The House of Mirth Study Guide

The House of Mirth by Edith Wharton

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Contents

Introduction

While *The House of Mirth* was only Edith Wharton's second novel, Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, with it Wharton "emerged as a professionally serious, masterful novelist." Published in 1905 it had the fastest sales of any of its publishing house's books at the time. The novel, as well as many of Wharton's other works, continues to enjoy great success to the present day.

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton explores the status of women at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century; indeed, Wolff believes that the novel "echo[es] the many dissatisfactions Wharton felt at this time." Heroine Lily Bart is a beautiful woman who has been brought up to achieve one goal: marry a wealthy, well-placed man. Although Lily, twenty-nine when the novel opens, has had opportunities to do so, her spirit has always recoiled from taking the step of marrying for money. However, the fate dealt to Lily in life is not spinsterhood but a fall from grace, that is New York's social circle, which comprises the only world Lily has ever known.

Over the past century, scholars and readers alike have applied numerous interpretations to this complex novel. Upon its initial publication, many readers saw it as a critique of the so-called marriage market. Contemporary scholars, however, have tended to read the novel, and Lily's actions, with a feminist slant. As Linda Wagner-Martin writes in her study *The House of Mirth*, "[It] is a key example of a woman's voice exploring significant women's themes in a covert manner: fiction as disguise."

Author Biography

Edith Wharton (born Edith Newbold Jones) was born on January 24, 1862, to a wealthy and wellconnected New York family. After the Civil War ended, however, Wharton's parents were hit hard by inflation. To save money the family lived and traveled throughout Europe until Wharton was about ten years old, by which time she spoke five languages. After the family returned to the United States, Wharton embarked on a program of selfeducation, primarily fostered by her extensive reading. Just before her fifteenth birthday, Wharton finished her first creative work, a novella entitled *Fast and Loose*, which did not see publication until 1977. She also had a poem published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and two published in the New York *World* before her eighteenth birthday.

After her first engagement was broken, Wharton married Theodore Wharton in 1885. Soon thereafter she began to write stories, which she sold to popular magazines. Her first short story appeared in 1891, when she was twenty-nine years old. Wharton, independently wealthy, did not depend on writing for a living. Only after her first collection of stories, *The Greater Inclination*, was published in 1899 did Wharton wholeheartedly throw herself into her work and recognize herself as a professional writer. Around this time Wharton also developed a lasting friendship with the writer Henry James. He served as her mentor, and critics have often compared the works of these two writers. Between 1900 and 1914 Wharton produced almost fifty short stories as well as some of her finest novels, including *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*. A later work, *The Age of Innocence*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1921.

In 1909 Wharton returned to France, where she had spent several winters. The next year, she made France her permanent residence, and in 1913 she divorced her husband. Throughout the next two decades, with the exception of the war years, Wharton traveled extensively throughout Europe, returning to American only once, in 1923, to be the first woman awarded the Doctor of Letters degree at Yale University.

In 1934, three years before her death, Wharton published her memoirs, *A Backward Glance*, which gracefully evoked old New York and its inhabitants. Wharton was at work on *The Buccaneers* when she died of a heart attack on August 11, 1937, in St. Brice-sous-Foret, France. Her biographer, R. W. B. Lewis, believed this novel to be her finest piece of work from the 1920s onward. The novel was completed by Marion Mainwaring and published posthumously.

Plot Summary

Lily in the United States

The House of Mirth opens in New York City as Lily Bart misses the train that was to take her to a house party hosted by her friends Judy and Gus Trenor. She runs into longtime acquaintance Laurence Selden and, despite the impropriety of such actions at the time, accompanies him back to his apartment for a cup of tea. When she finally gets on the train, Lily sees Percy Gryce, who is an imminently marriageable, but dull, man. She pays him a great deal of attention both on the train and at the Trenors. However, just as Percy is on the verge of proposing marriage to her, Lily neglects to keep an engagement with him. Instead, she chooses to take a walk with Selden, who has come down to Bellomont specifically to see her. Selden and Lily are attracted to one another, and Selden makes her feel that her intentions to marry Gryce□indeed, her intentions to marry wealthy□are "hateful." Lily returns to New York after asking Gus Trenor to help her invest her small income.

Trenor's financial help pays off immediately for Lily. She earns $10,000 in a short period of time. However, along with Trenor's financial help come his unwanted attentions, and after he lures Lily back to his house under the pretense of seeing Judy, Lily unhappily discovers that he has been giving her his own money with the expectation that she will have an affair with him. Lily vows to return Trenor's money, though she does not know where she will get it, as she recognizes the danger of compromising her reputation.

Meanwhile, Lily and Selden have been growing fonder of each other, despite the fact that Lily has come into possession of love letters that Bertha Dorset previously sent Selden. However, the night before Selden's engagement to see Lily, and perhaps ask her to marry him, he spies Lily fleeing the Trenors' home. He immediately assumes the worst, that Lily is having an affair with Trenor. Instead of keeping his appointment with Lily, Selden sails for Europe, which Lily later reads in the newspaper. Simon Rosedale pays her a visit to ask her to marry him, but Lily refuses. After Rosedale leaves, Lily receives a phone call from Bertha, inviting her on a trip to the Mediterranean.

