth is mostly constructed and conveyed to the reader through the character of Larry Kramer, who at his job sees poor, non-white criminals each day, and to a lesser extent through Sherman, who has a few run-ins with individuals of this type. As already noted, the two men have slightly different approaches to how they perceive these types; Sherman's encounters are largely saturated by fear of being

assaulted or robbed, whereas Kramer uses his own experiences and observations to typify people in his mind. Because of this, readers are challenged by the narration to question how factually one should take Sherman's focalization, and how much of the description of young blacks as potentially violent criminals is embellished through exaggerated satire of the way people like Sherman might think. The novel never provides any validation or closure to these questions though, as the intentions of underclass characters in these scenes of imagined conflict are at no point explicitly stated.

These categories of appearance, behavior, clothes and conduct around others from the same class or status group are also the ones Wolfe employs most in his satire of upper-class culture, and in some cases they cut across the socioeconomic spectrum. Although Masters' observation on the bestial imagery attached to the non-white characters is accurate, different interpretations of certain parts of the novel make it possible to argue that both the upper and lower classes are also depicted through the mutual properties of bodies and clothing. One such parity can be found in a part of the novel in which Roland Auburn, Henry Lamb's criminal friend who was with him at the time of the incident, is being questioned by Kramer and other authorities. The narration mentions how Auburn, a prominent drug dealer in the Bronx, is able to have new pairs of sneakers delivered to him despite being incarcerated. In this way, what is in Kramer's eyes a stigma of poverty is subverted into a status symbol that shows Auburn's pride in his strong ties to street life, which allow him to continue his lifestyle even in prison.

This interpretation of Auburn as an individual in control of his environment can be seen as a reflection of Sherman's self-proclaimed status as a "Master of the Universe", a male who has taken his place at the top of the social world they deem their own, and feels it is his right to take and enjoy what is rightfully his. To build on the idea of colonial allusions discussed by Masters (1999), a character like Auburn could be considered the king of the urban 'jungle'. Auburn's penchant for new sneakers can also be compared to Sherman's prized "\$650 New & Lingwood shoes" (BOTV:149).

This part in the novel thus exemplifies Wolfe's notion of so-called 'statuspheres'; it suggests that people like Auburn can opt out of the traditional hierarchy of class and form closed status groups of their own, where the members engage in a mutual competition for status (Best 2001:7). Auburn then expresses his claim to the top of this competition by using his sneakers as a sign of his mastery of the street life as a statussphere. However, one could argue that for ghetto youth like Auburn, the matter is more complicated than simply 'opting

out' of class hierarchy, since *Bonfire* seems to suggest that there are very few options for ghetto inhabitants in terms of groups formed around hobbies or professions, for instance. Furthermore, as previously discussed, the novel implies that Auburn pressures Henry Lamb to spend time with him, hinting at the lack of choices young people in the ghetto have in terms of peer groups and the ostracization they are faced with if they wish to stay away from street life. Also, although the novel makes Sherman's ideas about material possessions and their significance clear, the reader is not made privy to what Auburn considers his attire to represent. Even though his sneakers seem like a status symbol according to this interpretation, the novel does not shed light on questions such as e.g. what he had to go through to actually have new shoes delivered to him in prison or if there is a more personal reason behind his insistence on the matter.

The same scene also puts an interesting spin on Masters' argument about the bestial nature of the depiction of non-whites in the novel. Kramer, a man who prides himself on his physicality, especially his powerful neck muscles, exhibits through focalization envy toward the younger, similarly robust Auburn: "[Auburn's] pectorals, deltoids, and trapezii bulged with mass and sharp definition. Kramer, the atrophied one, felt a jolt of envy. To say that the fellow was aware of his terrific build was putting it mildly." (BOTV:432) In this instance, the bestial, physical qualities that Masters sees as the racialization of the underclass are in fact an object of envy for the middle-class Kramer, although this is not to say that the picture of Auburn as a hardened, muscular thug is not still racialized. Besides being merely physically imposing though, Auburn is presented as one of the few male characters in the novel who take pride in their masculinity without appearing to have any crises regarding their self-worth as a man. Kramer, as we see in this scene, is acutely aware and self-conscious of his deteriorating physicality, which is connected to his status as a middle-class working man, a breadwinner for his family, which makes him unable to keep up with his exercising hobby. Sherman is also shown to become unhinged whenever he is faced with men from social classes and status groups outside his own, such as when he faces Auburn and Lamb under the expressway, or when he is thrown in a holding pen after being arrested.

