

Halmstad University

Monique Johansson

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Supervisor: Maria Proitsaki

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Edith Wharton's View of Women: Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*

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## Introduction

*The House of Mirth* was the best-selling novel of 1905. It criticised the upper class society of New York in the early 1900s, a patriarchal society where women were subordinated and discouraged from achieving anything beyond a proper marriage. At a time of rapid change, as old Victorian traditions collided with new beginnings, of a modern world, Edith Wharton explored the changing worlds of women (Showalter 317). Therefore, the novel was controversial. It was also considered a social satire.

Wharton and her character Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* challenged the upper class society of New York by breaking social rules of conduct. In her work, Wharton, who became one of America's greatest writers and the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, broke the mould for women writers and wrote about life outside the domestic realm. Even so, she worked hard to be considered as an equal to male writers. In fact, she was troubled with her career as a writer and her position in society as a woman. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton explored gender roles and criticised society's expectations of women through the voice of Lily.

In the upper class social circles of New York in the beginning of the previous century, there was an economic, social, and psychological oppression of women. Living in a world of rules of conduct, Lily Bart, the protagonist of the novel, felt suffocated and unable to escape. In a context where women married for money and social position, she too had to marry a wealthy man to keep her position in society and support her expensive habits. Lily was, however, unwilling to marry without love *and* money, which meant she was still on the marriage market at the age of 29. In this perspective, she exemplified a woman who tried to rebel and resist the constrictions of patriarchal culture. At the same time, Lily became a victim of this society,

“emblematic of its essential cruelty and contradictions” (Benert 3), since, unable to fulfil its expectations of women, she was ultimately led to a tragic death.

In this essay I plan to show how Wharton, through Lily, criticised society, and more specifically its expectations of women. My thesis is that Wharton and her character Lily exposed the upper class society of New York, and its ruthlessness, by voicing a woman’s point of view. Therefore, the main purpose here is to reveal the complexity of the lives women led in order to fulfil society’s expectations and I thereby plan to explore what it was like living in a world governed by strict rules of conduct. Ultimately, I hope that, by exposing the hardships of Lily’s life along with the consequences of her misconduct, my analysis will contribute to a better understanding of the novel in its social setting.

I plan to approach the novel through the lens of Feminism and New Historicism. A feminist approach would unveil the economic, social, and psychological pressures that women lived under in New York during the early 1900s. Through the lens of New Historicism, I will examine how Wharton herself viewed her contemporary upper class society. New Historicism shows how “authors and their works of literature are products of their culture” (Griffith 432).

It is important after all that the novel was written at a time where while men went to work and participated in society, women were confined to the home and their role was limited to household matters. To have them conform, from a young age, women were to be kept quiet and docile. Thus social norms favoured men and women were considered of less importance; they had “less power, status, and respect than men” (Griffith 217). In literature as well as in culture in general, by portraying women as domestic and simple, female stereotypes were born, and in turn women had to live up to those stereotypes.

However, in Victorian England, women were opposing “traditional views about female sexuality and gender roles” and were fighting for “improved social rights in employment and education” (Moran 124). As Maureen Moran points out, marriage was “a stifling emotional straitjacket more likely to create female neurosis than to relieve it” (124). At the same time the rebellion to the constrictions of patriarchal society in literature led to a new way of writing, also known as “New Woman fiction.” This “rejected conventional respectability, embraced economic, sexual and educational independence, and declined to consider marriage and maternity as the only natural route to fulfilment” (Moran 125). Still, in most “New Woman” novels, the outcome was tragic and the heroine committed suicide; there were simply no other options for “rebellious, freedom-loving women in a confining culture” (Moran 125).

Although Wharton was American, she was influenced by the cultural currents in England. Similarly to her Victorian “sisters,” Wharton criticised society and its set expectations. In her novel, she targeted the upper class society of New York, by exposing the protagonist’s endless struggles, and showing how she was finally rejected and left to die alone. In line with Victorian women writers, the writer challenged thus the patriarchal culture of her time and its mercilessness towards women.

