

ANALYSIS

The House of Mirth (1905)



Edith Wharton

(1862-1937)

Book I, Chapter 1

The novel begins and ends from the perspective of the lawyer Lawrence Selden, a detached observer, objective by profession and the character most comparable to Wharton, though not to be identified with her. The setting in Grand Central Station--an intersection of humanity--is characteristic of Realist fiction, which seeks the social center, focuses on the typical or representative and tries to dramatize general truths about society and human nature, correcting romantic and naive illusions. Upon noticing Lily Bart, who becomes the medium of his enlightenment, and of his disillusionment, Selden asks himself the question he continues to ask for the rest of the novel, What was she doing?

When she approaches Selden, Lily exclaims, "How nice of you to come to my rescue!"--casting herself in the traditional role of a damsel in distress. Why he never does rescue her takes the whole story to reveal. "I don't know what to do with myself," she says. The novel is full of such lines, resonant thematic motifs and ironies that cannot be recognized as such until a second reading. *The House of Mirth* is more than a novel of manners, it is a precursor of Modernist art in being an holistic and prismatic vision of reality, expressing a transcendental aesthetic epitomized by the metaphysical James Joyce. Lily fascinates Selden as a revelation of Nature and he judges her according to the "argument from design"--as a manifestation of the divine.

Throughout the book, Lily acts according to her nature as conditioned by society, which is represented first by her mother. The story begins with one of her gambles, when she accepts Selden's invitation to come up to his rooms: "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." This introduces the theme of determinism that foreshadows catastrophe for Lily, focusing attention on the series of choices--gambles--she makes that determine her ultimate fate. Wharton is not an absolute determinist, hence not a pure literary Naturalist, as her metaphor leaves open the possibility that Lily might break free or slip out of her manacles, especially with help.

Ironically, all along it is Selden himself who could help set her free by telling her he loves her. Instead, all along in various ways he responds as he does over tea in their first scene: "I'm afraid I haven't any cream... Shall you mind a slice of lemon instead?" Selden is afraid to be sweet, let alone commit with his heart, like Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) by Hawthorne, John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle" by James (1903), and the Prufrock (1917) of T. S. Eliot. The independence and unpredictability of Lily would distance if not frighten off a lot of stronger men, especially when she says as she does to Selden, "You can't possibly think I want to marry you" and "It's stupid of you to make love to me" and "I must have a great deal of money."

Though more discerning than the rigid Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller* (1878) by James, like him Selden misjudges an innocent though reckless girl by categorizing her as a "type" according to convention. He regards her "case" at face value based on the evidence, though he knows enough to distrust the testimony, almost as if she was a potential client: "It was impossible, even with her lovely eyes imploring him, to take a sentimental view of her case." He notes her "imprudences" and "how highly specialized she was." Yet in the end, when she proves too specialized to adapt, he is too specialized in his own inhibited way to acknowledge his love for her even to himself--and he fails her.

The imprudent Lily is seen leaving Selden's rooms not only by a cleaning woman but by Simon Rosedale, who owns the building and represents the monetary basis of society. The building is Georgian in style, aristocratic like the New York society in which wealth secures Rosedale a place despite the ethnic prejudice against him as a Jew. Lily is a natural work of art, making her way by using her beauty and social graces, but she has too little conscious art. She is too natural and spontaneous to conceal her true feelings as people do in society.

She greets Rosedale with a look of "irrepressible annoyance on her face." He sees through her lie--her impulsive gamble--that she has been in the building to see her dressmaker, making it appear that she is hiding an affair, whereas she could have avoided suspicion by telling the truth. Now he could ruin her reputation. This is the first in a series of relatively innocent mistakes--or impulsive gambles--that make her vulnerable. Her lie, her artifice, is an ironic exception to her natural inclination to be too honest for her own good and suggests that she is repressing an attraction to Selden because he is not rich.

2

Lily laments, "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" that "was going to cost her more than she could afford." She gets into trouble by refusing to adapt to her environment--like Daisy Miller; by not using her head to balance her heart--like Hester Prynne; by yielding to her impulses and Romanticism--like Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin. "Hitherto Lily had been undisturbed by scruples," but now she has given Rosedale power over her life. "The worst of it was that she had always snubbed and ignored him." Throughout the story it is ironic how similar Lily is to those she snubs. Both she and Rosedale are outsiders striving for acceptance in high society: "She understood his motives, for her own course was guided by as nice calculations."

No longer playing a maiden in distress, she has selected the shy rich weakling Percy Gryce as "her prey"--"the young man who had promised his mother never to go out in the rain without his overshoes." She invites Percy to sit with her on the train and makes tea for the two of them "with the flavor of Selden's caravan tea on her lips." Lily sets up her easy target with "the pride of a skillful operator." She has him if she wants him, but how confining life would be with Percy is symbolized by the source of his fortune: "a patent device for excluding fresh air from hotels." Her nature rebels "and dangerous theories as to the advisability of yielding to impulse were geminating under the surface of smiling attention which she continued to present to her companion."