Auburn, on the other hand, seems to be in control of himself and his status in the environment he inhabits. In fact, there are notable similarities between him and some of the motifs presented in Wolfe's 1998 novel, *A Man in Full*, in which a young man who is likewise incarcerated discovers the philosophical teachings of the Greek stoics, and develops a view of manhood that is not defined by possessions and social status, but immaterial, spiritual

qualities that cannot be taken away from a man no matter what the circumstances. In the same way, Auburn appears comfortable in his surroundings, and is not fazed by being confronted by men who are much higher than him in traditional social hierarchy. It is indeed regrettable that Wolfe does not attempt to get inside the heads of his African American characters in the same way he does with white ones, as the question remains whether Auburn's stone-faced demeanor in this scene is to be taken at face value, or if the same 'vanities' and concerns of masculinity that control the other male characters' conduct in social situations also apply to him. This would also help level out the racialization of the novel to a much higher degree.

On a related note, the same scene includes commentary on the disposition of bodies to function as signifiers of class much in the same way as clothing does. Skeggs (2002) notes how working-class women in Britain were in her observations mindful of their bodies, collocating the notion of a healthy body with social advancement. Conversely, letting one's body deteriorate was considered as a sign of giving up, of accepting one's position as being stuck in the lower class. Part of the personal crisis that eventually drives Kramer to adultery during the course of the novel are the bodily changes he sees both in his wife and also himself as a result of acting as the breadwinner for his family: "Only twenty-nine, and she already looked just like her mother. [...] She *was* her mother! No two ways about it! It was only a matter of time!" (BOTV:29) A central part of Wolfe's satirical depiction of the urban middle-class through Kramer and his family is the pursuit of a better life, modeled after successful urban professionals. There is a clear resemblance here to Skegg's observations about fat and unkempt bodies signifying social immobility, which combined with the Kramers' other anxieties – their insecurity over their small apartment and Larry Kramer's aforementioned self-consciousness over his inferior salary compared to lawyers in the private sector, among others – combine to create an impression of class-consciousness.

As becomes evident from these observations, the depiction of the middle and upper classes in *Bonfire* are saturated by the notion of class-consciousness, of being aware of one's position in a society and how it relates to others. However, similar acknowledgment of one's class is not seen performed by characters from lower classes. Sherman's or Kramer's strategies for constructing the notion of class can be analyzed in fairly good detail, but due to the lack of lower-class or underclass focalization, the novel never relays to the reader how the dynamics of class hierarchy are perceived and lived among them.

In relation to the ideas presented above about clothing and bodies as class signifiers for example, there is a scene in the novel where Larry Kramer and Detectives Martin and

Goldberg meet Mrs. Lamb regarding her son's incident. In this scene, relayed to the reader through Kramer, she is described as a "trim black woman" with a "thin, almost delicate face" (BOTV:208). Her clothing is described as "businesslike", and overall she is described to have "the self-possessed look of a teacher or someone else used to meeting the public" (ibid: 209). All of these qualities contribute to the idea of 'passing' as described by Skeggs (2002), by which she refers to the desire of individuals from lower classes to be validated by those from higher ones, and thereby pass as e.g. middle-class. This kind of validation can be seen performed by Kramer, by whose standards Mrs. Lamb seems to 'pass' in this sense; her trim figure signifies health as opposed to laziness and a lack of caring, her clothes are likewise neat, and overall she takes on qualities of an educated, authoritarian middle-class figure, in this case a teacher. All of these qualities imply a desire to improve and to advance in social hierarchy, which, as is explained in the novel, is the intent of her and her son Henry, who wish to move away from the projects in search of a more middle-class life.