In this analysis, I will try to link the novel to the American society in the early 1900s. This was a time when old Victorian traditions were slowly disappearing as a new modern world was appearing. How Wharton viewed her world is of interest here exactly because she was very much influenced by England and “New Woman fiction.” The novel was about a rebellious woman with an upper class background, leading a life very similar to Wharton’s.

## 1. Wharton's Life

Lily Bart's world was very much the world of Edith Wharton. Wharton, like Lily, was expected to be feminine and pretty, "certainly not to think of herself as intelligent, creative, or sexual" (Showalter 314). Yet, she loved reading books and began writing at the age of eleven (Showalter 315), and that although she was brought up with an "almost pagan worship of physical beauty" (Showalter 314).

Still, Wharton's passion for reading and writing was considered vulgar by her mother. In particular she was appalled by the contents of the first novel her daughter wrote, which began with the following: "oh, how do you do Mrs. Brown? If only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing room" (Showalter 315). To start with, as Showalter points out, a woman's drawing room was always tidy (315). Moreover, "nice girls did not write novels" (Kaplan 4). Lastly, "successful women writers were the worst examples of vulgarity" (Showalter 315). Wharton was taught by her mother the generally expected subordination to men along with the general attitude towards women writers. But instead of listening and obeying, Wharton rebelled against her mother and against "the social confinement of women to passive domestic roles" (Kaplan 1) by becoming a writer and trying to create a life of her own. At a time when most American women writers were still writing about their work at home, "obeying national expectations about womanly submission and domestic obligation" (Showalter 312), Wharton wrote against a life within the domestic realm. She viewed men and women as equals and wrote a novel about an opinionated woman instead of a man.

## 2. Lily Bart

Lily was a troubled young woman living in an utterly controlling society. She was troubled because like other women of her class she was expected to marry, not for love, but for money. This meant that Lily was in search of a rich husband. But although she was in need of money, Lily was unwilling to marry without love and as a result she felt torn between her vocation and desire. In fact, as Sapora points out, Lily struggled between “a dependent and an independent self” (18). Yet, in order to live in this kind of world, she had to “accept its definition of her and repress her individual self” (Sapora 18).

This was a time when women were valued “as ornaments” (Sapora 18) and in the novel Lily was also viewed in that light. She was “brought up to be ornamental” (Wharton 248) and taught one thing in life, to marry a man of wealth and social class. The protagonist’s mother, Mrs Bart, had raised Lily with the beliefs that “whatever it cost, one must have a good cook” and be “decently dressed” (Wharton 27). Following the same line of thinking, when her family lost their money, Mrs Bart promised her that her looks would help Lily retrieve the loss: “but you’ll get it all back – you’ll get it all back, with your face...” (Wharton 25). Mrs. Bart obviously appreciated Lily as an “ornament” and entertained the idea that her beauty would someday charm a rich man. In fact, a woman’s beauty was of great importance in upper class society in general. This became obvious also in relation to Simon Rosedale, a wealthy business man looking to climb the social ladder, who was in search of a wife, an “ornament,” “to make all the other women feel small,” a woman “who’ll hold her head higher the more diamonds I put on it” (Wharton 157). He was looking for a woman like Lily, who was fashioned to “adorn and delight” (Wharton 264) and would be able to help him achieve social status.

However, when having to work for a living, Lily's mental and physical health, and her beauty, began to deteriorate. Her worries could be seen on her face, "the lines of worry and disappointment and failure! Every sleepless night left a new one" (Wharton 233). In Lily's mind, the appearance of lines and wrinkles was more upsetting than losing her place in society, while her loyal friend Gerty Farish could sum up the troubling reasons why her health was deteriorating:

You know how dependent she has always been on ease and luxury – how she has hated what was shabby and ugly and uncomfortable. She can't help it – she was brought up with those ideas, and has never been able to find her way out of them. But now all the things she cared for have been taken from her and the people who taught her to care for them have abandoned her too. (Wharton 237)

Although Lily would now count as working class, her preoccupation with beauty did not belong there. Her beauty belonged in upper class society.

