# LILY BART IN *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*: A SWAMP-HATCHED BUTTERFLY

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ABSTRACT

In *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton exposes and indicts society's suppression and distortion of sexuality, especially female sexuality. Lily Bart, the female hero of the novel, is viewed as a commodity, an artifact that is to be evaluated, ticketed, and sold to the highest bidder. However, Lily refuses to barter her body for security. She fights against her society's false claims and struggles for her dignity. In every crisis, Lily resists the moral hypocrisy that defines her genteel class, and it is her rebellion against her stultifying, inimical world that makes her an unconventional figure, the true embodiment of the New Woman. Her suicide is not a pathetic defeat but a conscious choice reached through her achievement of self-awareness. Her death symbolizes a victory of self-knowledge and authenticity as she becomes herself.

KEY WORDS: Female sexual consciousness, commodity, androcentric society, new woman, self-awareness, selfhood, spiritual emancipation

RESUMEN

En su novela *The House of Mirth* Edith Wharton expone y a la vez acusa a la sociedad del papel represor y distorsionador que ejerce con respecto a la sexualidad, especialmente la femenina. La heroína de la novela, Lily Bart, aparece como un producto de consumo, un artefacto al que se le da un valor, se le etiqueta y vende al mejor postor. Sin embargo, su rol es luchar contra esa comercialización y conseguir la dignidad personal. De este modo, su desafío a la hipocresía moral de la clase social a la que pertenece la convierte en un adalid de la nueva mujer. Incluso su suicidio final no se debe considerar una derrota patética, sino como una opción consciente que simboliza la victoria del autoconocimiento y de la autenticidad con el fin de llegar a ser ella misma.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Conciencia sexual femenina, producto de consumo, androcentrismo, nueva mujer, autoconocimiento, individualidad, emancipación espiritual.



Edith Wharton, who has long been regarded as America's quintessential novelist of manners, demands critical attention as a writer of female sexual consciousness. In her fiction, Wharton openly inauthenticates stereotyped definitions

of women, reinvents womanhood, and probes female psychology and female sexual consciousness. Her sympathetic rendering of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* and Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* as women fully aware of material and spiritual needs that are fundamental to their survival as adult women, her compelling delineation of the restrained, lady-like Anna Leath longing for emotional and sexual fulfillment in *The Reef*, and her strong description of Charity Royall's sexual awakening in *Summer*, all substantiate her argument that female sexual consciousness is central to woman's personal joy, identity, and social power. At a time when the great majority of female writers refrained from confronting the forbidden issue of female psychology and sexuality, Wharton showed that woman's sexual freedom, just like her economic independence and legal equality, was essential to her total freedom and emancipation. She repeatedly attacked the pernicious customs of her time and sought courageously to liberate woman —her mind as well as her body— from the confines of patriarchy and from the oppressive and repressive dictates of society.

In her novels, Wharton critically depicts the restraints of social indoctrination and treats her suffering, emergent characters with passion and sympathy. Her female characters reject the role models patriarchal society offers to them. They examine their needs and each in her individual way determines to live, not as a woman, a social construct, but as a female, marked but not defined by her sex and with the same rights and options as the male of her species. But until social structures undergo radical change, the longings of protagonists like Lily for a meaningful social role cannot be realized. So these protagonists dwell in the living pages of literary fiction as beacons toward the light of future days. Edith Wharton herself, as her biographer R.W.B. Lewis suggests, did not rule out the possibility of a better future —she "looked beyond her lifetime toward an age, like ours, of greater freedom and candor."



In studying male and female relationships, in contemporary America, Wharton envisaged the world of New York's high society the place where sexual relationships were most distorted by the invading parvenues and by ironclad social conventions.

> Economically and socially, this world was dominated by an established wealthy class consisting of the sons and grandsons of energetic provincial merchants... Quite free from any disturbing intensities of belief or aspirations toward grandeur of style, this class was strict in its decorum and narrow in its conventions. With tepid steadfastness it devoted itself to good manners, good English, good form. And it cared about culture too-culture as a static and finished quantity, something one had to possess but did not have to live by". (Howe 9)

What this view emphasizes in Wharton's fiction is her portrayal of life in turn-of-the-century New York as it was lived by the very rich. Unquestionably, Wharton is the social historian of the East Coast Aristocracy. She is a participant in and observer of the world of New York's high society in its moribund but still glittering years at the close of the nineteenth century.