Another concept used in the examination of working-class representations is *excess*, which refers to excessive styles, fashions, behavior or speech patterns exhibited by the working-class, and which higher social classes find tasteless and vulgar. Conversely, the middle-class is characterized by opposite qualities; restraint and refinement. Often a part of narratives where fictional characters cross class boundaries and seek better lives involves leaving behind these excessive styles and adopting more sophisticated and modest ones (Skeggs 2004:99).

In *Bonfire*, the representation of the lower classes, and in some cases even characters from higher ones, often involve forms of excess, and social refinement is conversely denoted by modesty. Excess can be seen in e.g. young black men's distinctive sneakers and pumping style of walking, the expensive-looking hairdos and leather jackets Sherman sees on two Cuban immigrants, or the displays of violence and drunkenness Sherman and Maria witness in the Bronx. On the other end, there are Mrs. Lamb, whose timid and restrained appearance was described above, and the 'civil-minded' Mrs. Langhorn, whose only noteworthy detail regarding appearance seems to be her shingle hairdo. These distinctions can be assumed to be a part of Wolfe's satire that cuts across the layers of social class, but as with the issue of employment, there again seems to be an effect taking place on the level of narration, where some characters are made out to be more in line with the reader's expectations of morally just individuals than others. Also, while the novel does not explicitly depict any characters moving between social classes, the aforementioned examples can be read to carry the

implication that assimilation with middle-class structures of employment, education and communality necessitate compliance with middle-class values, involving adopting certain fashions and modes of conduct.



#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

At the beginning of my analysis I set out to examine how social class and urban poverty are depicted in Tom Wolfe's 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. After examining various parts from the novel that depict the life of lower social classes and the 'underclass' in the 1980s New York City, several findings and observations could be made about the novel. Some of these findings relate to what previous researchers have written about the novel, and provide arguments that can be used to rebuke earlier ones. The analysis has perhaps also had a more prominently sociological approach than many of those before it, utilizing concepts from the recent resurgence of class discourse within sociology. The research questions that I set out to answer were:

- How does Wolfe construct representations of the difference in social class within the urban landscape?
- Does *The Bonfire of the Vanities* attempt to deconstruct or reconstitute contrasts of class difference through its narrative?

As for the first question, there are some notable differences in the ways the different levels of class hierarchy are depicted in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. While Wolfe applies poignant and often self-contained satirical observations to the upper-class and the middle-class, the analysis pointed out how the novel's portrayal of the poorer end of the class spectrum is measured against especially middle-class values. However, by comparing the observations and statistical data presented in sociological research regarding the urban poor, many facets of *Bonfire's* depiction of New York City's, and more particularly the Bronx's, urban poor can be seen to reflect real-life phenomena. Among these are of course economic deprivation, which affects both individuals and communities; the former in the form of low income and poor job opportunities, and the latter in the quality of housing and public services, such as health care and schools. As Wilson emphasizes, the economic shifts of the late 1980s can be argued to be one of the main causes in the increased gap between the haves and the have-nots within the American society.

Connections can be drawn between economic disadvantages and the lack of resources that *Bonfire's* poor characters suffer from. The lack of meaningful jobs and the generally low

wages discourage underclass individuals from entering the job market. In order to move up in social and economic hierarchy, one needs resources, both cultural and material, which for the underclass are difficult to attain, as the dismal quality of education fails to provide young people with the means to do so. One of the most prominent ways in which the abject position of the underclass is brought forth is in relation to public education in the novel's eleventh chapter, which implies a whole range of deficiencies in education in poor neighborhoods, which in turn of course results in deficient cultural resources. In relation to this topic, Wolfe touches upon issues such as tracking, i.e. counseling young people based on expectations that their race and social class impose on them, and authority responses which rather than attempting to root out these problems and improve the general level of education instead lower the bar to better match the cultural resources of the students. This in turn does little to improve the quality of public education in general. The vast variety of social issues that Wolfe manages to bring up within the course of the novel, even if it is in passing or only implied, clearly shows the author's dedication to observing the issues in the real world and documenting very minute details that can function as telltale signs of much larger, abstract concepts.