The chapter ends when Lily is interrupted by the wealthy Bertha Dorset with her maid, her footman and her dog--pushing her way into the seat beside Lily "like a disembodied spirit who took up a great deal of room." Bertha is the spirit of aristocracy at its worst. She asks Lily for a cigarette and, in an effort to maintain an image of purity in front of Percy, Lily lies again and gets caught again, by implying that she

does not smoke. Bertha implies to Percy that Lily is lying and leans back on her cushions with a malicious smile. This scene prefigures the plot of the novel, as Bertha proceeds in one episode after another to destroy the reputation of a rival beauty without wealth, power or husband.

3

The chapter opens with a reference to bridge at Bellomont, the Trenor estate that represents the pinnacle of New York society. Bellomont is the name of a real aristocratic family and its syllables evoke a beautiful mountain. Lily fails to bridge the gap between her low status and high society by marrying a rich man--or even a working man with access to society like Selden--because she is imprudent. The gambling "passion had grown on her" and she loses at bridge both literally and figuratively.

Lily recognizes Bertha as a rival--they are Good (mostly) and Evil in a moral allegory--yet she underestimates her. She is confident that she will be able to "capture" Percy from Bertha, while envying her for being able to "take a man up and toss him aside as she willed." Under the influence of Selden, Lily does have scruples. Which is why Bertha wins at bridge (in society) while Lily loses, especially to Bertha. "Was it her own fault or that of destiny?" Wharton dramatizes how it is *both*, contrary to the Naturalists--a significant intellectual achievement in this novel.

Lily was conditioned mostly by her mother, who prepared her for high society: She was raised to feel superior, to disdain people who "live like pigs," to exploit her beauty, to marry a rich man and to restore herself to the high social position the family lost when her father went bankrupt. Feeling superior to her crass mother, Lily grew up with sensibility and a desire to surround herself with beautiful things. She is a romantic American girl who like so many, wants to marry a European prince with a castle. She reads popular sentimental fiction.

After her mother dies of disgust at ending up poor and dingy, Lily is taken in by her reclusive old Aunt Julia, who is rich and dingy. "To attempt to bring her into active relation with life was like tugging at a piece of furniture which has been screwed to the floor." With such a mentor, Lily remains fixed in mind where her mother placed her. Now age 29 and anxious to move on, she is feeling like a failure in her hunt for a rich husband she might be able to tolerate and is having "fits of angry rebellion against fate." She considers making an independent life for herself. But then she realizes that she still wants to reach "the bright pinnacles of success," which will require a rich husband.

4

Lily trusts in her friendship with Mrs. Judy Trenor, her hostess at Bellomont. Mrs. Trenor laments the morals of others yet is morally bankrupt herself: "I don't say there's any real harm in Bertha. Only she delights in making people miserable." The priorities of the hostess express the values prevailing in this society, as when she complains about a woman who declined her invitation because her sister was having a baby: "as if that were anything to having a house-party." The lives of rich women, including for awhile Lily's mother, are depicted as entirely consumed by the selfish pursuit of pleasure: "They had a force of negation which eliminated everything beyond their own range of perception."

Lily has decided to join them by marrying Percy--to "soar into that empyrean of security where creditors cannot penetrate." She is so confident, she begins conforming to him in her mind while she neglects to stay physically close to him while Bertha is around. On the terrace at the end of the chapter, Lawrence Selden reappears and approaches her, but as she does throughout the story, Bertha steps between them.

5

To impress Percy, Lily intends to go to the church service on Sunday, an empty ritual to most of those at Bellomont, until she gets carried away comparing Percy to Selden: "It was that comparison which was her undoing." Now she sees herself as choosing a life inside a "great gilt cage" and hears the door clang on her: "In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom." This metaphor limits

determinism to those, unlike Selden, who are trapped by their own natures and choices, like Lily. Selden readjusts Lily's vision of herself and of the Trenors: "How dreary and trivial those people were!" Yet she still intends to marry Percy, though "her course was too purely reasonable not to contain the germs of rebellion."

Distracted by her mood to "impulse and truancy," Lily misses her ride to church (and to marriage), disappointing Percy. She finds Selden in the library, interrupting Bertha's intimate conversation with him. Knowing of their affair and seeing Bertha's effort to revive it, Lily "felt a certain pleasure in prolonging her distress," which must show in her face, further provoking Bertha to revenge. She gambles again by dawdling on her walk to church, forsaking Percy, waiting for Selden in the park (her heart) and hoping he will catch up. On a second reading this can be recognized as synecdoche: a part contains in sum or implies the whole in a holographic sense. The first 5 chapters of the novel contain a number of such moments, prefigurations like epiphanies on a second reading--illuminating elements of an intricate, holistic and prismatic work of art. As Wharton said, "My last page is always latent in my first."