*The House of Mirth* (1905) is the best example of Wharton's excellent use of American high society to expose and indict society's suppression and distortion of

sexuality, especially female sexuality. It is in this work that Wharton most extensively and intensively shows and condemns the sexual suppression and exploitation of the female in Victorian America. "What a miserable thing it is to be a woman" (Wharton, "House" 7). This expression of feeling could so easily have been blurted out by Edna Pontellier as she struggles toward identity and freedom in *The Awakening*. But the words are not hers: they are spoken by a very different woman, Lily Bart, the female hero of Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Lily is seen as a commodity, an artifact that is created by and for the very rich, to be evaluated, ticketed, and sold to the highest bidder. It is not even strange that Lily's mother relies on her daughter's beauty for financial support. For centuries women have been used as chattel property in a marital exchange for economic and sometimes political gain. In 1898, Charlotte Perkins Gilman remarked that marriage had been nearly the only socially acceptable means by which a woman could look for financial support and that her "economic profit comes through the power of sex-attraction" (63). Late nineteenth-century America had certainly not removed itself away from that despicable practice. In view of the social commercialization of marriage, Kate Millett observes that it is a "general legal assumption that marriage [in patriarchal societies] involves an exchange of the female's domestic service and consortium in return for financial support" (34).

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart is viewed by the members of her society as a creature destined to be a pleasing wife or an enticing mistress. However, Lily refuses to barter her body for security. Unwilling to be devoured by the world of New York, a world, to be sure, frequently defined by multiple marriages, promiscuity, sexual duplicity, vicious gossip, and emotional bankruptcy, Lily fights against her society's false claims and struggles for her dignity. That which enables Lily to rise above the decorative and seductive role for which she was perfectly trained is her wonderfully human characteristics and her intrinsic values. In every crisis, Lily resists the moral hypocrisy that defines her genteel class, and it is her rebellion against her stultifying, inimical world that makes her an unconventional figure, the true embodiment of the New Woman.

Lily first appears to be a compliant woman who wants to please people who throng around her and who desires no more than the material well-being that a rich husband can provide her. As Elizabeth Ammons points out: "On the surface she [Lily] perfectly embodies society's ideal of the female as decorative, subservient, dependent, and submissive; the upper-class norm of the lady as a nonassertive, docile member of society" ("Hard-Working" 349). It is true that as a young woman groomed for marriage, Lily in some aspects resembles May Welland of *The Age of Innocence*, and seems to be what Ammons calls in her essay a "child-woman" ("Hard-Working" 347). She is an enslaved woman who is untutored in any other skills other than those of entertaining people. But in reality, Lily differs from the conventional woman May Welland who willingly conforms to social notions of female role and conduct and who upholds the social ideal of feminine propriety. Lily, though she cannot envision herself in any other world besides the one of leisure in which she grew up, is aware of and discontent with her abject status in society. She knows perfectly well that as a woman of limited financial resources her life is destined to be

one of "servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality" (Wharton, "Mirth" 191). Still, Lily refuses to participate in her society's corrupt dealings, even at the cost of her own reputation. She has "fits of angry rebellion against Fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself" (Wharton, "Mirth" 39). Lily has different perceptions about the values of life and of her own beauty. Wharton writes:

> There was in Lily a vein of sentiment... She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste... She would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich: she was secretly ashamed of her mother's crude passion for money. (Wharton, "Mirth" 35)

In transgressing the rules of her society, despite her own conventionality, Lily indeed possesses characteristics of the New Woman. Clearly, her desire for freedom and independence overshadows her other concerns in life. Critics are not right in viewing Lily as an immature woman devoid of adult sexuality. In Joan Lidoff's words, "Lily is another Sleeping Beauty, slumbering in a dormant pre-sexual state from which she never awakens" (522). Therefore, "Lily cannot marry because she is incapable of love" (Lidoff 534). Similarly, Gloria Erlich argues that "Lily is out of touch with her desires" and that both her defeat and death "are direct results of her inability to move beyond narcissistic enjoyment of her own beauty into sharing it fully with another. She dies on the threshold of female sexuality, unable to cross over" (65, 69). Apparently, these critics think that Lily's lack of initiation or her inability to face and act upon her desire is the cause of her social downfall rather than the negative effect of her social feminization. In actuality, Lily is not asexual, nor is she passive. Lily, Wharton shows, is a young woman with romantic longings. Erotic desires are important components of her physical and psychological makeup, and the fulfillment of these desires is paramount in her matrimonial considerations. More important, Wharton shows that Lily is angry at the social codes that severely limit her personal freedom and punish her for acting naturally. Lily, in fact, questions the moral order of her society:

> Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice? She had yielded to a passing impulse in going to Lawrence Selden's rooms, and it was so seldom that she could allow herself the luxury of an impulse! This one, at any rate, was going to cost her rather more than she could afford. (Wharton, "House" 15)

In many ways, Lily is a conscious critic of patriarchal order. She understands the reasons for her social expulsion and is critical of New York's society moral and sexual standards. We understand her motivation and her emotions. We know how much she suffers and how much she tries to combat social objectification. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff contends, instead of merely observing Lily as a victim, "we discover her genuine feelings, and we learn what it really means to have become no more than a beautiful object" (111). Lily is not a non-feeling and unthinking object

but a normal human being who has emotions and desires and who constantly and progressively resists society's humiliation of her.

Wharton's greatest merit in the treatment of her female hero is that she endows Lily with the capacity for personal integrity and moral growth. Lily's social downfall proves to be the beginning of her moral maturation and of her attainment of the "real" Lily, the formation of a genuine, human self. As she descends socially, she gains more insight into herself, others, and society. As seen in her various works, Wharton exposes society's pernicious notions of female sexual purity and presents in positive terms young women who openly defy the restricting rules of "True Womanhood." Looking back in 1934 at her own literary career, Wharton took great pride in the fact that she had "fought the good fight" to turn "the wooden dolls" about which she was expected to make believe into "struggling suffering human beings" ("Backward" 127). As a matter of fact, Wharton had not only fulfilled her obligation as a writer to depict "authentic human nature" ("Backward" 127) and to debunk the Victorian myth of True Womanhood, but had also participated in, and made an enormous contribution to, the historical female struggle for emancipation. Her merits lie, not in marching in the streets for woman's rights, nor in publicly advocating social reforms, but rather in continuously creating fictions that are definitely iconoclastic and severely damaging to the ideologies of patriarchy. As Susan Minot argues:

> The novelist-that is, the good novelist-does not offer solutions, nor does she announce her work as a vehicle of change. But in delineating the foibles and exposing the tragedies in society, she composes a quiet, subversive song. Any increased awareness gives rise to questions and to considerations about how we live. The subversive work Wharton did was to write about the world she knew, supported by her access to privilege but relying finally on her own ability to see clearly and to mind her talent. (xv)

In fact, not until Margaret McDowell's essay, "Viewing the Custom of the Country: Edith Wharton's Feminism" (1974) did feminist scholars begin to see Wharton in light of turn-of-the-century female thought. McDowell argued that Wharton's novels were feminist in that they examined and explored the hopes and deprivations of women in a phallocentric society (521-538). Following this same line, Elizabeth Ammons in 1980, wrote a useful study of Wharton's "feminism" by placing her work alongside the feminist texts of her day" ("Argument"). Later, Elaine Showalter in "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's House of Mirth" and more recently Shari Benstock in *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *No Man's Land* (1989) have placed Wharton in the feminist canon, as a transitional figure between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Indeed, Edith Wharton is a curious phenomenon among American women writers in the twentieth century. Beyond any doubt, she is a groundbreaker in the realm of fiction. She not only eludes and transgresses the traditional strategies of the sentimental genre in the nineteenth century, but she also transcends them and comes up with counter strategies that enable her to portray her own conception of feminine freedom. She is one of the first women writers to provide us with a window to a new woman's lives. Her female heroes are not architects of the cult of domesticity.