Lily in Monte Carlo

Lily accompanies Bertha and George Dorset on a tour of the Mediterranean. Lily has been asked along primarily to keep George busy while Bertha carries on an affair. In Monte Carlo, Lily encounters Selden, who begs her to leave the Dorset's yacht, but Lily declares she cannot leave her friend. One night Bertha does not return to the yacht until the morning hours. George finally realizes what is going on, and he decides to see Selden (a lawyer) to begin divorce proceedings. However, Bertha shifts the blame to Lily, claiming that she compromised herself and George by not waiting for Bertha at the quay that would take them out to the boat. By that evening, George has decided not to go through with the divorce and he follows his wife's lead in chastising Lily. At a dinner,

Bertha humiliates Lily in front of everyone by announcing that Lily will not return to the yacht with them, implying that Lily tried to seduce George.

Lily in New York

Lily returns to New York upon the death of Aunt Julia. Although everyone, including Lily, expected her to inherit Aunt Julia's estate, Lily is only bequeathed $10,000, which must be used to repay Gus Trenor. The bulk of the estate goes to Lily's cousin Grace Stepney. Meanwhile, Bertha, who returned to New York ahead of Lily, has been spreading rumors about Lily, and Lily's former friends roundly snub her. Carry Fisher comes to Lily's aid, procuring her work as a companion to nouveau riche families (families who have recently acquired fortunes, as opposed to those with "old money"). Carry also encourages Lily to marry George Dorset; she believes that if George had proof of his wife Bertha's infidelity, he would divorce her. In fact, George asks Lily to help him prove Bertha's infidelity, but Lily refuses. Somewhat desperate, Lily acquiesces to marry Rosedale when he pays her a visit, but he no longer wants to do so. Lily understands that he has changed his mind because she is no longer valuable to him since she has lost her reputation. He urges her to give Bertha's love letters to Selden to fight Bertha and rehabilitate herself in New York society, and says if Lily uses these letters to implicate Bertha, he will marry her. Again, Lily refuses.

Lily obtains a position as a personal secretary to Mrs. Hatch. While in Mrs. Hatch's employment, Selden begs Lily to leave as he finds Mrs. Hatch to be an unsavory character, but Lily says she will not leave and the two part angrily. However, shortly thereafter, Lily quits Mrs. Hatch's employ and goes to work in a hatmaker's shop. She is ill equipped for such a job and is fired. Later that day Lily runs into Rosedale, who takes her to tea and then accompanies her home. Rosedale is appalled by the circumstances in which Lily now lives. He offers to lend her the money to repay Trenor, purely as a business arrangement, but she tells him she is unable to accept his offer. She does not wish to compromise herself again.

Lily makes up her mind to use the letters to blackmail Bertha. On her way to the Dorset's home, however, she decides to visit Selden. The two speak of their past affection for each other, and Lily implicitly asks him for help and love, but Selden refuses to acknowledge her entreaties. Lily secretly burns Bertha's letters in his fireplace. That night Lily receives her legacy from Aunt Julia and immediately writes Gus Trenor a check in the amount of $10,000. Lily then takes an overdose of sleeping medication. The next morning Selden rushes to Lily's boarding house. He has finally "found the word he meant to say to her." It is, however, too late; Lily is dead.

Book 1: Chapter 1

Book 1: Chapter 1 Summary

The House of Mirth, set in New York City in the first decade of the twentieth century, is a novel about high society, and about women's role within that society. It tells the story of one woman's life in particular, Miss. Lily Bart, who we meet in the first chapter at Grand Central Station. She is waiting for a train that will take her to one of her many social engagements, when she happens to spot an old friend in the crowd, Mr. Lawrence Selden. She is happy to see him, and calls out to him. He has a very evident admiration of her, and is more than happy to oblige her request that they have tea together somewhere while she waits for her train.

Mr. Selden suggests a popular nearby cafe, but Miss. Bart, ever mindful of the "appearances" that are the focal point of her life and the novel, expresses a preference for a more discreet location, meaning one where they will not be seen together. Far from being offended by this obvious snub, Lawrence Selden is both intrigued and amused by his companion's carefully calculated antics.

They decide to walk for a while, and happen to come to the street where Selden lives in a building called the Benedick. He casually invites Miss. Bart up to have tea in his apartment, and she surprises him by accepting. As they have tea together, she expresses her envy that, as a man, he is allowed to live by himself in his own apartment. Selden reminds her of his cousin, Gerty Farish, who is also a woman and lives alone. She is disdainful of the way Gerty Farish lives, in poverty, and of how she must work to be able to afford even her meager living conditions.

Miss. Bart admonishes Mr. Selden for never coming to visit her at her aunt's house, where she lives when she is not staying at the estates of her wealthy friends. At this point, the conversation becomes more flirtatious as she wonders aloud about the possible reasons why he does not come to visit her. She blatantly alludes to the fact that she does not want to marry him, and he confesses playfully that this is the reason why he has stayed away. He is at once amused by and attracted to her, and she seizes this moment of indecision to return his mocking tone. She expresses the fact that what she needs is not yet another man to "make love" to her with pleasantries, but a friend who will be frank and honest with her. She wonders if he might be that friend. He quickly assumes his new role of friend by bluntly asking her why she has not yet married. When she responds evasively, he further presses the question, asking, "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?" She assents, but implies that she is waiting for the right man, meaning a very wealthy man, and admits that she has thrown some good prospects away for this reason.

