

## Social Vision in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

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### Abstract

Edith Wharton is, by critical and popular acclaim, one of America's finest novelist and short story writers. A consummate stylist and astute critic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century American social life, Wharton often ridiculed the upper-class New York society of which she herself was a member. She also turned her sharp eye to New England and Europe, creating incisive portraits of characters deeply affected by their social and physical environments. Wharton's ability to combine such cutting satire and irony with compassion for human suffering results in a unique American realism that elevates her characters' struggles against restrictive conventions and circumstances beyond comedy of manners to pathos, and even tragedy. Wharton enjoys a high critical reputation; indeed, her place in American letters as one of the premier practitioners of realism seems assured

The present paper will examine the novel by Edith Wharton, namely *The House of Mirth*, with reference to the social and historical conditions which gave rise to her fiction. The study is devoted to contextualizing Wharton's work by placing it in the historical context of the late-nineteenth century American life so as to relate it to the American literary tradition as it obtained at that point of time. Besides, her work would also be examined in relation to her own life and to the ideas and conditions that went into the shaping of her life. *The House of Mirth*, powerfully portrays her contemporary New York society lacking in the virtue of 'the old America of her ancestors.' The novel presents the morally vacuous and intellectually inferior but materially successful upper class society causing the slow disintegration of the exquisite Lily Bart. The highly endowed Lily Bart just slips into annihilation as she could not compromise on her moral scruples.

**KEYWORDS:** The House of Mirth, Society, Marriage, Women.

Edith Wharton was born as Edith Newbold Jones in 1862 into a fashionable New York family near Fifth Avenue and Madison square. Her parents, George Frederic and Lucretia Rhineland Jones, belonged to the society that had dominated New York from the Dutch and English colonial era until, say, 1870 or 1880. She belonged to the elitist class of the Mercantile aristocracy of New York of the later half of Nineteenth century. And it is to this class that she turns for the subject of her major fiction.

It was an exclusive society with a somewhat puritanic moral code and Wharton studies the frivolity, as well as, the refined culture of this group. Her background had a deep and determining impact on her art. While the delicacies and graces of this society became a part of her make-up, yet its artificiality made her rebel against it. A serious and rigorous intellectual, Wharton shows a complex and ambivalent attitude towards the ethos of her class and this explains the development of her fiction.

Members of her society socialized with one another and shunned the ostentation of the nouveau riche, who after the Civil War were making their way into the social ranks of Old New York. From her mother, reputedly the best dressed

women in New York and the inspiration for the phrase ‘keeping up with the Joneses’, Wharton learned social graces, a flair for fashion, and reverence for proper usage of the English language. From her father, a more quiet, reflective man, she absorbed a love of poetry. Edith’s father had a library of six or seven hundred volumes; English dramatists, including Shakespeare; French dramatists, novelists and poets beginning with Plutarch, Milton, Pope, Swift, Sterne, Defoe, Scott, Irving, Thackeray and Longfellow, among others. Despite this wealth of available material, Edith’s father and mother did not read much. Her father perhaps looked sporadically into one or another of his books; her mother’s favourite reading consisted of current popular novels.

Despite their lack of interest in literature, Edith’s parents were heirs to a tradition that includes a ‘feeling for good English.’ This, alongwith (occasionally restricted) access to good books, was handed down to their daughter, Edith.

As an adult, Edith, who was conspicuously estranged from her mother, evinced a unique gratitude to her for her insistence on good English not necessarily bookish, but not slangy either. Edith never attended school, daughters of houses like that of the Joneses were educated by governesses for their ultimate role in their society that of wives with the proper social graces. This kind of education, however, was not necessarily limited. It could, and in Edith’s case it did, produce a girl of almost frightening erudition. She learned French, German and Italian before she was nine. By the time she was in her early teens she was reading Goethe, Balzac, even medieval German and French poets. She had at least browsed through everything in her father’s library, it was not her habit to read every book she picked up from beginning to end. Family friends gave her books, for she was beginning to attract attention as the girl who read avidly. This was, however, definitely not what the Joneses had had in mind while making available to her the varied, sometimes highly developed talents of a series of governesses. Her family feared that if Edith continued in this direction, she would never become adapt at the social game that was the proper destiny of young ladies of her family and social background.