They actually go on a quest of self-discovery, search for the meanings of the inner self, explore their own individuality, and discover the hidden embers in their hearts. In the course of their growth and their self-redefinition, they experience a rite of passage —from innocence or ignorance to knowledge— from inability to ability to cope with the circumstances of the lives. The quest of the female protagonists is not for reconciliation with society, but for inner harmony and discovery of values that transcend the hypocrisy and discord of society. Of course, Wharton's female heroes Ellen Olenska, Lily Bart, Anna Leath, and Charity Royall act out their lives in female roles proffered them by society, roles they consciously or unconsciously assume, until through painful growth, or through the rejection of certain rules, they come to awareness of who they are. Significantly, her female heroes are all skillfully drawn portraits that create complex women characters who are strong-willed, self-assertive, hearty, sexual, and autonomous women whose potential for development and growth is full of possibilities. Wharton's contribution to the feminist movement lies clearly in her commitment to what may be the true republic of woman's spirit, the liberation and assertion of woman's spirit and self.

Exploring the life of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton creates a novel about a female hero who is a questioning, questing woman. Wharton follows Lily through the different stages or phases of her life and depicts graphically her anger, her vulnerability, her pride and self-absorption, her disillusionment, her strength and rebelliousness, and her humanity. The very first chapters of the novel introduce Lily's resistant yet irresolute ways. In the opening scene Lawrence Selden encounters Lily at Grand Central Station and, as he looks at this charming woman, he notes "how highly specialized" (Wharton, "House" 5) she is in contrast to the working-class women around her, sensing "that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must have been sacrificed to produce her" (Wharton, "House" 5). Here, Wharton employs a metaphor that she will use throughout this novel: Lily is the product of meticulous breeding and convention, like the Lily which is, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have suggested, "one of the characteristically voluptuous art nouveau flowers that decorated drawing rooms and lamp shades, mirrors and Metro entrances, at the turn of the century" (138).

Yet, Lily is not a helpless, victimized product of her society. Indeed, she is self-propelled. Though she has received several proposals of marriage, she continues, at age twenty-nine, to be single. In a society where marriage constitutes virtually the only socially acceptable role for a young woman of her class, Lily's single status, eleven years after her social debut, is conspicuous in her society. Lily has done precisely the thing that constitutes a violation of the rules of female role and conduct. By remaining thus far unmarried, she not only deviates from the sexual conventions of her society, but she also rebels against the dictates of that same society. Even Selden, who regards her more often than not as a product of her social milieu, apprehends her disquieting duplicity: "She stood apart from the crowd... wearing an air of irresolution which might, as he surmised, be the mask of a very definite purpose" (Wharton, "House" 3); it was characteristic of lily that "she always roused speculation, that her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions" (Wharton, "House" 3).

For example, Lily knows that if she were seen entering a man's private apartment in *The Benedick*, a community of bachelors, that social transgression could irrecoverably harm her reputation, but she finds the appeal of being momentarily free of social contrasts "too tempting" to resist, and she decides, "I'll take the risk" (Wharton, "House" 6). At that particular moment, Lily's need to spurn or defy empty and constricting conventions is stronger than her fear of social approbation. As Lily and Selden sit down in the simple but cheerful apartment, Lily remarks, "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self!" (Wharton, "House" 7). She then makes plain her awareness of the sexism of her society and spells out the difference between an insufficiently rich man and an insufficiently rich woman at the time: "Ah, there's the difference-a girl must [marry], a man may if he chooses" (Wharton, "House" 12). A man's tattered clothes will not lose him a dinner invitation, but "a woman [Lily understands perfectly] is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself."[1] In her explanation to Selden, Lily demonstrates how well she understands existing social standards. She is seen as possessing a strong feminist consciousness and shrewdness. She betrays not only her awareness of how beauty and charm determine a woman's worth in the marriage market but also her awareness of an additional double standard of gender to that of sexual morality. Lily is a prime example of Wharton's female characters who are all to much aware of social deterrents to the New Woman's ideals.

At heart, Lily does despise the life she has been trained to lead. Being unable to embrace the societal behavior which she comes to understand as hypocritical, Lily defies the hollow conventions of her world. Even though Lily has been bred for marriage, she, time and again, sabotages her own successful campaigns to land an eligible husband. In a conversation regarding Lily, Mrs. Fisher explains to Selden "That's Lily all over, you know: She works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic... Sometimes... I think it's just flightiness-and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for" (Wharton, "House" 189). Lily is torn asunder between what society indoctrinates and expects of her and what she really and truly wants. Seemingly, society offers her a beautiful harvest. For one, she may find security with Percy Gryce, "who might ultimately decide to do her the honor of boring her for life" (Wharton, "House" 25); or she may find shelter with Gus Trenor, who would play the stock market for her in exchange for sex. Or she can win Bertha Dorset's husband. Finally, by using the love letters that Bertha has written to Selden, she can blackmail Bertha and marry Simon Rosedale, who would evince his pride by the sheer fact of possessing her as a commodity. Any of these men can be her "male" —of-arms (pun intended) "to arrange her life as she pleased, to soar into that empyrean of security where creditors cannot