As a woman and an "ornament," Lily had no education and had previously to her misfortune never worked a day. She was then "delimited by the lack of formal or classical education, and constrained by the social and aesthetic norms of her day" (Kolodny 48). Lily did not go to school, instead she was trained to be "the highly specialised product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock" (Wharton 164). This meant that she knew very little, except how to look and act as a beautiful objectified individual. Therefore, she struggled when working for a living: "it was now two months later, and she was still being rebuked for her inability to sew spangles on a hat-frame. As she returned to her work she heard a titter pass down the tables. She knew she was an object of criticism and

amusement to other work-women” (Wharton 249). Her inability to sew and overall lack of skills made her feel inferior, which was in turn embarrassing, especially as all she wanted was to be treated as an equal to the other women:

Lily had no desire that they should recognise any social difference in her; but she had hoped to be received as their equal and perhaps before long to show herself their superior by a special deftness of touch, and it was humiliating to find that, after two months of drudgery, she still betrayed her lack of early training. (Wharton 250)

Despite her upper class upbringing and experience of all things beautiful, Lily thus came to suffer that she was taught nothing while growing up. However, she also realised that “by respecting society’s expectations of women, female development was inhibited” (Goodman 151), which was an important realisation, because in order to grow and develop as a person she had to resist the constrictions of society.

Beyond her beauty, Lily’s most valued asset was her self-control. She only expressed her feelings by a “touch of her hand or a trembling smile over a cigarette” (Sapora 13). This was mostly because of the “social restrictions” (Goodman 148) governing her upper class context. Self-control was important, as when abandoned it was a signal that one had fallen to a lower status. However, when living poor and lonely became too much for Lily, she broke down crying: “she did not weep easily, and the long habit of self-control reasserted itself, though she was still too tremulous to speak” (Wharton 268). By explaining her current situation to her friend Selden, Lily tried to make sense of her tears:

I have tried hard – but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or

a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? (Wharton 270)

Lily's sudden lack of self-control was thereby linked to her loss of social status.

At the same time, Lily's long habit of self-discipline was stifling as it controlled her: she loved Selden but was unable to express her true feelings to him. The closest Lily came to declaring her love to Selden was that she talked about their walk at Bellomont:

I wanted to tell you that I have never forgotten the things you said to me at Bellomont, and that sometimes – sometimes when I seemed farthest from remembering them – they have helped me, and kept me from making mistakes; kept me from really becoming what many people have thought of me. (Wharton 269)

At Bellomont, Lily and Selden came very close to confessing their love to one another, but were interrupted. Although their feelings were mutual by this stage in the novel, Lily's habit of not expressing herself kept her from love and happiness with the only man she ever truly loved. Her habit of self-discipline along with the realisation of "a marriage's necessity and its impossibility" (Goodman 154) ultimately meant she would never marry, which contributed to her odd fortune.

Living in upper class society was a constant challenge for Lily. Since her inner self did not agree with society's expectations of women, she was often confused and for that reason also sometimes misunderstood by her social circle. Towards the end of the novel, her uncertainty ultimately led to a rejection by her friends. Yet, instead of verifying their reasons for rejecting Lily, Wharton ridiculed them.

### 3. Lily's Vocation

In the society Wharton wrote about, girls were neither encouraged to marry for love nor to live an independent life. Women, were inferior to men and like children they “were expected to be seen but not heard – or at any rate not listened to seriously” (Sapora 13). However, in the novel, Lily wanted more from life. In fact, she longed for independence and equality.

While dealing with Lily's desire for independence, the author points to the fact that although marriage was a “vocation” for women, it was an option for men (Sapora 14). Lily's friend Selden could pick and choose as he liked while she, with regards to marriage, had “to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance” as if she was “going through an intricate dance, where one misstep would throw her hopelessly out of time” (Wharton 42). Selden had moreover the option to choose “personal freedom” instead of marriage; he wanted freedom “from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents” and to keep a kind of “republic of the spirit” (Wharton 60). This “republic of spirit” was a place free from upper class society's oppressing expectations. As a man, Selden could live as a bachelor, while Lily had to engage in search of a husband, because she did not have the option to be single and respected at the same time. Her reality was paralleled to “the links of her bracelet,” which were “like manacles chaining her to her fate” (Wharton 7). In fact, due to gender inequality perpetuated by society (Ryan 132), Lily was expected to be dependent on a husband. Being a woman, she was “a victim of the civilisation which had produced her” (Wharton 7) and left with no other options but to marry a rich man.