Selden does follow Lily, though he lags behind, and she confirms that she has been waiting for him. As they walk together toward the church (potential marriage) they pass Percy coming in the opposite direction. Feeling snubbed, Percy now sees Lily with Selden. She pays no attention to Percy and continues her intercourse with Selden, who invites her off the path to walk in the park. The chapter is opened, emphasizing that each has free will and the future is for them to choose—contrary to the Naturalists who deny free will. Lily has already chosen Selden over Percy, romantic impulse over calculation, Nature over artifice, heart over head—but she remains divided.

6

Walking in the park with Selden, Lily follows her natural desire but is said to have "no real intimacy with nature." She projects her mood as romantics do. Her perception of Selden is limited by her values, as she admires him most of all for projecting "as distinct a sense of superiority as the richest man she had ever met." Selden's true superiority is moral. In a reversal of Victorian gender roles he, the male, becomes Lily's conscience. He attributes more virtue to her than she has displayed, sees her as superior to the aristocrats and brings out the best in her, which ironically contributes to her downfall. At the same time, he is following her lead in courtship rather than trying to win her, which also contributes to her downfall, and to his, in the moral sense.

While "something throbbed between them," Lily asks, "Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?" When she is so bold as to ask if he wants to marry her, he says no, "but perhaps I should if you did!" adding that he would be willing to take that risk, stepping as close to commitment as he ever does. They were "like adventurous children who have climbed to a forbidden height from which they discovered a new world."

This will prove to be the height of their romance. A passing motor car reminds Lily that she must protect her reputation: "Let us go down!"--ending the moment. Selden recovers his grip on "the actual" and tells Lily he took no risk in his near proposal of marriage because, as he implies, she has made it clear that she wants to marry a rich man. "Let us go down," he agrees. And they do, for the rest of the story.

7

Judy Trenor, the voice of society, criticizes Lily for dropping Percy and going after Selden—"interfering" with Bertha Dorset's relationship with him: "If you had a grudge against Bertha it was a stupid time to show it... She has a right to retaliate." Lily has conformed so much in her mind that it "was the voice of her own conscience which spoke to her through Mrs. Trenor's reproachful accents." Unlikely though the comparison seems, Lily and Huckleberry Finn both are conditioned by a corrupt society to such an extent they are both in bondage to a false "conscience."

Bertha Dorset poisons Percy against Lily, whose gambling debts have made her vulnerable: "She could not remain at Bellomont without playing bridge." She gambles again when she picks up Judy's lecherous

husband Gus at the station, flatters him, confesses to her debts and appeals to him as a damsel in distress. When he offers to make an investment for her, “her hopes dilated like lamps in a fog”—an example of Impressionist symbolism that conveys Lily’s lack of forethought. She allows the loutish Gus—“a coarse dull man”—to rest his hand on hers, using all her artifice and calculating how to use him. She disregards “the claim at which his manner hinted.” When she “made a tour of inspection in her own mind there were certain closed doors she did not open.”

8

At times Lily is led by her affluent friend Carry Fisher, who has set an immoral example: “always getting Gus to speculate for her, and I’m sure she never pays when she loses.” In contrast, Lily condescends to her poor friend Gerty Farish, a model of humble virtues, seeing Gerty as dingy and stupid. Lily longs for a life as perfect as a jewel to “form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness.” Her next encounter with Selden is interrupted by Gus and Rosedale, who infers that she may be having an affair with Gus, while Selden is surprised by her acquaintance with Rosedale. It was a moment “for the quick, bridging over of gaps,” but “Lily felt herself powerless to exert her usual arts.” At the end of the chapter, a door closes behind her when she learns that Percy has announced his engagement to someone else.

9

The house of Aunt Julia is “as dreary as a tomb”—in contrast to the house of mirth at Bellomont. Lily sustains her sense of superiority by making harsh judgments of the cleaning woman. Then a cleaning woman from the Benedict, where Selden lives, places in her hands some morally dirty letters from Bertha to Selden, giving her power over her adversary. Lily proves her essential decency in being morally repelled by the letters—recoiling by taste, training and “inherited scruples.” She buys them nevertheless because “Selden would wish the letters rescued.” Then she is so provoked by Aunt Julia’s account of Bertha Dorset’s manipulations, she decides to keep rather than burn them.