[1] Wharton, *Mirth*, 12. For an elaboration on the relationship between a woman's wardrobe and her social status, see Simone de Beauvoir 534.

penetrate" (Wharton, "House" 49). But all these unions have no appeal for Lily, for she knows full well, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff has observed, that the men around her are "principally connoisseurs or collectors" of her beauty (115). For Lily, marriage would spell not only her self-immolation but also her death certificate.

The men in Lily's social world see Lily primarily as a sexual object, a rare commodity produced for the sensual pleasure of men. In view of the social commercialization of marriage, it is no wonder that no man in the novel has ever considered or cared about Lily's feelings or her own desires. It is precisely with this kind of attitude that men like Gus Trenor and Simon Rosedale handle their relationships with Lily. Gus and Simon betray a dehumanizing belief that in the marriage market the female is a non-feeling human commodity whose chief value is her sex appeal and who should not be too scrupulous about putting it out for sale. Not satisfied with just looking at Lily as a spectacle, Gus and Simon seek to own her as an object of desire. As E. Ann Kaplan observes, in patriarchal society, "men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and possession" (31). Believing in the power of the all-mighty dollar, Gus and Simon assume that they can buy Lily's sexual service even without giving her the benefit of marriage. When Lily seeks financial advice from Gus, he promises to speculate for her (presumably with her own money) but later actually pays for her large sums of money (in the name of "dividend") out of his own pocket (Wharton, "House" 92).

Lily's selection of Gus is not a chance. She chooses him as financial confidante because "as the husband of her dearest friend, [he] stood to her in a relation of almost fraternal intimacy" (Wharton, "House" 82). But having given Lily money, Gus thinks he has the right to her sexual favors. He first assumes in his task a "note of conjugal familiarity" (Wharton, "House" 81). with Lily and asks her to go off with him somewhere for a "nice quiet little expedition" (Wharton, "House" 117). As she continues to put him off, one night he finally tricks her into his deserted Fifth Avenue mansion, intending to claim his right. Accusing her of "dodging the rules of the game" (Wharton, "House" 145). Gus makes it clear to Lily that the money she has been spending is his and that he has been speculating on her body. Even though Lily manages to escape from being physically violated, the event leaves her with an emotional shock —the shock of a woman suddenly confronted with the harsh reality that she is, in the eyes of the voyeuristic men, no more than a sexual object. Lily's realization that Gus expects her to repay with sexual favors, the currency of her gender, rather than the currency of male transactions, does not however paralyze her into submission but propels her forward into action. Lily demands clarification of the nature of her debt to him and refuses to comply with his demands. Acting in compliance with her own code of conduct, she promises to repay him on her terms, in cash.

Equally crude is Simon Rosedale's view of Lily. Rosedale, who is a "plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery" (Wharton, "House" 14) and a recently made fortune, aspires to make Lily his wife. He believes that Lily is useful in transforming his economic power into social prominence. He, therefore, makes a marriage proposal to Lily in his plain business language that since she is "fond of luxury, and style, and amusement, and

of not having to worry about cash," (Wharton, "House" 177) he would provide her with all these if she would be his wife. Later, when Lily loses her social standing, she becomes for him only a sexual object to be toyed with. He wants Lily and him to be "good friends all the same" (Wharton, "House" 254). But when Lily asks, "What is your idea of being good friends?... Making love to me without asking me to marry you?" he answers frankly, "Well, that's about the size of it, I suppose. I can't help making love to you-I don't see how any man could; but I don't mean to ask you to marry me as long as I can keep out of it" (Wharton, "House" 255). Rosedale's answer evinces, in effect, society's prevalent notion that a beautiful woman like Lily is destined to be a man's (men's) sexual property either as a wife or as a mistress.