Still, Wharton criticised the given vocation for women by linking it, in her protagonist's case, to prostitution. When rejected by society, Lily was under more pressure to marry

immediately (Wharton 208), as “a marriage with Rosedale seemed the only honourable solution of her difficulties” (Wharton 217). But to marry this rich man in order to regain her place in society also involved that she had to accept society’s definition of her as an “ornament” (Sapora 18) as well as yield to her prescribed “vocation” in life. Although Lily had learned “in her long vigils, that there were certain things not good to think of, certain midnight images that must at any cost be exorcised – and one of these was the image of herself as Rosedale’s wife” (Wharton 217), she came to realise that she had no other alternative. As Goodman points out, Lily eventually resolved that “not much separated the business of marriage from the business of prostitution” (49) and therefore she decided to approach Rosedale regardless of how she felt about him.

#### 4. House and Privilege

In her given social surroundings, a woman like Lily was of little value unless she was married and owned a house. Women were in control of “what happened inside the house, inside the relationships” while men were in control of “what happened outside, including, ultimately, access to [the house]” (Benert 1). This meant that Lily was in control of nothing as she was not married nor did she have a house—and until she was married, she would be powerless. A marriage then was linked to power via a woman’s installation in a house, which in Lily’s case commanded a rich marriage. In the meantime, Lily was dependent on her aunt and friends to look after her as she did not have an income, or an inheritance, from her parents. While in search of a husband, she had no home and had to live with her aunt, Aunt Mrs. Peniston. Otherwise, she was constantly travelling, “moving from Judy Trenor, to Julia Peniston, to Norma Hatch, to her

own last shabby parlour and scantily furnished bedroom” (Benert 6). This inevitable dependence resulted in Lily being unable to live on her own.

But even in cases of privileged ownership of a house, although a woman was in control of her drawing room; its interior design was influenced by specific requirements set by upper class ideology. The room was so oppressive with its heavy drapes and curtains, that a woman’s identity was almost “dwarfed and effaced by the objects around her” (Kaplan 13). In the novel, Lily felt suffocated and entrapped by her Aunt Mrs. Peniston’s drawing room. The house “in its state of unnatural immaculateness and order, was as dreary as a tomb” (Wharton 88). She felt “as though she was buried alive in the stifling limits of Aunt Mrs. Peniston’s existence” (Wharton 88). Lily knew she would feel better as a woman if she could do over her aunt’s drawing room (Wharton 7). Reading between the lines, Lily wished for a more modern kind of existence. She desired release from her contemporary societal rules.

At the same time Lily could see that men were privileged in terms of having the chance to have their own living space. Selden’s apartment with a “small library, dark but cheerful, with its walls of books, a pleasantly faded Turkey rug, a littered desk” invited Lily to sink with a “sigh into one of the shabby leather chairs” (Wharton 6). She admired his place and lamented over her fate as a woman: “how delicious to have a place like this all to one’s self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman!” (Wharton 6). Well aware of gender related inequalities, Lily longed for the same opportunities as Selden, to choose her own life.

## 5. A Rumoured Affair

For the social norms to be preserved, Lily had to be punished for her different values and attitude. Her reluctance to marry as well as her unruly behaviour resulted in gossip and slander: she spent too much time in the company of others and got caught “coming alone from Selden’s apartment, glimpsed on Gus Trenor’s doorstep late at night, seen too often with the Gormers” (Sapora 18). Inappropriate was also that she was gambling, smoking and “performing for different audiences with different values” (Von Rusk 2). At the time, society believed that “any woman disobedient of rules had collaborated in her own destruction” (Goodman 50) and in that perspective Lily deserved punishment. Her punishment was a false rumoured affair between Lily and Bertha Dorset’s husband, spread by Bertha Dorset, which in turn led to her rejection by upper class society. Obviously, Lily’s friends were objecting to her ways and wanted her removed from their social circle: “Judy Trenor and her own family have deserted her too – and all because Bertha Dorset has said such horrible things” (Wharton 236). Although Lily was a member of the upper class, a rumoured affair led to her being rejected immediately.