10

On display at the opera, Lily enjoys “showing her beauty in public—lifted to a height apart by that incommunicable grace which is the bodily counterpart of genius.” This “height apart” is independent, in contrast to the height she experienced with Selden. When she gets invited to the Dorset estate, Lily feels welcomed again to the height of society, now armed with the letters and empowered to destroy her worst enemy. She feels at the height of her powers, but she is naive to believe Bertha has forgiven her. Also the Dorsets are a step down from the Trenors, who are at the social peak represented by Bellomont. Lily is already in social decline.

11

Rosedale grows richer and despite her clear aversion to him he sees Lily as having “precisely the complementary qualities needed to round off his social personality.” She has been conditioned against Rosedale by the ethnic prejudice of the society she wants to join and also dislikes his personality and lack of refinement as a matter of personal taste. Her nature thwarts this social opportunity. She feels superior to Rosedale. In her household, her feeling of superiority has “mortally offended” her rival for an inheritance from Aunt Julia, turning Grace into another enemy: “Grace Stepney’s mind was like a kind of moral flypaper, to which the buzzing items of gossip were drawn by a fatal attraction, and where they hung fast in the toils of an inexorable memory.”

Grace, ironically named, implies to Aunt Julia that Lily is having an affair with Gus Trenor, in Julia’s view “a fat stupid man almost old enough to be her father.” Grace repeats the gossip, saying “Gus Trenor pays her bills” and her gambling debts. Julia reacts to the shock of this news by validating the injustice to Lily: “However unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made.”

By now Lily is becoming “fatalistic,” surrendering her free will to a predestined course “from one wrong turning to another.” She invites herself to a party at Bellomont, finds that she is in disfavor and leaves “conscious of having failed in every purpose.”

Thanks to her friend Carry Fisher, Lily is invited to a party at the Welly Brys, another step down, but an opportunity for Lily to redeem her self-esteem by participating in a tableaux vivant, posing as “Mrs. Lloyd” in a famous aristocratic portrait by Reynolds. The audience responds with a unanimous tribute to the “loveliness of Lily Bart.” Among them Selden’s perspective is Platonic: Lily transcends her trivial environment and manifests an “eternal harmony.” Like an ancient Greek sculptor he sees the ideal in her, but like a Greek tragedian he also sees that this ideal will be destroyed: “In the long moment before the curtain fell, he had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life.”

Later when he leads Lily into another garden, she appeals to him once again as a damsel in distress: “You promised to help me.” His reply that the only way he can help her is to love her implies that he does. She turns to him “with the motion of a flower” and “their lips touched.” This is the only kiss between them in the story and Selden does not respond with passion. Before she leaves him there, she asks him to love her but not to tell her, a prohibition that can only reinforce his inhibition. She slips away through an arch of boughs that is “reduplicated in the arch of a starry sky” and disappears into the bright room beyond, a movement from Nature and potential transcendence back into the artifice of society. At the end of the chapter, the crude Gus Trenor, appreciating Lily only for her figure while complaining about the bad taste of the new rich, embodies the vulgar pretense of the society Lily is choosing.

Lily decides to end her relationship with Selden, “since she could not marry him.” Feeling strung along for too long, Gus corners her and demands more return on his investment. She escapes “with inward loathing,” feeling compromised and isolated now: “Lily had no heart to lean on” and turns for support to humble Gerty Farish, her antithesis.

Gerty is a model of self-sacrifice who exposes Lily to poverty and awakens pity in her for the first time, an awareness of other people worse off than herself. Yet Lily remains self-absorbed. For his part “Selden was in the state of impassioned self-absorption that the first surrender to love produces.” At his club, he encounters Gus and declines his invitation to dinner, sickened by having heard “this man’s name coupled with Lily’s!” He scorns this society—“the ugliness, the pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul—“

Selden relates to the lower class as represented by his cousin Gerty and feels “a throb of pride that Lily could trim her own hats.” He thinks “The fact that her life never satisfied her proved that she was made for better things...than...the conventional rich marriage which she had been taught to consider the sole end of existence.” But then, walking past the town house of Gus Trenor, he is disillusioned by what appears to be Lily with Gus, silhouetted against hallway light. Though “appearances are deceptive,” he allows his judgment to be determined by society, no longer able to “separate the woman he knew from the vulgar estimate of her.” For “he was, as much as Lily, the victim of his environment.”

Wharton is especially realistic in her depiction of Gerty the moral exemplar when she gets jealous to the point of hating Lily: “It seemed incredible that Lily should wish to be Selden’s wife. Lily might be incapable of marrying for money, but she was equally incapable of living without it.” Lily melts Gerty’s hatred away when she appears at her door confessing to her faults, to her pride and to keeping bad company--in effect rejecting society just as Selden would have her do. It is Gerty who redeems Lily for awhile, proving her goodness of heart by not only forgiving her rival for Selden, but embracing her and even sharing her bed with her.