Indeed, in what Elaine Showalter calls the "city of sexual commerce," (362) Lily can hardly escape the fate of becoming a "superfine human merchandize" (Wharton, "House" 227) who is valued chiefly for her sexual attractiveness. Notwithstanding, Lily cannot and will not commit herself to social compliance. Being the beautiful object of male desire differs from what Lily aspires to achieve. According to the narrator, she longs to be "something more than a piece of sentient prettiness, a passing diversion... "(Wharton, "House" 95). The harboring of individual dreams and aspirations outside the world of conventions and her attempts to fulfill them show Lily as an agent of her life and set her apart from the women of her social circle. Unlike the other women in the novel, Lily notices and rejects the double standards that a woman must observe to retain her good social standing. As heroes rebel against unjust laws, so does Lily rebel against the injustices inherent in her society. Her impulse to freedom asserts itself, and she asserts her right to behavior that differs from what is socially acceptable for upper-middle-class women at the end of the nineteenth century.

Lily has to make it on her own and to set her life in motion even if she feels emotionally starved and financially insecure. But by fighting against the constraints of society as she tries to establish her identity and by appearing different, Lily has made herself an object of hatred and scorn. Her daring spirit creates hatred and scorn among her social peers. This is evident in Lily's participation at the Brys's *tableaux vivants*. On this occasion, while all other participants embody the personality of their chosen character in a painting, Lily retains her own. In her representation, "there could be no mistaking the predominance of personality" (Wharton, "House" 134). Lily's success in depicting her chosen subject Sir Joshua Reynold's Mrs. LIoyd without losing her persona is not accidental. But because of her ability to assess her own qualities and to profit from them, Lily finally settles on one which allows her self-expression. Her choice of character attests to her "artistic intelligence" (Wharton, "House" 134). As the narrator comments:

> ...she had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings. (134)

By disregarding conventional guidelines for female disclosure, Lily not only insists on remaining herself but she also asserts her persona as a whole. The specta-

tors' gaze, however, when confronted with Lily's individuality, cheapens and transforms "the eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part" (Wharton, "House" 135). The remarks of the men gazing at Lily attest to the male appropriation and vulgarization of Lily's beauty. The males apprehend only Lily's carnality, and aroused by it, they classify Lily as a member of the "whore" class.

The result of Lily's disregard of "propriety" is the progressive deterioration of her material circumstances and her social status. She is now ostracized and becomes an outcast of her society. She is also disinherited by her aunt and benefactress and abandoned by Selden whose "republic of the spirit" (Wharton, "House" 68) proves to be nothing more than a sham and a smokescreen with which he conceals his confinement to the social system. Selden's "republic of the spirit" is, in fact, only an inflated euphemism for cowardice. Edmund Wilson has also defined Selden with characteristic acuteness: "Lawrence Selden [is] the city lawyer who sits comfortably in his bachelor apartment with his flower box of mignonette and his first edition of La Bryere and allows Lily Bart to drown" (168). Throughout the novel, Selden is not an attractive ambassador of his "republic of the spirit." As Lily is cast out of the social world, Selden himself moves within the gilded cage of societal prejudices and attitudes and accuses Lily of sins he is blind to himself. When Lily needs him most, he becomes at times what Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls him: "the unthinking mouthpiece of the worst of society's prejudices" (111).

Truly, as Lily reaches out to Selden for help, he assumes the role of detached observer, of civil but disdainful judge. He attacks her ambitions and predicts a miserable future for her if she continues with her present goals. What Selden does is to offer Lily a standard he himself does not live by. Lily is right when she asks Selden, "Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?" (Wharton, "House" 70). Lily bitterly realizes that Selden cannot truly offer her any other way to live, for she senses that he spends most of his time "in the element [he] disapproves of" (Wharton, "House" 72). Lily's criticism of Selden shakes him but it "took him a moment to regain his usual view" of her ((Wharton, "House" 74). Only Lily's death awakens Selden to his own character and, perhaps, in part, redeems him.