At the same time, Lily’s rejection highlighted that rules of conduct were strict and permanent. When Lily’s rumoured affair spread, Aunt. Mrs Peniston had to disinherit her. She could not remain in contact with a frivolous woman like her, in fear of social disapproval of her acceptance of her niece’s inappropriate behaviour. In fact, as Goodman points out, society was “essentially fixed” (151), which meant rules of conduct were unchanging. Therefore, Aunt Mrs. Peniston had to remain loyal to her social circle of friends in order to keep her place in society. In effect, “Mrs. Peniston cut her off with a small legacy” (Wharton 236), and Lily became penniless.

In a society where women were defined as either “good” or “bad” (Sapora 17), Lily was viewed as “bad” because of her rumoured affair. This became obvious in relation to Rosedale. Although he loved Lily, Rosedale could not marry her because of the rumours, as the affair would give him a bad reputation. His refusal summed up his and society’s perspective: “the quickest way to queer yourself with the right people were to be seen with the wrong ones and that was the reason he wanted to avoid mistakes” (Wharton 224). If Rosedale married Lily, he would “queer” himself and everything he worked for would be wasted (Wharton 224). The old Lily could help Rosedale climb the social ladder, while the rejected Lily would only jeopardise his chances of climbing to the top.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have pointed out how women were often “depicted either as monsters or angels in the male literary tradition” (Ryan 132). In the novel Wharton portrayed Lily as “bad” and by doing so, she arguably wrote like a man (Showalter 313). However, by giving her protagonist a bad reputation, Wharton also rebelled against social conventions: because in society there was no space for “bad” women and because society was not open for change, she had to kill her heroine. But in this way she also ridiculed society’s expectations of women and in one sense blamed it for Lily’s death.

Unable to erase the false rumour, Lily came to realise that those in power could run the rules in society: “where a woman was concerned, it was the story that was easiest to believe” (Wharton 197). It was far easier to believe Bertha Dorset’s story than Lily’s, “because she had a big house and an opera-box, and it was convenient to be on good terms with her” (Wharton 197). Left without a chance, Lily was on her own, a powerless woman: “well, the truth about any girl was that once she was talked about she was done for; and the more she explained her case the worse it looks” (Wharton 197).

Yet, by resisting society, Lily showed that she valued her own self more than her social circle of friends. She considered blackmailing Bertha Dorset with her love letters to Selden, which would mean that Bertha Dorset would have to back her up “instead of trying to fight her” (Wharton 225) and Rosedale would then marry her. But blackmailing Bertha Dorset would be “a form of living suicide to which she could not contract” (Goodman 50).

Instead, Lily struggled to learn how to live with the consequences that her decision to not blackmail Bertha Dorset had brought. Her worries kept her awake at night. A prescription for chloral, a sedative, helped her sleep: “the thought of chloral was the only spot of light in the dark prospect: she could feel its lulling influence stealing over her already. But she was troubled by the thought that it was losing its power – she dared not go back to it too soon” (Wharton 273). Although Lily had made the decision to live without a husband, she was still unable to live on her own without help from family and friends.

By writing about Lily’s rumoured affair, Wharton was able to comment on her social circle and expose the malicious and bitter world of upper class society. Wharton let a powerful society woman spread a false rumour about her heroine. This resulted in Lily’s rejection but more importantly also in the exposure of the cruel rules that governed and regulated inclusion and privilege in those circles.

## 6. The Rise and Fall of Lily

Failing to conform and live by society’s expectations of women, Lily was punished. At first, upper class society encouraged Lily’s rise: she was admired and adored by her friends and family and was promised wealth and social status by her mother Mrs. Bart, Aunt Mrs. Peniston,

and her friends. However, when Lily's desire to marry for money and love was expressed along with her uncertainties regarding society's rules of conduct, she was rejected by all, and they all watched her fall. Although she tried hard to meet the set social expectations, she found that she could not "escape, redefine, or recreate the existing world" (Goodman 153) of upper class society. Instead of conforming, she struggled within "the confines and the context of civilisation" (Goodman 153) but this struggle, ultimately, caused her fall from her privileged position.