Lily approaches Aunt Julia for help in repaying her debt to Gus and the old lady shuts her lips “with the snap of a purse closing against a beggar.” Julia declares her disgraced and turns for solace to Grace. Lily now feels “shut in with her dishonor” and once again hopes to be rescued by Selden: “Now his love was her only hope... For love was what she needed--it would take the glow of passion to weld together the shattered fragments of her self-esteem.” However, inhibited by her words and conduct, Selden has yet to display any passion.

Worse, now disillusioned, he does not come in response to her note. Instead, it is Rosedale who appears and offers her a bed of roses: “The clink of Mr. Rosedale’s millions had a faintly seductive note,” but he is so repugnant compared to Selden, she gambles again and asks Rosedale to give her time to answer his proposal. By the time she understands that Selden is never coming, she feels old and defeated and hopeless, yet still cannot accept Rosedale. More vulnerable than ever, Lily seems to be rescued by an invitation from Bertha Dorset to go on a cruise.

Book II, Chapter 1

Lawrence Selden, distanced from Lily in Monte Carlo, feels “grateful for rescue from a dangerous accident.” Then Carry Fisher tells him Lily is anchored just offshore on the Dorset yacht: “At first I thought Lily was going to play her cards well this time, but there are rumors that Bertha is jealous of her success here and at Cannes.” Selden checks an impulse to flee: “It was ridiculous to be flying like an emotional coward from an infatuation his reason had conquered.”

Still infatuated, however, he sees her “poised on the brink of a chasm, with one foot advanced to assert her unconsciousness that the ground was failing her.” The unreliable poet Ned Silverton (silver-tongued), who is having an affair with Bertha, tells Selden that Lily is playing bridge again and flirting with George Dorset, that Bertha knows it but is too good a friend to object or to criticize Lily. Throughout the novel, Impressionist techniques are used in speeches by minor characters to convey exposition and to dramatize how people make judgments based on their biases and subjective impressions. For another example, Lord Hubert laments to Selden that Lily is not being guided by her Aunt Julia—“a diffuse and innocent person who was great at bridging over chasms.”

2

Oblivious to all this, Lily is enjoying her cruise as a “romantic adventure” with the hope of “some happy change of fortune to sustain her; and meanwhile life was gay and beautiful and easy,” as in a floating house of mirth. She does not miss Selden: “Time and change seemed so completely to have relegated him to his proper distance.” Monte Carlo is “of all places, the one where the human bond is least close.” Moved by good intentions, Lily naively shifts her sympathy from jealous George Dorset to Bertha, giving her an opportunity to send a telegram to Selden asking for help in saving the Dorset marriage. The treacherous Bertha reveals why she invited Lily on the cruise when she shifts away blame from her affair with Ned by accusing Lily of scandalous conduct with her husband George: “You carried your imprudence too far.” Once again, sharp irony defines the moral situation. In this episode, Lily’s greatest imprudent gamble was trusting her enemy Bertha.

3

Lily, ironically, is the one trying to build up “the crumbling structure of appearances” in the Dorset marriage: “To be of use was what she honestly wanted; and not for her own sake but for the Dorsets’.” Selden does not know what to think: “In interpreting Miss Bart’s state of mind, so many alternative readings were possible; and one of them, in Selden’s troubled mind, took the ugly form suggested by Mrs. Fisher”—that Lily is trying to steal George from Bertha.

Selden, knowing Bertha well, seeks out Lily and begs her to leave the yacht for her own good. In response, her face lined with “the sharpness of a tragic mask,” Lily refuses, declaring her loyalty to Bertha, who is still her enemy and represents aristocracy at its worst. The ironic tragedy is that, like a conscience, Selden brings out the best in Lily and her increased goodness destroys her. He himself rejects her in his heart: “His real detachment from her had taken place... He saw her definitely divided from him by the crudeness of a choice which seemed to deny the very differences he felt in her.” Among the ironies of the

situation is the fact that Selden himself is guilty for such a “crudeness of choice” in having had an affair with Bertha, making him seem an opportunist, the stereotype of a lawyer.

At dinner in a Monte Carlo restaurant, Selden no longer sees Lily as in need of help, until Bertha banishes her from the yacht, making a scene in public, destroying Lily’s reputation and shocking everyone. Lily responds with grace and a “pale bravery,” once again turning to Selden: “You promised to see me to my cab.” Selden’s feelings for her are “blocked by the fear of committing a blunder.” T. S. Eliot may have borrowed from this portrayal of male weakness in creating J. Alfred Prufrock just as Wharton may have been influenced by James’ portrayal of John Marcher, who is too self-absorbed and timid to appreciate the woman in his life, in “The Beast in the Jungle.”