The resistance of the older society to the parvenus, the uneasy mixing of the two societies and the final triumph of what Edith called the ‘Invaders’, who now boasted an admixture of respectability obtained either through intermarriage or purchase, is the material of all of her best novels except *Ethan Frome*. Coming of age in a rapidly changing society, she was never able to make peace with the emergent society. She despised its vulgar suppositions, including, above all, its materialism, which did not mean that she approved of the manners-the rigid external forms of the society in which she grew up. She perceived the excessive devotion to such manners as a futile self protective device in a society that was already doomed. She produced a large corpus of work: twenty-five novels, including best-sellers such as *The House of Mirth* and The Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Innocence*, eighty-six short stories, three books of poetry, a book on interior design, numerous volumes of travel literature, a study on the theory of fiction, an autobiography, and countless articles, essays, and reviews-an impressive accomplishment, all the more so because she did not launch her career fully until she reached her forties. She was a serious intellectual, well read in science, religion, and philosophy, as well as in horticulture, art, and architecture.

*The House of Mirth*, published in 1905, established Edith Wharton as a famous novelist although it was her ninth published book. Within three months, one lakh forty thousand copies were in print and this was after the novel had been running serially in *Scribner’s Magazine* from January through November 1905. Wharton turned to her

own society for both, the background and the subject of *The House of Mirth*. The novel reveals Wharton in the act of discovery, distancing herself from the protagonist, Lily Bart, who portrays the social creature the novelist was once destined to be. Both Lily and her maker were women growing up in times of social transition.

Writing about her choice of subject namely, the fashionable New York society, Wharton wrote, “There it was before me, in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand, since I had been steeped in it from infancy” (qtd. in Auchincloss 69).

The title of the novel is significant. It is taken from a passage in Ecclesiastes; “Sorrow is better than laughter for by sadness of countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning. But the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” (7:34). On the obvious level ‘the house of mirth’ is the enclosed, exclusive society where Lily foolishly longs to dwell. By contrast ‘mirth’ becomes an ironic word with which to describe the empty routine of pleasure followed by leisure class characters. And Lily, who begins as indeed a foolish, superficial heroine, must move, through pain, humiliation, and rejection to a kind of bitter wisdom by the end of the novel.

The opening of the novel introduces us to Lily Bart, as a young woman of twenty-nine born to wealth and to heritage in New York society. Lily’s original misfortune stems from the fact that she has extremely profligate parents who eventually become bankrupt, both financially and socially. Lily is well educated, sensitive and frivolous, very much her parents’ daughter. The financial ruin of her father, when she was nineteen, leaves her with but one way of making a living. She would for the time being have to become a useful companion to women of wealth and later be obliged to make a suitable marriage for money.

*The House of Mirth*, set in New York City, is a novel about high society, and about women’s role within that society. As seen in this novel, women in early the twentieth century society had little chance to play any role other than that of the wife and the mother. The female leaders of the society, Bertha Doreset and Judy Trenor, derive their power and social standing from their marriage. Bertha is a selfish woman who thinks of nothing but her own pleasure. She is a married woman and her husband is completely unaware of her affairs. She chooses her lovers from among the young men in her glittering social set-up, men who aspire to a better social position than their finances can accommodate. Bertha aggressively uses her social position to isolate and humiliate the protagonist, Lily Bart. On the other hand, Judy is an expert hostess and is considered at the top of fashionable society. However, the older and more conservative families do not approve of the things that go on in her household like drinking smoking and gambling. Judy is somewhat self-absorbed, and is very jealous of her husband, Gus Trenor, as he seems to be always interested in attractive women. Judy likes Lily because she thinks at first that Lily has no designs on Gus and vice versa. She also believes that Lily really does add life to a party.

Standing in contrast to these socialites are the women who act as companions to them. They are either unmarried or divorced but skillful enough to make a living by mooching from other people. Carry Fisher is one such woman companion. She is an attractive, repeatedly divorced woman who makes a living by playing second fiddle to the rich ladies. She is a professional house-guest who relies on her sense of humour

and social skills to make herself fun to invite to parties. At times, Bertha uses her to distract George Dorset to make it easier for Bertha to carry out an affair. Carry often attaches herself to an up and coming couple who have a lot of money but few social connections. She then uses her contacts in high society to introduce her new “friends” and to ease their entry into the better social circles.