Yet, Lily's fall from society coincided in fact, with her rise in self-worth. Lily reached personal "empowerment" (Goodman 150) by expressing her true feelings and resisting the confining rules set by her social circle. Her answer to Rosedale's proposal of marriage summed up her perspective:

It is not always easy to be quite independent and self-respecting when one is poor and lives among rich people; I have been careless about money, and have worried about my bills. But I should be selfish and ungrateful if I made that a reason for accepting all you offer, with no better return to make than the desire to be free from my anxieties. (Wharton 157)

With the rejection of his offer, Lily matured on a personal level: "her whole being had risen against [blackmailing Bertha Dorset with her love letters to Selden]; and she did not yet perceive that, by the mere act of listening to him, she had learned to live with the ideas which would once have been intolerable to her" (Wharton 229). By explaining the reasons for her gambling debt, Lily also took responsibility for her once inappropriate behaviour:

[I]t was incredibly stupid of me, but I knew nothing of business.

Afterwards I found out that he had not used my money – that what he said he had made for me he had really given me. It was meant in kindness, of

course; but it was not the sort of obligation one could remain under.

Unfortunately I had spent the money before I discovered my mistake.

(Wharton 256)

Lily resisted society by being honest and reluctant to compromise and this resistance gave her personal strength.

Lily's ultimate rebellion was her bridging "the gulf" (Goodman 154) between social conventions and Selden's "republic of spirit," materializing in a life outside upper class society. But although she set herself free from society's expectations of women, Lily had nowhere to go. There was no place for her in society, upper class, or working class. Instead, she was led to a sad and lonely death: "the blind was down, the irresistible sunlight poured a tempered golden flood into to the room, and in its light Selden saw a narrow bed along the wall, and on the bed, with motionless hands and calm unrecognizing face, the semblance of Lily Bart" (Wharton 285). Towards the end of the novel, Lily was hardly recognizable to her old friends, her beauty and charm had weathered away, leaving behind nothing more than a weak body.

But Lily's death was not in vain because she did not fail entirely. Instead she triumphed "in her determination to become a responsible adult by her final rejection of her empty self" (Sapora 20). She resisted the constrictions of her social surroundings by making her own decisions. By letting Lily die at the end of the novel, as Kaplan points out, Wharton stressed the importance of a woman's worth: "women like Lily at the turn of the century were still struggling to articulate and cope with the knowledge of their paradoxical position within an ideological terrain that was both determined by their material reality and constantly reproduced ideology of gender in which they lived" (19). In other words, Lily's struggle mirrored the struggle many women of her time and her death marked the importance of this struggle.

## Conclusion

*The House of Mirth* was written during a time of turmoil and change during the early 1900s in America. The novel was very different to the majority of American novels written at the time, mostly because they were written by men, but also because women generally wrote about their domestic life experiences. Instead of writing about a woman's household duties, Wharton was inspired by "New Woman fiction" in England and committed "to an art beyond the limitation of gender" (Showalter 313), wrote about Lily, a woman desiring knowledge and independence.

Wharton viewed women and men as equals and wrote like her male counterparts, about life in society, a society which was in rapid change, but where upper class values and attitudes were relatively solid and unchanging. As this society's expectations of women around her frustrated Wharton, her response was to challenge the oppressive social conventions in her writing and through her brave female character give women a voice.

Wharton stressed the complex life Lily had to live in order to keep her upper class position. She showed how her protagonist was torn between her "vocation" to marry for money and achieving a life free from obligations – instead of having to marry for social status, Lily wanted to marry for love. Wharton problematized how women were expected to follow strict social rules of conduct by showing that as soon as Lily was rejected by society due to her reluctance to fully accept its expectations of her she was left with nowhere to go. She could not survive a life outside society either, because she was not educated or trained to live a life on her own. Thus, with no other options lying ahead and no space for her in this world, Lily is led to her tragic death.

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