He continues to admire her beauty with "a purely impersonal enjoyment" as they smoke a cigarette together, and the conversation turns to his book collection. A new thought evidently crosses her mind, and she begins to question him with interest about his

books, and about Americana collectors. This foreshadows a conversation she will have in the near future with a prospective suitor, but Selden is too caught up in her beauty to wonder at her sudden interest.

As the first thing we learn about Lily Bart is that she is beautiful, the first thing we learn about Selden is that he is poor, when Lily asks, "Don't you ever mind not being rich enough to buy all the books you want?" She then asks if he would consider marrying for money, to which he forcefully responds, "God forbid!" She once again expresses her envy that whereas "a girl must, a man may if he chooses." She talks about how necessary it is for a woman to keep up appearances if she wants to be accepted in decent society, whereas a man like Selden can be slightly shabby and still mingle with high society.

On her way out of the building, Lily meets Simon Rosedale, an up-and-coming Jewish businessman. He asks her whom she has been to see at the Benedick, and she lies to him, replying that her dressmaker's shop is in the Benedick. It is an obvious lie, and he is not deceived. She quickly hails a taxi and is taken away before he has time for more questions.

Book 1: Chapter 1 Analysis

In chapter 1, Edith Wharton introduces some of the most important thematic elements that will come up throughout the novel. The first and most apparent is that of beauty as a commodity item. Although she is poor, Lily's beauty is portrayed as not only her ticket to financial freedom, but also as a weighty obligation. It is her duty to keep herself beautiful, and to use this beauty to her social and financial advantage. In portraying her beauty in this way, Wharton draws an ironic parallel between Lily's use of her beauty for financial gain and blatant prostitution, despite one being infinitely more acceptable in society. A recurring theme in the novel is Lily's moral battle regarding the fine line between using men for financial stability, and putting oneself in a compromising situation.

Nonetheless, Lily's beauty is unarguable, and even the cynical and independent Lawrence Selden is drawn to her. The author writes that Selden "ha[s] a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?"

This important quote makes Selden's opinion of the female species abundantly clear. By referring to women as "vulgar clay," and a "futile shape," he reveals his disparaging view of womankind, but is at the same time struck with the idea that Lily is simply too beautiful to be merely a woman inside her goddess-like exterior.

This brings up another important thematic element, that of the nature of the male/female relationship at this moment in history. Wharton makes the reader aware that it is not common for a woman to have tea alone with a strange man by Selden's surprise that she accepted his offer. The issue recurs on her way back to the train station, where she meets Mr. Rosedale, and is forced to lie about her reason for being in Selden's building. Lily's naivete and inability to judge what is appropriate concerning friendship between men and women will be the cause of many of her future problems.

If Selden's opinion of women is not particularly complementary, it is no less so than Lily's own opinion of her species and their plight. "What a miserable thing it is to be a woman," she says, although at the same time, when offered the life of Selden's cousin Gerty as an alternative, she assents that she prefers the lifestyle she has chosen to Gerty's. The reader is shown at that moment that Lily Bart lives in a constant state of emotional conflict between wanting independence and wanting luxury. The author uses Lawrence Selden as a symbol of that independence throughout the novel, and her various wealthy suitors as a symbol of the alternative – a dependence on pleasure, ease, and luxury. Selden is also a symbol of bachelorhood, which is alluded to by Wharton through the name of the building where he lives, the Benedick. Benedick was the bachelor in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, or the name may also have been modified from the term Benedictine monk.

Book 1: Chapter 2

Book 1: Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 begins with Lily once again musing forlornly about her plight as a woman. She feels the injustice of her situation, where any small deviance from her rigorous social schedule could damage her reputation. She is also angry with herself for not thinking more quickly when she met Simon Rosedale in the street.

While on the train to Bellomont, her destination for the evening, she spots someone else on his way to the Bellomont party. He is Mr. Percy Gryce, blonde, shy, puritanical, and extremely wealthy. Lily pretends to read a book as she carefully plots her "method of attack." With a combination of good timing and grace, she walks past him and allows herself to almost be flung into his lap as the train swerves. Thus, a conversation is started, and Lily uses her newly acquired knowledge of Americana to impress him, as he's an avid collector of Americana. Through her witty conversation and beauty, she begins to charm the shy Mr. Gryce.

The situation begins to look promising until the train stops again, and a third member of the Bellomont party boards the train, a Mrs. George Dorset. Mrs. Dorset is seen as a possible rival for the attentions of Mr. Gryce, despite the fact that she is married, and further impedes Lily's courtship efforts by asking Lily for a cigarette. Lily pretends that she does not smoke, as she has been trying hard to present a pure and modest front to the puritanical Mr. Gryce.