Lily’s only goal in life the only “profession” for which she has been trained is to make a good marriage, in other words, marriage with a rich man. When she fails to reach the goal, she has no skills or even inner resources to fall back upon. Marriage being the main focus of attention in a woman’s life, makes Maureen Howard to remark,

The House of Mirth may be read as a perverse marriage novel, for it we track Lily’s business, the business of getting married, she is, at twenty-nine, a failure. And, what is most evident, she has no desire to be wed. The pressures are all external. While she understands the material advantages of marriage, the comfort zone, she is never interested in the power of marriage, though she observes the use of that power by her friend Judy Trenor and her adversary Bertha Dorset. (142)

As an orphan young woman, Lily comes to live with her aunt, Mrs. Peniston, who is described as a timid woman having “a vague fear of meeting a bull” (41). She is shown as having retired from social life though keeping track of all major social events. Mrs. Peniston provides her not only with a comfortable lodging and occasional gifts but also with a remarkable freedom, paying scant attention to her comings and goings. Lily, who has been raised by her worldly mother to abhor the dingy and sordid in life, is determined to find a husband who can provide her with the luxury she craves. However, despite her best efforts she is unable to find a suitable match though she has turned twenty-nine. As such she is forced to play the role of a ‘woman companion’ to the rich ladies. With passage of time she is bored with her status as an “extra woman” and finds it increasingly difficult to manage money to maintain her personal appearance.

The opening of the novel comprises of three major parts: the chance meeting of Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden at the Grand Central Station, her visit to his apartment, and her discomfiture by Rosedale on the street as she emerges from Selden’s apartment.

Edith Wharton’s novels examine the status of women and explore their relationships with men in an essentially male dominated world. We first meet Lily Bart waiting all by herself at the Grand Central Station. She is spotted by Selden, a young bachelor, who works as a lawyer. He is not independently wealthy like the Trenors and Dorsets and has to work for a living. But because of his good family and charm, he is welcome in the fashionable society. Although carrying on an affair with the married Bertha Dorset, as it helps him socially, Selden is attracted towards Lily. He is surprised by Lily’s presence there and invites her to his apartment. His curiosity at Lily’s presence at the station offers an insight into the contemporary social attitude of the men towards women

In Lily’s society women were just viewed as objects meant to appear pleasant to men and to serve just one purpose, that is, marriage. As such Selden sees her “as an art object, as a thing so well made that he imagines she must have cost a great deal” (7). Selden realizes during tea with her, at his apartment, that there is only one thing for which Lily is made – marriage - and he asks her: “Isn’t marriage your vocation? Isn’t it what you’re all brought up for” (11). While marriage was the sole purpose of a

woman's life, it was different for men. The men were free to choose to marry or not. As Lily observes, "Ah, there's the difference a girl must, a man may if he chooses" (7).

Lily also notices that the social expectation from the women in the matter of appearance is also quite rigid. While talking with Selden she remarks:

"Your Coat's a little shabby but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like; they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well dressed till we drop and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership. (14)

In fact, Lily's tragedy is that she can't move in any other atmosphere but the one provided to her by her society and her training. Observing this, Selden muses, "She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate (9).

Lily's whole training had taught her to make herself an object of supreme beauty. She is beautiful and she must keep on being so, must cultivate her charms and be a work of art. Her mother considered her beauty as a weapon:

[...] only one thought consoled her, and that was the contemplation of Lily's beauty. (39-40)

Lily's mother had also taught her to hate dinginess and to always live in style. This was a thing that cost a tremendous amount of money or rather a waste of material, as well as, human resources. Blake Nevius points out that "Edith Wharton was one of the first American novelists to develop the possibilities of a theme which since the turn of the century has permeated our fiction: the waste of human and spiritual resources which in America went hand in hand with the exploration of the land and forest." (120)

On the way back to catch the train, Lily meets another gentle man named Sim Rosedale. He was a young man who had dilligently worked his way up the social ladder. A self-made man, he had made a fortune in the Wall Street but the Fifth Avenue was yet to accept him on equal terms. His humble background prevents the snobbish aristocracy from accepting him on their guest list. It is only towards the end of the novel that Rosedale manages to conquer the citadel of aristocracy just as he had achieved ascendancy in the world of business earlier.