Many of the societal issues discussed by Jencks and Wilson, as well as Wolfe in *Bonfire*, must be approached with a critical mindset, however. As the Background chapter already highlighted, the positions of these researchers are conservative and middle-class-oriented, which can be seen in the way they often attach ideas of morality and expectations to their observations regarding phenomena associated with poverty. For example, both researchers see female-headed households as an unequivocal sign of pathological social behavior, but this view can of course be contested. In fact, in quite stark contrast to this notion, the most well-adjusted family depicted in *Bonfire* are arguably the Lambs, a poor minority family headed by a single woman. The novel's nuclear families, the McCoys and the Kramers, on the other hand have their marriages crumble during the course of the story. Wolfe's portrayal of families, then, could be interpreted to operate against normalized ways of discussing the subject, implying that in a modern society, individualistic desires – in this case the men's infidelities and pursuit of more fulfilling lives – can be more detrimental to a family than the issue of family structure. Noteworthy in this interpretation is of course the emphasis on the men as the characters on who the dissolution or union of the family befalls, attesting to Masters' (1999) comments about the lack of female representations in the novel.

The analysis began by looking at the novel's representation of inner-city ghettos as places of residence and growing up, focusing especially on the theme of crime, which seems to be a prevalent part of the depiction. As section 3.1 brought up, the squalid environment of the Bronx and its housing projects is used as a stark contrast to the glamorous lifestyles of the 1980s upper-class businessmen, especially the so-called Wall Street "yuppies". Like literary critics such as Masters (2002) and Kennedy (1995) have pointed out, *Bonfire*'s intended cross-section of all the levels of the 1980s New York City can actually be seen to be primarily divided between the extremely rich and the extremely poor, and that this distinction is mainly constructed through the consciousnesses of the novel's white, male focalizers. An overarching theme that can be witnessed in the close analysis of the depiction of the inner-city ghettos in section 3.1 is that their representation is largely collocated with negative qualities such as danger, immorality, dishonesty, sloth, and vice, which are then contrasted with the members of the Lamb family as an example of people who despite these disadvantageous surroundings are able to cling to the same moral values that are embraced by middle-class people in particular.

A notable aspect of this representation is that due to the novel's viewpoints, the 'good' and the 'bad' parts of the urban ghetto do not exist so much in relation to themselves, but are constantly measured against wider society. For example, the Lamb family's amiable qualities – the mother's employment, tidy appearance, and the son's relative diligence at school – are always filtered and contrasted through the eyes of the novel's middle or upper-class characters, resulting in the lower classes being mirrored against middle-class values and notions of respectability. Of course, social classes need to exist in relation to each other. Without lower classes there cannot be higher ones and vice versa. The dynamics of class in *Bonfire* though, are always seen from a top-down perspective. As for the underclass, there are very few comments within the novel by disadvantaged characters regarding other people from either their own social sphere or those from other ones, and what is completely missing are assessments by these characters on what their role and position are within society and how they relate to others. Such thoughts are expressed by Sherman and Kramer for example, who we see contemplating their positions as a self-described "Master of the Universe" and an average-income public servant respectively. Common to both of these men is how they measure their own status in relation to others, especially in terms of money and material possessions. They also look to those below them in order to construct their self-esteem and validate their current social positions. In other words, class-consciousness in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a quality reserved for the middle-class and upper-class.

The understanding and acknowledgment of one's class, even if it is not explicitly mentioned in the novel, can be seen clearly in these characters. Such awareness of oneself, however, is not expressed by the underclass in *Bonfire*. As the analysis shows, the comments on New York city's disadvantaged people, especially minorities, are mostly made by people outside of that social reality. Fittingly enough, the novel's depiction of the topic could arguably be described with a term that is central in New Journalism: participant observation. The novel's characters surely participate in the events that involve the city's underclass, and they make observations of them, which occasionally correspond closely even with extra-literary facts. However, this is very different from the concepts of living or experiencing class. As previously mentioned, Wolfe portrays this aspect of the class experience in great detail through the novel's focalizing characters, going inside their heads to illustrate what e.g. wearing sneakers signifies in various contexts, such as on a train, at one's workplace, or in a trendy part of town, when one's position in social hierarchy is also included as a building block of meaning.