Lily's defiance of her oppressive society and her inability to resort to the corrupt usages of her class have disastrous effects. In Monte Carlo, Lily painfully discovers the fragility of her position with the Dorsets, which is based on Bertha Dorset's need to provide "entertainment" for her husband George during her conquest of young Ned Silverton. In order to efface evidence of her own dalliance, Bertha publicly implies that Lily is having an affair with Mr. Dorset. Mrs. Dorset's Machiavelian plot seals the ruin of Lily's reputation among the wealthy Americans in Europe, for whom it is more convenient to believe the wealthy, powerful Bertha's side of the story. Although Lily knows that in her society "the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for," (Wharton, "House" 226) she refuses to use her incriminating evidence against Bertha Dorset, the letters to Selden, to blackmail her way back into society and to regain her original status. Although Lily has to pay for sins she does not commit, she cannot bring herself to rely on her society's corrupt conventions, conventions that judge her not by what she is but by what she

appears to be, i.e., by the mere appearance of impropriety. Simply, blackmail violates Lily's personal code of conduct. Despite the expectations of society and the threat of poverty, and without anyone's help or support, Lily, honoring her dignity, decides to burn Bertha's letters. Not unexpectedly, Lily's response to her public degradation, "the faint disdain of her smile seemed to lift her above her antagonist's reach," (Wharton, "House" 218) and her resistance to compromising her ideals and herself for the sake of socially condoned standards reflect her inner strength and courage in a moment of crisis. Her unwillingness to surrender her sense of values in order to survive and her continued resistance against a despotic world of false values suggest and confirm her female agency, her spiritual growth of character, her emotional honesty, and her independent assertion of the reality of her inner self.

Adherence to her principles and her independence of agency insure Lily's inability ever to rejoin her social class and her forfeiture of a chance to marry. Lily departs form the conventions of her society and thus becomes a social outcast. Under all kinds of pressure, she attempts to earn her own way by making an honest living. But her attempts at self-sufficiency are doomed from the outset. Lily lacks the training that transforms talent into a marketable skill and the tools to carve an independent life for herself. She has never been trained to do even the most perfunctory of female chores, her "untutored fingers" (Wharton, "House" 285) cannot sew the stitches necessary to trim hats. Even if she had the skills, the low wages and seasonal nature of the work would have proved insufficient to sustain any respectable lifestyle, let alone the lifestyle she deserves. Lily is suddenly aware that she is incapable of making a life for herself or even to stay physically alive. The narrator explains Lily's plight and failure:

> It was bitter to acknowledge her inferiority even to herself, but the fact had been brought home to her that as a breadwinner she could never compete with professional ability. (297)

Despite Lily's inability to succeed as a laborer herself, she has a growing recognition of the humanity of working-class women like Miss Kilroy, who kindly offers sympathy to a fatigued Lily one day after their supervisor criticized the latter's work. Lily also finds comfort and warmth with Nettie Struther, the young woman she once helped by donating money to Gerty's charity. As Lily sits with Nettie in the tiny kitchen with Nettie's baby, Lily comes to see that the Struther's sense of community is "the central truth of existence" (319) "a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss" 320). The narrator notes that the "strength of victory shone forth"(315) from Nettie as she looks at Lily, and when she gives Lily the baby to hold, the child "thrills" Lily "with a sense of warmth and returning life" (316). On Lily's way home, she realizes "that she felt stronger and happier: the little episode had done her good" (316). She is even willing for the first time to go down to dinner with the other boarders, another attempt to find a new social place for herself. Lily's first glimpse of a possibility for a meaningful life teaches her gratitude and human fellowship and connects her with a vital source of life. Though later she dies alone in a boarding-house,

Lily does not feel alone. She has, in her dreams, Nettie's little infant girl in her arms. Her life is continued in that of the little girl. As Elaine Showalter argues, *The House of Mirth* ends not only with a death, but also "with the vision of a new world of female solidarity, a world in which women like Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther will struggle hopefully and courageously. Lily dies-the lady dies-so that these women may live and grow" (379).