In order to conceal her meeting with Selden so as not to create a wrong impression, Lily foolishly makes up an excuse that she was just coming from her dressmaker. Rosedale, however, points out that 'The Benedick', the name of the building she had just came out of, did not have any dressmakers in residence. He knows this because he happens to own the building. Rosedale views Lily with admiration and would feel honoured to be seen with her. As Lily is a member of the aristocratic circle, Rosedale feels that she could be her entry ticket into the high society. He judges with his characteristic shrewdness that she could be an eminent wife who could launch him in society better than any other woman. Deliberately setting aside the sentimental aspects, he views her in terms of a financial project:

He had his race's accuracy in the appraisal of values and to be seen walking down the platform at the crowded afternoon hour in the company of Miss Bart would have been money in his pocket as he might himself have phrased it. (18)

Lily, however, being a typical member of the high society looks down upon Rosedale. Lily does not consider him a suitable match as he was not born into the aristocracy, but had worked his way up the social and economic ladder. Even in the weak financial position, Lily cannot let go of her social snobbery and instead eyes Selden as an ideal match.

Lily's fault lies in the fact that she, too, wishes to live in the same 'house of mirth' as the other women belonging her social strata. This group includes women like Bertha Dorset, Judy Trenor, etc., whose sole aim in life is to look pretty and to lead an empty life of pleasure. Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor have been successful in achieving their aim by marrying rich men while Lily is still looking for a suitable man. Further, it is a vain society where each one of these women tires to establish her superiority. This similarity of their desires causes competition. Wharton is quite clear in projecting the idea that in a system like this, defeat is a kind of moral triumph.

On the train to Bellomont, her destination, she meets Mr. Percy Gryce. Percy Gryce is a blond, shy and extremely wealthy young bachelor, who had inherited a large collection of Americana literature and who is somewhat obsessed with it. Lily is intrigued by Percy and she figures him out as her future husband. Being wealthy, Gryce is an ideal match in Lily's view. Therefore, Lily carefully begins plotting her "method of attack", while pretending to read a book. After a handful of conversations and glances, Lily is confident that her hold over Percy is now strong.

However, after spending a day with him at Bellomont Lily realizes that Percy is not as suitable a match for her as Selden. She now ignores him by pretending that she is not well. In short, Gryce is portrayed as a bore whose only defining characteristic - his book collection of Americana - has been passed down to him from a wealthy uncle. This characteristic causes Lily to recognize him as an individual lacking self-confidence.

Lily's good (and mercenary) intentions simply disappear when Selden arrives at Bellomont. Lily begins to see the Trenor house party she had so recently admired in a new light: "That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way. Under the glitter of their opportunities she saw the poverty of their achievement" (55). Selden further tempts Lily from her chosen purpose that of marriage to a rich man with a vision of a "republic of the spirit" that she can aspire to, a republic that he says offers freedom "from everything - from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents" (68). He attacks her ambitions, and predicts a miserable future for her if she continues with her present goals. Selden reinforces the doubts Lily already has, increasing her own self-mistrust.

However, Selden himself has nothing concrete to offer to Lily. What Selden does is to offer Lily a standard he himself does not live by. Advising her that very few of the rich can ever enter the "republic of the spirit," Selden is himself exposed by Lily's reply: "It seems to me ... that you spend a good deal of your time in the element you disapproved of" (70), and Selden's very presence at Bellomont, an environment he is teaching Lily to despise, indicates that Lily's criticism is a valid one.

Like Beatrice and Benedick, Lily and Selden now move from verbal sparring to the banter of love. Like “adventurous children who have climbed to a forbidden height from which they discover a new world” (73), Lily and Selden play with the idea of their marriage. But as they come close to an outright declaration, both back away. The intimacy is over. Selden, who had allowed his attraction to Lily to take him into that “now world,” is shaken, and “it took him a moment to regain his usual view” of her (74).

Wharton’s fiction observes the human spectacle as a continual struggle between individual desire and social pressure. The House of Mirth takes up the theme of this struggle and demonstrates the defeat of the individual at the hands of a society largely composed of pleasure-seekers. Lily has a spirit which is simultaneously independent and slavish. She is not a flat character in white and black, but presents a baffling spectrum of opposite colours. In her simplicity, she commits a breach of some arid conventions of the social group. But the conventions do not necessarily constitute wisdom and after outliving their utility they tend to become irrelevant. The irony is that traditions that have lost their meaning are the hardest to destroy.