Book 1: Chapter 2 Analysis

It is in Chapter 2 that the reader is fully acquainted with Lily Bart's wiles and manipulations as a woman, and her ability to magically transform herself into whatever the situation requires at the time. When she begins a conversation with Mr. Gryce about his Americana collection, we remember that she has just been questioning Lawrence Selden about Americana, and it becomes evident that she had been planning this same conversation with this eligible and very wealthy bachelor long before it actually happened.

When contrasting her two conversations of the day, we are forced to compare and contrast two very different Lily Barts. Wharton raises the question of who is the real Lily Bart early on in the novel, as we will see many different faces of Lily Bart before its end.

Mr. Gryce makes his first appearance in the novel directly after Lily leaves Lawrence Selden for a reason. Wharton wants the reader to draw parallels not only between Lily's reactions to the two men, but also between the two men themselves. Lawrence Selden is the symbol of bachelorhood, poverty, and in many ways, of freedom. Percy Gryce is the opposing symbol of marriage, wealth, and a freedom of a very different sort. Selden's freedom is the freedom from the burdens and evils of society, whereas Gryce's

freedom is the freedom from financial burdens. These two contrasting freedoms form the pillars of the novel, and the question of which freedom Lily chooses to pursue will haunt her throughout it.

Another aspect of this society that Wharton draws the reader's attention to in Chapter 2 is the overt racism that Jews and other minorities have to face at this moment in history. Lily, as she ponders her encounter with Simon Rosedale, continually refers to the unfavorable characteristics of "his race," and refers to him as the "little Jew." The irony here is that the lot of an outsider and minority trying to win a place in high society is something that both the revered Lily Bart and the despised Simon Rosedale share. This also foreshadows a time when, after Lily's fall from good standing in society, it will be Mr. Rosedale who is revered and Lily Bart who is despised.

Book 1: Chapter 3

Book 1: Chapter 3 Summary

The first night of the party at Bellomont consists of a long night of bridge. For some of the players, it is a successful night, but for Lily it is not. Upon returning to her room and balancing her finances, she finds that she has gambled and lost all but $20.00 of her money in one evening.

Lily's excesses at the bridge table are not entirely her fault, although a mild gambling addiction is hinted at. It is simply expected and required of Lily to join in all aspects of the high society parties she attends. She considers her gambling losses a small tax charged by the hostesses who allow her to stay at their estates and include her in their outings despite the fact that she is financially inferior to them.

In this chapter, Lily's envy moves from the freedom of men to the freedom of a married woman. Before retiring to her room, Lily sees Mrs. George Dorset flirting with Mr. Percy Gryce. Although she is not concerned that Bertha Dorset is a threat to her budding romance with Mr. Gryce, she is nevertheless envious at the ease with which a married woman can pick up and discard men without consequences.

She recalls the boring afternoon she spent with him, the steady drone of his voice, and thinks wryly to herself that she must continue to endure the boredom tomorrow, only "on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honor of boring her for life."

It is also in Chapter 3 that we learn about Lily's history. We learn that she grew up in a middle to upper class family, a family in which it was the man's job to earn a decent living, and the woman's job to spend even more. At 18 years of age, Lily made her debut into society, and was wildly successful. She spent one golden year enjoying her social successes before her father came home with the ugly news that they were financially ruined. Her father died shortly after, leaving Lily and her mother to apply to distant relatives who had once been scorned as "living like pigs" for assistance.

Lily's mother died "after two years of hungry roaming…died of a deep disgust." She left Lily penniless but with the knowledge that her only way out of the pig-like existence that was to be her future was through her beauty. After Mrs. Bart's death, Lily was taken in by Mr. Bart's widowed sister, Mrs. Peniston. Although Mrs. Peniston was not by nature a kind woman, she liked Lily, and aside from a place to live, she gave her niece a small living stipend and frequent presents of dresses and jewelry.

Lily invests her entire stipend, along with all her youthful energy, beauty and talents, on the goal that her mother set for her before she died: the search for a wealthy husband.

Book 1: Chapter 3 Analysis

The House of Mirth is a novel of manners, or a novel that illustrates the social conventions of the time, and highlights the importance of the quest to marry. Chapter 3 gives the reader a good sense of what this genre, the novel of manners, and this novel in particular, is about.

The novel of manners, as a genre, categorizes the novel that deals with women, their place in society, socio-economic class standing, and the portrayal of the proper way to act within high society. Other novels in this genre include Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility. The development of this genre took place throughout the 19th century, when authors like George Eliot and Henry James began to explore the role of women in society, and their main occupation within this role, finding a husband. The novel of manners as a genre continued to develop in America with works by Hannah Foster, Catherine Maria Sedgewick, and Kate Chopin.

Until the House of Mirth, the novel of manners was considered a British genre. How can a novel explore class-related issues in a supposedly classes-less society, was the argument against the American novel of manners. Edith Wharton challenged this theory by blending the British novel of manners with the American realism movement, which began roughly after Reconstruction (the late 1870s) and lasted until just after World War I (the early 1920s). To do this, Wharton created distinct social circles within New York society, rather than actual classes. Upward and downward mobility within these social circles plays a large role in the novel. Lily's main goal is not to marry for love, as we see with her rejection of Selden, nor even for money, as we see with her rejection of Simon Rosedale, but for a secure place within her social circle, as we see in Chapters II and III, with her attraction to Percy Gryce.