It is, ironically, Lily who provides salvation in her fallen, predatory world. Slandered, discarded by the rich who can make no further use of her and by the envious who cannot tolerate her superiority, it is she who ennobles their lives by attaining, and thereby signifying, a moral elevation as spirited and triumphant as her social collapse is sordid and mean. Her determination to write a check against the very last of her funds to her creditor, Gus Trenor, is the responsible act of a woman who has moved beyond the orbit of the corrupt survivors in "the house of mirth." It is important to note that Lily demonstrates strength and moral dignity by settling her debts before her death. As Wai-Chee Dimock has noted, Lily's repayment of Trenor's money is a profound refusal to be part of the system that exacts such insidious "payment in kind" from a woman (131). Thus, despite her seeming weakness, Lily is also a strong character in that she remains defiant of the sexual economy of her world to the last. It is this resistance that makes Lily Bart, who cannot even support herself by trimming hats, an unlikely New Woman. In contrast to many other Wharton characters who compromise their ideals to survive within the dictates of the social order, Lily remains true to herself, even when it requires giving up all that she has ever known. Lily fully establishes her moral identity and achieves, according to Margaret B. McDowell, "a silent and lonely victory" (23).

Lily's emblem in *The House of Mirth* is a seal with "Beyond! beneath a flying ship" (154). This emblem symbolizes her desire to go beyond the delimiting labels of social convention and to sail, with a sense of purpose, to the safe shores of human connection. There is no question that Lily wants to live well, but she wants to do so on her own terms. But Lily, as woman at the turn of the century, cannot go beyond. Without marrying a wealthy man or inheriting money, she falls prey to poverty, illness, depression, eventually drugs and death. At the end of the novel, Wharton presents sleep as the only respite in Lily's life. As her tolerance to chloral increases, Lily's need to sleep propels her to raise the dosage to dangerous levels and to risk "a sleep without waking" (323). Lily chooses death and her willed suicide constitutes a life-affirming choice. Her suicide speaks of a woman's desire to be a whole human being, body and soul, and of her rebellion against an existence that objectifies her and deprives her of that wholeness. Lily's death does not result from the lack of will to establish and sustain her identity. Her death constitutes instead the ultimate proof of her indomitable will to live as an adult female. An identity discovered, an attempt made to establish it, and a willingness to die and to preserve what little identity she actually has maintained instead of adapting to traditional molds bear witness to heroic courage. Heroically and at the cost of her life, Lily defends the independent identity with which Wharton has endowed her. Lily dies physically wasted, but morally unblemished. Only at the end does Selden appreciate her real

quality, though even then he is not allowed to share our knowledge of how much she has been true to herself.

Lily's struggle to survive and to find integrity makes *The House of Mirth* a novel of universal import and lasting appeal. Certainly, Wharton has created a power of womanhood not generally found in American fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lily Bart is a superbly non-conformist, passionate, and self-defining protagonist who tries to lead an all-too-human life, finding some purpose in her existence and keeping her life in order. Her experiences and myriad trials in her arduous journey of recognition and selfhood release her from bondage to myths about herself and sustain her moral growth and her recognition of her right to her own mode of being. Despite the incredible odds against her, Lily takes charge of herself and defines her own course of life as her imagination and experience determined. By sending Lily to her death, Wharton refuses to endorse the sentimentality of a fairy-tale resolution and lets Lily decide her own destiny. She presents Lily, in terms suggesting Melville, as a defiant, unfettered soul that stands out against the limitations that society places upon her and that accepts in the final analysis a defeat that involves no surrender.

The one value that really counted with Wharton was an assertion of woman's right to be herself, to be individual and independent whether she wants to be strong or weak. Lily is not weak. She discovers the power of her self and refuses to abjure it. Her death is motivated by an uncompromising desire for spiritual emancipation. Her suicide is not a pathetic defeat but a conscious choice reached through her achievement of self-awareness. Her death symbolizes a victory of self-knowledge and authenticity as she fully becomes herself. Throughout *The House of Mirth*, the most striking feature of Lily's character has been her rebelliousness against the injustices inherent in her society and her ruthless determination to reject unequivocally the society's treatment of female sexuality. The ultimate realization that she has awakened to is that the only way to save her self is to give up her life. She cannot accept the restrictions and the double standards that society has conspired to impose upon her. And so, paradoxically, she surrenders her life in order to save her self. Wronged or erring, Lily is a valiant woman, worthy of place beside other fictional female heroes who have sought emancipation and become thoroughly human-Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynee, and Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier. Readers are likely to find something of themselves in her. In celebrating her literary talent and its probable longevity, one of Wharton's greatest admirers Arthur Hobson Quinn questioned, "For after all which of us are as truly alive as Lily Bart, as Ethan Frome, as Ellen Olenska, as May Welland? And which of us will live as long?" (550).

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