Lily now moves before Selden “like some deposed princess” cast out on the street. When he says, with more passion than he has shown before, “I must ask you--you must obey me,” it is a pity he does not risk what he has called a “sentimental attachment” and save the poor woman. Instead he dumps her in a hotel with the reluctant Stepneys who will kick her out in the morning: “She leaves tomorrow by the early train.” The train image recalls the first setting of the novel and suggests that, having failed to get anywhere, Lily is now headed for the end of the line, due, as put in the next chapter, to a “train of consequences.”

4

Her social death is followed by her monetary demise--the end of all her security--when Aunt Julia disinherits Lily except for just enough to pay off her debt to Gus Trenor, leaving everything else to Grace. Julia changed her will only six weeks before she died, implicitly after hearing the false rumor, probably from Grace, that Lily tried to steal Bertha’s husband. Once again Lily gets moral support from Gerty Farish, deterministic now in her defeat: “Why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose--in the way I was brought up and the things I was taught to care for.” And yet, influenced by Selden, she has transcended her conditioning by becoming a better person--more ethical, self-sacrificial and capable of love.

Lily becomes more sympathetic as she admits to her faults and copes with adversity: “Borne forward on the wave of her buoyant grace”--true grace in contrast to Grace. When she realizes that Judy Trenor has rejected her, “Lily had the doomed sense of the castaway who has signaled in vain to fleeing sails.” Yet she is honorable, resolving again to pay her debt to the dishonorable Gus. Having not yet received her meager inheritance, she begs Grace for a loan, only to get blamed for Julia’s death. Grace lies to cover her selfishness, like Bertha.

5

“Gerty’s a trump, and worth all the rest of us put together,” says Carry Fisher. Nick yells to Gatsby, “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.” Very different characters, but Fitzgerald may have borrowed the line from Wharton, a writer he revered. Lily’s next step in descent is her association with the Gormers, whose milieu is, ironically, superior: “only a flamboyant copy of her own world” but more egalitarian, with “greater good-nature, less rivalry, and a fresher capacity for enjoyment.” Traveling with the Gormers all the way to Alaska is high adventure and suggests how far Lily is now removed from high society, that she has moved closer to Nature and to Gerty.

According to her nature, however, conditioned by her aristocratic upbringing, Lily is a social flower, requiring an artificial environment. She is urged to marry by Carrie Fisher, who suggests George Dorset and the highly successful Rosedale, whose name identifies him with a place for flowers, though Lily finds him crass. “Much as she disliked Rosedale, she no longer absolutely despised him.” By now she is realistic enough to understand that she has lost her capacity to further his social ascent. “What if she made him marry her for love, now that he had no other reason for marrying her?”

6

When the miserable George Dorset makes himself available to Lily, “Revenge and rehabilitation might be hers at a stroke.” Yet she refuses to reveal the evidence she has against Bertha and turns him down, disproving the rumor that Bertha spread to ruin her. Lily struggles against the temptation to accept George

as a “peril” that would destroy her self-esteem, dishonor her and involve Selden in a scandal. For “material well-being,” she “must try to marry Rosedale.” By now she is able to see him as “kind in his gross, unscrupulous, rapacious way, the way of the predatory creature with his mate.” Carry Fisher tells Lily that Bertha is still “insinuating horrors” about her because she is afraid of her and “the only thing to save you from Bertha is to marry somebody else.”

7

On a walk with Rosedale, she accepts his proposal of marriage. He is in love with her, but acceptance in society is his higher priority and Lily has lost her social value. He will marry her only if she compromises her integrity by using the letters to blackmail Bertha into helping Rosedale to advance in society: “She saw that the essential baseness of the act lay in its freedom from risk.” Not a gamble this time--a sure thing. Yet she turns him down, as he surmises angrily, to protect Selden.

8

However, “there had been nothing in her training to develop any continuity of moral strength.” She turns again to Gerty, saying, “I’ve had to take up bridge again.” Though reduced to working as a private secretary, she is “determined” to identify herself with the upper class for “as long as the illusion could be maintained.” Gerty persuades Selden to make an attempt to help Lily, although her association with the Gormers has “chilled his desire to see her.” By now, “Every step she took seemed in fact to carry her farther from the region where, once or twice, he and she had met for an illumined moment.” This was the nearest they come to spiritual transcendence, this brief experience of natural attraction, recognition and interplay that might have bloomed like a Lily into love.