In Chapter 3, we also begin to get a sense of just how crucial Lily's beauty is to the novel. Lily's beauty is the only wealth she possesses, and it is a currency that she means to turn into capital in a very real sense. It is for this reason that two small lines appearing on her face gives her such fear. As a not-so-young woman, Lily is racing against the clock. As she herself said, when she first came out she squandered some opportunities. She now finds herself at age 29, and the urgency that she feels to find a husband is more real than ever.

Book I, Chapter 4

Book I, Chapter 4 Summary

The next morning Lily awakens to a note on her breakfast tray from her hostess, Mrs. Judy Trenor, asking if Lily could come down and help her with some secretarial tasks. Lily is resentful, but understands that, due to her financial situation, it is her social obligation to be of assistance to her hostess whenever possible. We are introduced to Mrs. Trenor as a woman who "exists only as a hostess," and one who, due to her social and financial successes, is ranked by Lily as one her friends who was least likely to "go back" on her.

As Lily works sending letters and paying bills, Judy Trenor gossips. Through the gossip, we are introduced to many of the characters that will form the backbone of the novel. Carry Fisher is a divorcee who borrows money from Gus Trenor, Judy's husband. Lady Cressida Raith is a new member of society who is a disappointment to Judy because of her boring conversation and rigorous moral values. The Van Osburghs are an extremely wealthy family, and Mrs. Van Osburgh is Judy Trenor's rival for social success. We also find out the Mrs. George Dorset is either in some way romantically involved with Lawrence Selden, or wishes to be. Mrs. Trenor is afraid of incurring the wraith of Mrs. Dorset, because she had promised to make sure Selden was at the party for Mrs. Dorset's amusement, and he failed to make an appearance.

Lily then tells her friend of her intentions with Percy, to which Mrs. Trenor replies that he has an annual salary of $850,000 a year. Mrs. Trenor then cautions Lily to be careful, and hints that Lily has a reputation of hunting for a rich husband that could be off-putting to the cautious Mr. Gryce. It is settled that she will neither smoke nor play bridge that evening for fear of offending him.

It is as the third day of the party at Bellomont is ending, and Lily is increasingly assured of her success with Percy Gryce, that Lawrence Selden makes his aforementioned appearance.

Book 1: Chapter 4 Analysis

The beginning of Chapter 4 is less about Lily herself and more about the inner workings of the social circle to which she belongs. The reader learns about the sacrifices Lily must make as the least wealthy member of her group, as well as the complexities and intricacies of being a hostess and active participant of the social elite. The reader also learns about the role of family within this social circle. Carrie Fischer is frowned upon by Mrs. Trenor because she just divorced her second husband, although many of the women mentioned are divorcees.

This chapter also introduces the literary technique called the epigram. An epigram is a short, witty piece of dialog that is meant to provide social satire and entertainment at the

same time. When Mrs. Trenor remarks paradoxically that "it's much safer to be fond of dangerous people," in reference to Bertha Dorset, this is an example of an epigram. This technique has also been utilized by Oscar Wilde to convey irony and social commentary in his works.

Towards the end of the chapter, Wharton gives us a hint about the turn of events that the novel is going to take. As she sits contemplating her successes with Percy Gryce over the past few days, Lily sardonically remarks to herself that Percy Gryce and Miss. Van Osburgh would make a perfect couple, although they themselves would never even consider the match. This foreshadows the fact that Mr. Gryce and Miss. Van Osburgh will in fact end up together, leaving Lily once again alone and searching for a husband. The fact that Lawrence Selden's arrival is simultaneous with these thoughts is a further example of foreshadowing by the author.

Book 1: Chapter 5

Book 1: Chapter 5 Summary

Lily awakens on Sunday morning with every intention of accompanying Mr. Gryce to church. She knows that the sight of the "pious Lily" in a conservative gray dress with head bent in prayer, coupled with an opportune walk home together, will be enough to induce Mr. Gryce to propose to her.

Despite this certainty, Lily spends spent the previous evening contemplating whether Lawrence Selden had come with the intention of seeing her or Bertha Dorset. His appearance causes her to reconsider all that she had felt that afternoon. The same friends, who had hours earlier been sophisticated, fun, and elegant, are suddenly made dreary and trivial when she looks at them through the critical eye of Lawrence Selden.

However, the mention of Simon Rosedale, and the fleeting thought that if she didn't marry soon, the day might come when she'd have to be pleasant to him, coupled with the arrival of a fresh batch of bills, brings her to her senses and drives her to wake up early Sunday morning to get ready for church.

It was still with the intention of going to church that she dawdled over her thoughts until she heard the omnibus leave with Mr. Gryce and the other churchgoers. She then proceeded downstairs with the intention of finding Mr. Selden, whom she found in the library chatting with Mrs. Dorset. She purposefully interrupts their meeting, and then goes outside with the intention of walking to the church to meet Mr. Gryce on his way back. Instead, she dawdles once again, in hopes that Mr. Selden will catch up with her. He does, and after thanking him for the information about the Americana that proved so useful to her in the last few days, he persuades her to take a walk with him.