As Skegg's (2002) observation of British working class women shows, in real life class can be examined through the dynamics of distancing oneself from what one does not want to be, and seeking to 'pass' in the eyes of the judgmental other, the higher class, who might even be an imagined force that nevertheless influences a lower-class person's expectations and self-consciousness. In other words, even though class always exist in relation to other classes, there is a great deal of variation within classes themselves. They are not homogeneous groups with similarly unified mindsets, but groups whose members can draw distinctions between themselves and the other members.

There are certainly opportunities for exploring these kinds of class dynamics in *Bonfire*. For example, section 3.5 analyzed a scene where the black, lower-class Mrs. Lamb makes an appearance in front of people who are higher up than her in social hierarchy. While the narration, filtered through the consciousness of Larry Kramer, hints towards these themes – signifying certain qualities through the semiotics of dress, and seeking to 'pass' in terms of credibility – the reader is given no insight as to how a character like her approaches and constructs these concepts. When choosing what to wear for the occasion, does she think about the significance of the clothes she wears? Does some part of her appearance, such as the quality or price of her clothes, the signals she sends with body language or the way she speaks make her feel class-conscious, and if so, how does it affect her interaction with people in higher social positions? Is it different from the way she acts in front of her friends or family,

for instance? Furthermore, one might ask whether being both a woman and a member of a minority affects the way she interacts with people who either share the same qualities or are removed from one or more of them. Such questions are left unexplored in *Bonfire*, despite Wolfe's self-professed intention to cover all aspects of modern life New York City (Wolfe, 1989).

The present thesis has hopefully showcased how representations of lower social classes and urban poverty can be discussed within popular literature, using Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* as an example. This thesis has built on the views expressed by other critics, but what I have attempted to achieve is a revised look into what these critics have claimed the novel is lacking, namely representations of disadvantaged, mostly minority characters.

The analysis examined how middle-class oriented views into the topic of poverty and the underclass are largely constructed through subjective focalization, in which morality and respectability play a central part. This was identified to be happening at both the level of the story and the narration, the former in the way the novel's middle-class and upper-class characters describe people of lower social status based on qualities related to decency and respectability, such as employment, diligence at school and clothes and appearances. At the level of narration, Wolfe seems to portray these same qualities to either satirize or legitimate characters. The vanities of the WASPs and the middle-class' pursuit of similar lifestyles are depicted satirically, while the Lambs are made out to be respectable characters through their meek and proper characteristics.

These considerations of course raise questions about the intended readers of the novel and what kind of effect it can be presumed to have on them. The adherence to commonly held values regarding e.g. employment and education would suggest that the novel is meant to be relatable for likewise middle-class audiences by presenting the disadvantaged realities of the ghettos in relation to middle-class norms. As it is however, these representations remain just that, observations filtered through a middle-class viewpoint. Although the novel hints at the distinctly different paradigms of everyday life that can be witnessed in the ghettos, the breadth of Wolfe's portrayals of New York would have certainly benefited from exploring concrete, lived class experiences. Although it can be argued that such an approach would have taken away from the effectiveness of the novel's satirical treatment of the higher classes, as much of it relies on undermining their inhibited and egotistic lifestyles, lower-class representations could have also immensely strengthened this effect by way of providing contrast.

*The Bonfire of the Vanities* is of course not the only novel by Wolfe that deals with issues of class and status in the modern American society. His 1998 novel *A Man in Full* is considered a spiritual successor to *Bonfire*, and the two have many similarities; both feature multiple focalizers, and a complex plot divided between many different focus characters, whose lives cross paths as a result of seemingly coincidental matters. Set in Atlanta at the brink of the 2000s, the novel features themes similar to *Bonfire*, such as masculinity, status, and race. Interestingly, it seems as if Wolfe took advice from the criticism regarding the lacking minority and female viewpoints in his earlier novel, as *A Man in Full* follows, among others, the lives and thoughts of a black lawyer, and a divorced upper-class woman, who act as the novel's focalizers. A suitable continuation for the present thesis would then perhaps be to examine *A Man in Full* in a fashion similar to *Bonfire*, possibly comparing the two, while keeping in mind the points made about the strengths and deficiencies of Wolfe's representation of social class in the American society.

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