By now, however, Selden is afraid of her. “It was much simpler for him to judge Miss Bart by her habitual conduct than by the rare deviations from it” and “he returned to the conventional view of her.” Like Winterbourne in relation to Daisy Miller, in the end Selden is as unjust as the society he criticizes. He betrays the woman he might have loved and he is to some extent responsible for her death. He is an empiricist lacking heart and intuition, like Giovanni in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” by Hawthorne. When he learns that Lily has gone to work for the disreputable Mrs. Hatch, he is disgusted to see her lower herself both socially and according to his own idealization of her personal qualities.

9

Lily does not welcome Selden, she is bitter and even near hating him: “His desertion had wounded sensibilities far below the surface of her pride.” At this point, “The situation between them was one which could have been cleared up only by a sudden explosion of feeling; and their whole training and habit of mind were against the chances of such an explosion.” Selden makes a declaration to her that is traditional for the hero in romances: “You are to let me take you away from here.” However, he does not intend to carry her off to a marital happy ending, he plans to dump her off at Gerty’s place, unemployed and without prospects. He assumes that she will have an income even after he learns that her entire inheritance will go to pay off her debt. Their quarrel culminates when Lily defies Selden by declaring that she is going after what she wants: “Don’t give me up; I may still do credit to my training!” Since her training was in how to marry a rich man, this is another rejection of Selden.

10

Influenced by Selden nonetheless, only a few weeks after his urging she quits Mrs. Hatch to avoid involvement in an unethical transaction. “Once again, Lily had withdrawn from an ambiguous situation in time to save her self-respect, but too late for public vindication.” She fails at Regina’s millinery for “lack of early training” and shares “the degradation of a New York street in the last stages of decline from fashion to commerce.” Her own incremental decline is characteristic of victims in Naturalist novels, which typically emphasize external forces of determinism. *The House of Mirth* is exceptional for its complexity in dramatizing *internal* forces--human psychology and the interplay of free will and determinism.

Having quit Mrs. Hatch to avoid an unethical transaction, Lily now stoops to a different unethical transaction by copying the prescription of Mrs. Hatch in order to obtain a drug. At this point in her degradation, she encounters Rosedale again. She tries to cleanse herself of Bertha's smears by telling him how exactly she became indebted to Gus Trenor. Lily is sincere with Rosedale for the first time and they part friends. "It was of course impossible to accept a loan from Rosedale." She takes the drug in the hope of renewing her strength, in order to resist the temptation to blackmail Bertha with the letters so that Rosedale will marry her.

11

She "had neither the aptitude nor the moral constancy to remake her life on new lines; to become a worker among workers... She was perhaps less to blame than she believed. Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock." The phrase "perhaps less to blame than she believed" affirms free will by attributing some blame to Lily, while it also mitigates the blame by taking into account the determinism of her inherited nature, her early training and her social environment. As a Realist, Wharton acknowledges with "perhaps" the elusive variables of psychology, environment and chance that make a more definitive analysis impossible.

Lily finally succumbs to temptation, decides to use the letters and sets out for the Dorset townhouse. However, when she nears Selden's place, "She seemed suddenly to see her action as he would see it...and that...to attain her end, she must trade on his name, and profit by a secret of his past, chilled her blood with shame." Inwardly she accepts the blame for their estrangement and abandons her plan to blackmail Bertha, rejecting dishonor and society. Fatefully, as if turning to him for validation, she turns instead to see Selden, "with a light in his window."

12

Lily apologizes to Selden with "an intense longing to dispel the cloud of misunderstanding that hung between them." She makes a "confession" as if to a priest, that she left Mrs. Hatch because he told her to. He makes an effort to "bridge over an awkward moment," which jars her as she sees him avoiding "the heart of the situation" and lingering on "the conventional outskirts of word-play and evasion."

Selden is embarrassed and withdrawn. "Such a situation can be saved only by an immediate outburst of feeling; and on Selden's side the determining impulse was still lacking... She saw herself forever shut out from Selden's inmost self." In contrast, Lily attributes her moral salvation to Selden as her conscience, who "kept me from mistakes; kept me from really becoming what many people have thought me.... Some women are strong enough to be good by themselves, but I needed the help of your belief in me.... You did love me for a moment, and it helped me." He had predicted at Bellomont that a selfish life married to a dull rich man in a house of mirth could never satisfy her—"and I was ashamed to admit to myself that I could." As her conscience, he shames her into becoming a good person. In doing so, he both saves and dooms her.

During her social decline, Lily individuates through a wilderness of suffering and becomes self-reliant and whole. She wants Selden to "understand that she had saved herself whole from the seeming ruin of her life." She leaves behind with him her old self—"the Lily Bart you knew"—and moves on like a newborn soul. Lily has resigned herself to reality: She can "no longer call to life" Selden's love for her. "But something lived between them also, and leaped up in her like an imperishable flame: it was the love his love had kindled, the passion of her soul for his." The term *soul* rather than *heart* elevates her state above popular romance to spiritual love. Moved by love transcending herself, she discretely drops the letters into his fire. The pity is that Selden has no inner fire. She kisses his forehead as he bows, which contrasts their states of grace.