Book 1: Chapter 5 Analysis

In Chapter 5, we see that not only can Lily be deceptive to those around her, but also she can successfully deceive herself. She disguises her lateness for the bus as a strategy that would whet Mr. Gryce's appetite for the walk home. When she excuses herself from the afternoon's festivities on the account of a headache, it was to increase his longing for her through her absence. The author makes it clear that her true intentions are to spend time with Lawrence Selden, but she is so far from understanding these new emotions she's experiencing, she cannot admit this even to herself.

Wharton also uses this chapter to show the irony of the members of the group who attend church regularly without applying Christian teachings to their daily lives. The hypocrisy of the group lies in moral inconsistencies such as its condemnation of the divorces of Carry Fischer, but the tolerance of the infidelities of Mrs. George Dorset.

Book 1: Chapter 6

Book 1: Chapter 6 Summary

Chapter 6 houses the conversation between Selden and Lily that reveals their true feelings for each other. The two have an afternoon together bought by Lily's lie to Percy Gryce about a headache. The weather is perfect, and after walking for a while they decide to sit down. Lily feels at this moment something that she compares to a brief love affair she had with a man named Herbert Melson in her youth. She notes that she has experienced love with fortunes or careers, but that what she feels for Selden at that moment was for him alone, not a mere "blind groping of the blood." She has concrete reasons for her feelings for him, and, having nothing to do with his fortunes, she is forced to examine what it is she likes about him. Wharton describes him as tall, cultivated, with keenly modeled dark features and a quality of friendly aloofness which some people confused with sarcasm, but which Lily admired.

He accuses her laughingly of being premeditated and calculating, and if only moments ago she had felt something like love for Selden, she now admits that one of her reasons for agreeing to walk with him was to further tempt Percy Gryce.

They talk about their individual ideas of success. To Lily success is getting "as much as one can out of life," whereas Selden equates success with personal freedom, which he defines as the republic of the spirit, or a freedom from the material world. As he explains to Lily about the republic of the spirit, she realizes that despite the fact that she is drawn to Selden, she has no place in this republic.

He cautions her that upon attaining her goals, she may realize that they are not what she wanted after all. She is upset, but then realizes that she has seen this bleak future for herself before. The conversation reaches an emotional high when Lily asks him suddenly if he wants to marry her. He responds in his typical evasive fashion, saying, "No, I don't want to-but perhaps I should if you did!"

She owns that it would be a great risk for her to marry him, and he responds by tenderly calling her a coward. They share an intense moment of closeness that is broken by the sound of a car off in the distance, reminding them that the rest of the party would soon be returning from their driving excursion, and they walk home.

Book 1: Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 is one of the most emotionally charged scenes in the novel. It is also one of the most telling about the true character of Lily Bart. In Chapter 1 also, we catch a small glimpse of the real Lily Bart, but at that early moment in the novel, we have no knowledge of the other Lily's, and have nothing to which to compare it.

Here Lily reveals a small part of her true self, and even more importantly, admits that Lawrence Selden brings this true self to the foreground. As they talk about Selden's views on personal freedom and the republic of the spirit, it is evident that while Lily cannot afford to admit this to herself, she agrees with him on many of these points.

In many ways, Selden is as versatile as Lily in his personality. However, whereas Lily can actually change her personality based on the situation, Selden keeps his personality but has the ability to adapt himself to different social circles. He calls this quality "amphibious," meaning he is able to live with the elite and with the working class.

As in Chapter 1, they share a cigarette together before they leave. However, whereas in Chapter 1 the smoking took on a flirtatious connotation, here it marks the end of their afternoon together. It also symbolizes a final rejection of Percy Gryce, as he sees smoking as a terrible vice for women.

Book 1: Chapter 7

Book 1: Chapter 7 Summary

When Lily returns from her afternoon with Selden, she is greeted by a disapproving Mrs. Trenor. Judy Trenor is confused by Lily's pursuit of Mr. Selden, and admonishes her for interfering when Bertha and Selden were chatting in the library. This had apparently angered the volatile Bertha Dorset, who had had designs on spending the afternoon with Lawrence Selden herself. She retaliates by spending the afternoon sullying Lily's name to Percy Gryce, who in turn leaves Bellomont immediately, horrified by what he hears.

Mrs. Trenor spends the next hour listing all of the accusations, real or otherwise, that Bertha Dorset brought against Lily. Lily tries to defend herself against the accusations, but at the same time is appreciative of her friend's frankness. She apologizes contritely, and the two women go back to the secretarial duties that they had begun in the morning.

At lunch, Bertha Dorset gloats about her victory, and the rest of the table mocks Mr. Gryce's shyness and naivete. After lunch, Mrs. Trenor asks Lily if she would mind going to pick up her husband, Gus Trenor, from the train station. Ironically, she asks Lily to go instead of Carry Fischer, who she accuses of always asking Mr. Trenor for money. Lily goes willingly, but is annoyed that Carry Fischer can borrow money from whomever she pleases because she is a married woman, while Lily is unjustly accused by Bertha Dorset for any and every petty aspect of her life.