Lily faces this social pressure on account of the financial crisis, that occurs when she loses heavily at a game of cards in the house-party of the Trenors at Bellomont. Lily asks Gus Trenor to invest money for her, forgetting that money gives the lender the right to expect something in return. Gus demands favours from Lily in lieu of the financial help rendered, even though Lily “innocently” assumes to be bargain. Lily fully awakens to the horror of her dilemma and feels disgusted by the attempts of Gus to seduce her. Though she finds a way to get out of the situation, she does not dare to enter her aunt’s house. As such she goes to Gerty Farish’s flat. Gerty, Selden’s cousin, is a pure hearted woman who labours to live and does charity work in her spare time. Mild, generous and optimistic, Gerty sees the best in everyone. She harbours love for Selden but when she comes to know of Lily and Selden’s feelings for each other. She sublimates her love unselfishly.

Learning from Gerty that Selden had been looking for her, Lily’s anguish overflows: “Gerty, you know him-you understand him-tell me, if I went to him If I told him everything - If I said: I am bad through and through-I want admiration. I want excitement, I want money- ‘yes, money! That’s my shame, Gerty” (174-75). It is characteristic of Lily that in a moment of crisis she becomes fully aware of the reality of this society. It was a society where money was the ruling power.

When Lily goes home the next morning, she realizes that she must pay ten thousand dollars to Gus so as to regain her dignity. Feeling miserable, she realizes “that not a penny of it was her own and that to restore herself respect she must at once repay the whole amount. [...] She was realizing for the first time that a woman’s dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage” (178-79). Lily is disgusted with the fact that the maintenance of a moral attribute was dependent upon dollars and cents. The materialistic world appeared more sordid to her than she had imagined. Unable to solace her outraged feelings, she is filled with a paralyzing sense of insignificance.

Lily had also asked Trenor to “invest” money for her, refusing to consider where the high dividends he provides her with are coming from. In fact, Lily’s connection with Gus Trenor proves to be a major trap: far from assisting her to economic independence, he reduces her to even greater poverty and even more humiliating

dependence. The real nature of Lily's transaction with Trenor is implied by the disguises she invokes to cover it and is symbolized by the pressure of his "beefy red hand upon her." (182). Indeed, were Lily to ask herself with any rigour why Gus was willing to help her financially when Judy was not, she would have had to confront the implications of the arrangement hemakes with her; implications which Rosedale in his own blustering way exposes when, toward the end of the novel, he makes the heroic and preposterous offer to Lily of "a plain business arrangement, such as one man would make with another" (348).

This makes it clear that a financial transaction between a man and a woman is anything but plain and involves a great deal more than business. The realities of such a relationship are not good faith but exploitation in which the woman pays the price of her reputation. And since the survival of a woman finally depends as much upon her reputation as it does upon her looks, the end result of such apparent assistance is ruin.

Lily believes that she would get the money to repay Trenor from her aunt. Her aunt, however, refuses to pay her gambling debts. Lily is now left with only one hope, that of Selden coming to her rescue. She even refuses to accept Rosedale's offer of marriage in this hope. However, Selden is a man much in the grip of social traditions and conventions. To begin with, he is attracted and drawn towards Lily and he briefly considers a commitment to her. But as Lily falls from grace and is cast out of the social world, Selden, too, withdraws. He is, rather, enmeshed in social values which constrict his ability to love. Thus, societal prejudices and attitudes prevent him from coming to Lily's help. As the conflicts of the novel develop and when Lily needs Selden most, he becomes at times what Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls him: "the unthinking mouthpiece of the worse of society's prejudices" (111).

The story moves further when Lily is invited by Bertha Dorset to join them on a Yacht trip. The Dorsets, are as rich and socially powerful as the Trenors. They do not pretend to show respect to the old values and traditional styles as the Trenors. Bertha Dorset has been flirting with Selden while George Dorset, her husband, a limp dyspeptic, does not have that strength of character which is required to straighten a situation created by an errand wife.

Lily readily accepts the invitation failing to realize that this invitation will endanger her social position. In fact, Lily regards this as an opportunity to escape the threat of ruinous gossip in her Manhattan circle. Though she knows that Bertha's social world is ignoble, it is the only world in which Lily can imagine to find security and pleasure. Carrying her away from the danger of social ruin, the Transatlantic cruise seems to embody both safety and luxury-indeed, safety is for Lily the ultimate luxury. Ironically, however, at the moment she believes herself most secure, Lily is headed for a fall.