13

Lily is "still treading the buoyant ether which emanates from the high moments of life." Her spiritual high moment is burning the letters, which is also burning her bridge to high society. Her tragedy is that to save herself, she must destroy herself.

Overtaken by loneliness in Bryant Park, she encounters a young woman named Nettie Struther, one of the poor girls she helped when she did volunteer work with Gerty. Though still frail, Nettie is full of “hope and energy.” She has a husband now named George and a child. Throughout the novel, high society is depicted as devoid of children, a world of artifice removed from Nature, the source of the deepest happiness. Nellie is a common girl with lots of heart who overcomes adversity, begins a new life and now is fulfilled by her family life: “I’d never have had the heart to go on working just for myself.” This capacity for love transcending the self now connects the two women, but the strong Nettie is the opposite of the weak Lily. Just as Selden’s belief in her made Lily a better person, Nellie and George make each other better: “The man’s faith as well as the woman’s courage.” Like Hawthorne, in the Victorian tradition Wharton affirms marriage as an institution that can improve both genders and society, setting her at odds with radical Feminists.

Likewise unpopular today, in an age of women pursuing status in the workplace as avidly as Lily does in her society, is the high value Wharton gives to motherhood and nurturing. When she holds Nettie’s baby, Lily comes in contact with aspects of her nature that make her feel weak, “as though the child entered into her and became a part of herself,” another image of rebirth, though also of vulnerability and incapacity. After holding the baby in Nellie’s place, she feels “stronger and happier.”

This cannot last and she is soon overtaken by a “deeper loneliness” and “inner destitution.” In contrast to Nellie, she feels “there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life... Her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nellie Struther’s kitchen. The poor little working girl who had found strength to gather up the fragments of her life and build herself a shelter with them seemed to Lily to have reached the central truth of existence.” Wharton affirms the humble over the glamorous and turns the social value structure upsidedown, as do Melville, Twain and Faulkner.

Lily sees that “Selden had twice been ready to stake his faith on Lily Bart; but the third trial had been too severe for his endurance.” Now “she dreaded the fall from the height of her last moment with [him]... She felt an intense longing to prolong, to perpetuate, the momentary exaltation of her spirit. If only life could end now--end on this tragic yet sweet vision of lost possibilities.” This death wish, in the romantic tradition of “Ode to a Nightingale” by John Keats, underlies her mood when she takes the drug overdose.

She sustains her spiritual elevation by writing out a check in repayment to Gus Trenor, hearing the rumble of the “elevated” through the hush. The effect of increasing a dose of the sleeping drug chloral “was incalculable” and “she did not, in truth, consider the question very closely.” Her death by accidental overdose parallels her life, in particular her tendency to act on impulse. She does not destroy herself consciously on purpose, yet she is responsible. She has free will, yet her fate seems inevitable. This paradox is explained by the Calvinist Jonathan Edwards in his treatise on free will (1754).

Lily dies imagining that she is holding Nellie’s child, maternal and peaceful, with a desire to tell Selden “some word she had found that should make life clear between them.” In the next chapter that word implicitly is *love*. She resists death briefly, “feeling that she ought to keep awake on account of the baby.” Nellie’s baby “became a part of herself” and makes her feel reborn, but it is also a wish fulfillment representing the baby she will never have with Selden.

Selden “launched himself on uncharted seas of emotion.” He sets off “boyishly” to see Lily as if he too is reborn. He had “found the word he meant to say to her,” but he has overcome his inhibition and discovered love too late. He finds her lying dead. She is not in harsh direct light, but in a “tempered golden” light through the blind, tempered by grief and love. “There never had been more than a little impalpable barrier between them--and yet he had suffered it to keep them apart!” He has “failed to reach the height of his opportunity.”

The tragic perversity of life in this story--especially unfortunate timing--is comparable to the pessimistic vision of Thomas Hardy: “He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart.” Selden blames both “fate” and his own “spiritual fastidiousness” for losing Lily. Like her, he consoles himself by

holding on to their “moment of love,” their “fleeting victory over themselves.” Selden notices how little luxury is left among the few belongings in her room, “which showed what her other renunciations must have cost.” One day perhaps Rosedale will reveal to Selden how much Lily sacrificed for him by not using Bertha’s letters--but probably not.

Michael Hollister (2015)

Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and, later, *The Age of Innocence* (1920) belong to a category of novels known as the "novel of manners." Aiming to describe the conventions, habits, and ideology of a given society in all of its complexity, the novel of manners usually presents one character's efforts to fight against restrictive rules and traditions, with varying degrees of success.

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