Perhaps it is for this reason that when Gus Trenor gets into the coach with her, she begins to flirt with him. Delighted to have such a young and beautiful girl to listen to him, he chats with her about his day, his business, and the intricacies of Wall Street. It suddenly occurs to her that perhaps Gus Trenor could assist her in her financial difficulties by telling her where to invest her small living stipend so that she may begin to profit from it. Unlike Carry Fischer's blunt requests, she begins by telling him that his wife wants Lily to marry Percy Gryce, due to her financial troubles. He is suitably horrified at the thought of Lily Bart marrying a "milksop" like him, and by the end of their drive he has agreed to help her invest her money more wisely so that she need not marry hastily.

Book 1: Chapter 7 Analysis

In chapter 7, we see the vicious and ruthless nature of the relationships between the women of this elite circle. Bertha Dorset's betrayal of Lily over a young man's affections is extreme, and foreshadows events involving Bertha Dorset's jealousy that will be the demise of Lily's social standing.

The fact that Lawrence Selden and Percy Gryce left on the same train was both irony and symbolism on the part of the author. It was the same doubt that Selden awakened in her that had driven her away from Percy Gryce for the afternoon, but the same quest for all that Percy Gryce symbolizes that in the end drove her away from Selden at the end of the afternoon.

Book 1: Chapter 8

Book 1: Chapter 8 Summary

Lily begins receiving large checks from Gus Trenor's investment of her small stipend. She finds it easy to stay in his favor, all that is required of her is to be nice to him, listen to his stories and laugh at his jokes. Judy is delighted at the new friendship, thinking that Lily was becoming friends with her husband as a favor to her.

The largest check to date is paid to her by Gus Trenor at the wedding of Miss. Van Osburgh to Lily's cousin, Jack Stepney. The sight of Mr. Percy Gryce, whom she had not seen since his sudden departure from Bellomont, further improves her mood. She takes it as a good omen, although she is once again more excited by the sight of Mr. Selden, who she had also not seen since their afternoon in the woods. Selden comes to the wedding with his cousin, Gerty Farish. Gerty is sweet, loyal, compassionate, philanthropic, and completely dull. Everything about her, as described by Lily, is gray, from her skin color to her personality to her dress.

Gerty breaks the news to Lily, unaware that Lily has designs on him, that Percy Gryce is infatuated with the youngest Miss. Van Osburgh. She is on the verge of tears when Gus Trenor comes and presents her with a check for $4000. She feels that not all is lost, although Gus Trenor has begun to pressure her to spend more time with him now that his skills as a speculator are starting to compensate her in a big way. She begins to think that she can win Gryce back after all when Gerty Farish comes to tell her that Gryce and Miss. Van Osburgh have just announced their engagement. She realizes that people are snickering and gossiping about her failure to "catch" Gryce, but does her best to keep her composure.

Book 1: Chapter 8 Analysis

From an outsider's perspective, it is obvious that Lily could not make so much money from her small stipend, but with a selective consciousness that seems to be Lily's trademark, she chooses to continually ignore these realities. She even half-jokingly tells Gus Trenor that she would be more than happy to be pleasant to Simon Rosedale, as she may be able to get some tips out of him for the stock market. Her mercenary and manipulative attitude towards men is more evident than ever in Chapter 8, and takes away some of the sweetness that is portrayed as her main characteristic in other chapters.

In her reaction towards Gerty Farish, we see an aspect of Lily Bart's character that is not entirely complimentary. The reader is introduced to Gerty only through the commentary of Lily, and if the "sympathetic observer" would list kind, sympathetic, and loyal as descriptors of Gerty, Lily has only negative things to say about her. Lily is impatient at Gerty's "cheerful acceptance" of her faults, and calls her mediocre,

ineffectual, and stupid. The reader might detect the same type of envy in Lily towards Gerty that she feels towards some of her wealthy, married, lady friends. Certainly Lily would prefer to be in the shoes of Evie Van Osburgh right now than her own, as she is asked by Percy Gryce for her hand in marriage, but perhaps she'd also prefer even Gerty's situation to her own. Her financial situation is similar to Gerty's, but her inability to cheerfully accept her fate as Gerty can is a constant source of frustration to her. She has the worst of both sides, with the tastes and refinement of an Evie Van Osburgh, but the pocketbook of a Gerty Farish.

Book 1: Chapter 9

Book 1: Chapter 9 Summary

After leaving the Van Osburgh wedding, Lily returns to her aunt's home to find it in a state of upheaval. It's cleaning day, and the disorder only adds to Lily's bad mood. Soon after Lily's return, a visitor is announced. Lily recognizes her as Mrs. Haffen, the cleaning lady from Lawrence Selden's building, whom she saw cleaning the floors the day she went to Mr. Selden's apartment for tea.