Dorset's wife, Bertha, had invited Lily for no other purpose than to distract her husband so that she could carry on her affair with another man, Ned Silverton, who is an aesthetic and a chronic gambler. Bertha's husband suspects her of going around with Ned. One night when Bertha and Ned fail to return to the yacht, George Dorset discusses the whole issue with Lily. Lily, in reply, just suggests to him to consult Selden as a lawyer.

Lily, however, becomes the scapegoat for the lover's exposed affair and is expelled from both the yacht and the Dorset's social circle. At the dinner party, Mrs. Dorset

accuses Lily of being alone with her husband. She hints that Lily was doing something irresponsible. Lily is shocked by the reversal of truth. Bertha, finally, declares that Lily would not travel with them on the yacht.

Lily is kicked off the yacht and this incident marks the irreversibility of Lily's social decline. The Dorsets who return to New York before Lily, spread a misleading story about her behaviour on the cruise. The result is that she finds herself ostracized by the polite society. The only reason why Lily, despite her superior character, cannot triumph over her enemies is that she does not have the backing of a bank balance like Bertha's. As Diana Trilling puts it: "Although Lily's departures from conventions represent a natural superiority to her social group, she lacks the money and family backing to support her divergence, and she also lacks the harsh consistency without which rebellion is exposed as a weakness" (108-09). When society has to choose between Bertha's tale and Lily's, Lily knows what the choice will be

In order to save her precarious social position, Lily enters into an association with Wellington Brys, social newcomers not fully accepted by the Trenor-Dorset set. At the Brys' ballroom, a central scene of the novel occurs. To attain a quick entry into society, the Brys plan an extravagant entertainment, that of tableaux vivants, in which a dozen fashionable women exhibit themselves in a series of pictures. Lily performs is one of the tableaux, and Selden, Trenor, Rosedale, and many others of Lily's set are in the audience. The tableau becomes symbolic of Lily's greatest virtue and her fatal flaw.

As the curtain rises to reveal scene after scene in which the women skillfully subdue their personalities to the setting, Selden is already entranced. But when Lily appears, Selden receives an impression quite different from that conveyed by the other women:

Even the least imaginative of the audience must have felt a thrill of contrast when the curtain suddenly parted on a picture which was simplify and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart [...] (134)

Seeing Lily in the tableau, Selden is finally able to "place" her. Earlier he had puzzled over her genuineness, over whether she was totally a creature of her milieu, but now his doubts about Lily fall away. (135).

This is a scene packed with irony, for as Selden sees the "soaring grace," the "touch of poetry" (134) in Lily's beauty, the rest of her observers see Lily as the object she is presumed to be; they cannot see past the role Lily has been living for years. What strikes the other observers is not so much Lily's grace as the scantiness of her draperies.

The comment affects Selden, and the combination of his own vision of Lily and the reaction of the crowd forces him to perform an act of faith. Caught between the world of Van Alstyne and the isolated Lily, Selden sees the cheapness of the New York set: "This was the world she lived in, these were the standards by which she was fated to be measured! Does one go to Caliban for a judgement on Miranda?" (135). Seeing his class as they are, Selden separates himself from them and commits himself to Lily.

The impact of the tableau on Lily herself is also ironic. She sees the evening as a great personal triumph, indiscriminately accepting all the compliments Van Alstyne and others shower upon her. She cannot know how the audience perceived her, as "a girl

standing up there as if she was up at auction” (157). Lily does not realize that by making herself stand out she was casting herself out, and that by appearing different, even superior in her beauty, she had made herself an object of hatred and scorn.

Lily Bart is a similar solitary figure, standing on the edge of a perilous wilderness, a world of poverty and shame, facing her enemies – Trenor, Dorset, Rosedale – and appealing to a weak lover – not Dimmesdale, but Selden. And, just as Hester Prynne’s delicate, grace does not save her but serves only to increase her accusers’ fury, so too Lily’s beauty only lends credence to the charges made against her. As the Puritans’ treatment of Hester illuminates the cruelty of their beliefs, so will Lily’s fate reflect upon the brutality of the rich toward those who violate their rules.

They very next day Gus Trenor, who had interpreted Lily in the tableau as Lily on sale, demands that he get his money’s worth from her. Trenor wants a return on his investment and he bluntly tells Lily: “There’s such a thing as fair play – and interest on one’s money – and hang me if I’ve had as much as a look from you” (146). Lily realizes that, by taking money from Trenor, she had become somewhat like a dishonest prostitute. She cries to Gerty Farish: “I’ve sunk lower than the lowest, for I’ve taken what they take, and not paid as they pay!” (166).

As Lily is pushed away from society, Selden, too, moves farther into its confines. His egotistic fantasy of taking Lily “beyond – beyond the ugliness, the pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul” (154), is destroyed when he sees Lily leave the Trenor house, and all the rumors about Lily are confirmed in his mind. Rather than facing her, Selden runs away judging Lily by appearances and by the words of those he had so recently disdained.

Lily is totally upset by the turn of events. But as luck would have it, she comes in possession of certain letters which Bertha Dorset had written to Selden. At first she contemplates using these letters to blackmail her way back into polite society. In fact, she is advised by Rosedale and George Dorset to do so. However, Lily cannot bring herself around to such a thing. One of the reasons being that such a disclosure would have harmed Selden as well. Lily cannot resort to something as mean as blackmail. For Lily to resort to blackmail would mean that she is no longer Lily. The reason lies in the fact that she is different from the social elite in precisely the way that she does not violate the moral codes.

Lily’s reputation, as such, is totally tarnished and she sinks lower in society. Thus, Lily, who was solely “fashioned to adorn and delight”, becomes an object “as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock”(301), when she is no longer wanted as ornament by the society. Wharton seems to be quite aware of the fact that Lily is a product of the ethos of her society. Analysing the psychology of Lily, Wharton writes:

She had learned by experience that she had neither the aptitude nor the moral constancy to remake her life on new lines inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was [...]. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight(311)

The fact that the conventions of society are responsible for Lily’s tragedy has made critics like Judith Fetterly to observe that, “[Wharton] invokes a special standard, and in so doing becomes in effect, one of ‘fellow’ throwing shields at and killing her

heroine” (50). G.S. Rahi, too, comments likewise, “Wharton appears to be on the side of the destroyers herself” (82). The two critics have, however, misinterpreted Wharton’s purpose and intention. The House of Mirth is, rather, Wharton’s powerful indictment of the frivolity of a society that, among other things, has chosen a less than human role for its women. The novel demonstrates the dehumanizing effects of an ethos that hampers the growth of the feelings of love and compassion.

The next stage in Lily’s descent is again linked explicitly with money. Just before dying, her aunt disinherits her as a result of the rumours about her conduct in Europe. In fact, it is Lily’s Cousin, Grace, who sabotages Lily’s chance at receiving a significant inheritance from Aunt Peniston. Ironically, Lily had looked towards Grace for financial help to pay off her debts. However, Grace insinuates Aunt Peniston that Lily had been seen with Gus Trenor frequently, and that she was in dire need of money to pay off her gambling debts. Mrs. Peniston, a highly moral woman, feels extremely upset. She does not approve of Lily’s ways and as such disinherits her. It is only later that Grace discloses to Lily the rumours she had passed on to Aunt Peniston.

Lily descends from one rung of the social ladder to another. She moves from higher to the lower strata, under the stewardship of Carry Fisher, a woman who assists the newly rich to find their place in society by instructing them in manners and customs, as well as introducing them to a select group of the wealthy social class. Left with no option, she, too, adopts the ways of Carry Fisher. She now attaches herself to the Gormers. She quickly joins this group, realizing that she would rather be part of their society than be excluded from it. Gormers, are favourable towards her because they are people who had a lot of money but cared less for status. Their sole aim in life was pleasure. However, Lily cannot continue in this position for long as Bertha influences Mrs. Gormer to displace Lily and Lily has to leave the place. Lily’s descent continues and gradually she is driven out of the world of rich to the poor.

Left with no place to go, Lily thinks of Rosedale and his interest in her. But she realizes that she would now be no longer useful to Rosedale in the social context. She would now have to rely on love to win him over. However, when she approaches him, he is not forthcoming. Rosedale explicates:

Last year I was willing to marry you, and you wouldn’t look at me; this year-well, you appear to be willing. Now, what has changed in the interval? Our situation, that’s all. (265)

The pace of Lily’s downfall accelerates. Lily loses her aunt’s money and moves from the Brys to Norma Hatch. Hatch is a divorcee who lives in a chaos of indolence and is forever a prey to sharpers and schemers. Lily finds this atmosphere intolerable, and nothing remains for her but the last fall into the abyss of poverty. All through this Selden remains distant, appearing only as the voice of society to chide Lily about her association with Norma Hatch. Selden feels a sense of relief as he returns to the conventional view of Lily, and he is no longer even her friend. Lily however, ignores his advice and thus says with Norma too long to salvage her own reputation.

But as the distance between Selden and Lily widens and she no longer has his constant criticism to deal with, Lily develops her own moral strength. Lily had once told Selden that “a girl who has no one to think for her is obliged to think for herself” (67), and in her isolation Lily shows a new moral strength. It is this moral strength

which makes her to refuse to marry either Rosedale or Dorset, because to do so she would have had to use Bertha's letters to Selden. And she had already burnt those letters which were the key to her social rehabilitation.

By bringing this message from outside the fashionable group, Wharton might be submitting to some kind of sentimentality but it certainly indicates her harsh judgement of a society that has abandoned its natural responsibilities at the altar of meaningless pleasures. Nettie confesses to Lily that she had always drawn comfort and hope from the vision of her beauty and its memory. Lily's beauty had been an agent of goodness, for Nettie just as her example now is a source of illumination for Lily. In the comparison of beauty and goodness money has been left out, at least directly. Thus, the wealthy have set their heart on the house of mirth, and thus prove themselves fools. Wisdom lies in the house of mourning.

Gerty and Carrie Fisher now decide to find a job for Lily in a hat shop. However, her skills have no use there and she is rebuked for her shoddy work time and again. She pretends to be sick and takes leave. On her way back home, she stops at a pharmacy and picks up some pills. She also happens to meet Rosedale and narrates the whole story to him of her borrowing money from Gus Trenor and how she has to pay it back.

When Lily reaches home, the maid hands her a letter. The letter, in fact, is the check for ten thousand dollars that Lily has been waiting to inherit. She takes the money and writes a check for the same amount to Gus Trenor thus, relieving herself of the burden of debt. Feeling extremely tired, she decides to take her chloral sleeping drug and she eventually drifts off into a pleasant sleep.

Although Lily does receive a letter bearing a cheque, her inheritance, towards the end of the novel, money cannot save her. Money had the power to save someone like Nettie, earlier in the novel, but not one like Lily. She dies of a last, miscalculated dose of chloral, yet another in the long list of bad risks, misunderstandings and irresolution's that make her story.

Lily Bart is socially unfit, a weak strain, though morally she proves to be superior to the world that produced her. Commenting upon the moral superiority of Lily, Maureen Howard writes: "Fate may dole out the extra dram of chloral, but she has paid her debts, chosen to be good" (322). Lily dies searching for a word she had meant to say to Selden – the man she had idealized, just as he searched for a word to say to her at their last meeting, when Lily spoke clearly without "the conventional outskirts of word-play and evasion" (322).

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton analyses the stratified American society at the beginning of the twentieth century and depicts Lily's struggle between her society's money-oriented values and her inherent sense of decency which keeps her from attaining her ends. The novel traces the downward journey of Lily from grace to her final destruction in an overwhelmingly materialist society.

The mindless people among whom Lily finds herself have a force of negation. They ignore morality themselves but judge others by stern rules of prudery. This frivolous and unscrupulous society tramples upon the tender feelings of Lily. Bertha Dorset, Gus Trenor, Mattie Gormer and Norma Hatch all use her for their selfish ends and poor Lily is seriously maimed in character and reputation for no fault of hers. At no point in her life she has had any comfort. For, as she looks back into her life in the

final hopeless state, we meet an infinitely pathetic creature who was denied even parental love.

Wharton, thus, believes that ‘society,’ in the narrow sense, is guided by a set of arbitrary and artificial conventions. It does not matter what vices or crimes an individual may commit as long as he does not openly attack these conventions. Most people capitulate to these conditions; they indulge in the private vices at pleasure but preserve a hypocritical respect for the conventions of polite behaviour. It is all very well for a social leader to conduct a secret affair with her chauffeur, but to marry him is inexcusable. Wharton’s protagonists are often sensitive, artistic, highly moral persons who find this hypocrisy repugnant; they are willing to pay any price in order to be able to live honestly. This obsession eventually brings them to destruction; society imagines they are paying for their sins, but actually they are being made to suffer for their virtues.

#### Works Cited:

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