Mrs. Haffen has a proposition for Lily. While cleaning Lawrence Selden's apartment one day, she found some letters that were exchanged between Selden and Mrs. Bertha Dorset. She explains to Lily that her family is in a difficult situation now due to her husband being out of work, and offers to sell the letters to Lily. She mistakenly thinks that Lily is the author of the letters, but does not realize that Lily has an even better reason for wanting the letters in her possession. She purchases them, but instead of burning them as she intended to do in her mind, she hides them on the highest shelf of her closet.

Book 1: Chapter 9 Analysis

Lily's path and the path of Mrs. George Dorset seem destined to cross. Perhaps Wharton is foreshadowing that Bertha Dorset will play a crucial role in Lily's fall from grace, or perhaps Lawrence Selden continually brings the two women together. In this scene, we see a repeat of the situation in an earlier chapter. It is Mrs. Dorset's affection for Selden and jealousy of Lily that causes her to slander Lily to Percy Gryce earlier in the novel. Lily now has the opportunity to slander Bertha Dorset, but she restrains herself because of her affection for Mr. Selden.

Book 1: Chapter 10

Book 1: Chapter 10 Summary

Lily spends the next few months enjoying the money acquired by Gus Trenor's "speculation," and avoiding her obligation of seeing him by not going back to Bellomont all autumn.

One day Lily meets Gerty Farish on the street, and Gerty tells her about her philanthropic work with a charity for young women who have no income and have to work for themselves. Knowing that her own life could precariously tip in that direction one day, Lily generously donates a sum of money to the charity through Gerty.

She joins a party with Mrs. Carry Fischer and a newly wealthy couple that Mrs. Fischer was helping to "promote" at a camp in the Adirondacks. Under normal circumstances, she would not have attended, but, due to a lack of invitations, she decides that it is better than nothing. Upon her return from this party, she is met by Mr. Simon Rosedale. He invites Lily to the opera with him and Gus Trenor on opening night, and makes it known that he is aware of her business arrangement with Mr. Trenor. She accepts the opera invitation, but is appalled that Gus Trenor would betray her confidence and tell Mr. Rosedale about the arrangement.

At the opera, Gus Trenor is drunk, and accuses her of ignoring him unless she wants a tip off on the stock market from him. She tries to pacify him, but he will not be satisfied until she agrees to meet him at the park for some private time together. She agrees, and he leaves when George Dorset arrives to invite her to a party at their house on Sunday.

Book 1: Chapter 10 Analysis

Although Lily feels betrayed by the indiscretion Gus Trenor showed by talking about their arrangement with Simon Rosedale, she continues to play the game, through either naivete or desperation. This compliance is shown through her softening to Simon Rosedale at her house, the acceptance of his invitation to go to the opera, and the acceptance of Gus Trenor's insistence that they spend time alone together. Trenor's response of "hang talking" when she suggests that he come to her house for a chat makes his intentions completely obvious for the first time. Yet, Lily continues to believe the charade that Gus Trenor is prospecting for her out of fraternal affection.

Book 1: Chapter 11

Book 1: Chapter 11 Summary

The holidays arrive, and although the stock market is said to be plummeting, Simon Rosedale's fortune continues to grow. Lily's aunt, Mrs. Peniston, decides to give a party. She invites Lily, but excludes her other niece, Grace Stepney, who often comes to spend time with her when Lily is busy with social engagements. Grace is angered by the snub, and to retaliate tells Mrs. Peniston that there are rumors circulating about the nature of the relationship between Lily and Gus Trenor. She implies that Gus Trenor pays Lily's expenses in exchange for the attention she pays him, and she mentions Lily's gambling habits and other flirtations. Mrs. Peniston decides to say nothing to Lily now, but files the information away for future use.

Book 1: Chapter 11 Analysis

This incident of Grace Stepney's jealousy of Lily causing her to gossip to Mrs. Peniston about Lily's relations with Gus Trenor seems harmless enough. However, this is the beginning of a trial of events leading to the ironic conclusion of Lily's disinheritance and of the reversal of fortunes culminating in Grace Stepney becoming the sole heir to Mrs. Peniston's fortune.

Book 1: Chapter 12

Book 1: Chapter 12 Summary

In chapter 12, we learn why Bertha Dorset was interested in reconciling their differences and becoming friends with Lily again. She has a new lover, and needs a distraction for her husband so that he will not become suspicious or jealous of her activities. George Dorset is extremely ill tempered, and Lily is one of the few people whose company he sincerely enjoys, so she is the logical choice of distraction. Suddenly, after months of isolation, she returns to the social scene she used to frequent. Even Judy Trenor, whose wrath she'd incurred with Mrs. Trenor, learned of Lily's agreement with her husband, is polite to her once again.

The Welly Brys are a newly rich family trying to make an entrance into the exclusive social circle of which Lily and her friends are members. They are being helped by Carry Fischer, who supports herself by helping the nouveau riche make their debut into high society. They throw a huge party, and invite all the members of this circle. The party's main sources of entertainment were expensive music and tableaux vivants, an art form in which beautiful ladies recreate famous scenes of art or history. Lily is one of the tableaux vivants, and she is at her loveliest that night.

Once the entertainment has ended, Lawrence Selden goes to find Lily to congratulate her on her success. Here he admits to her that he loves her, and they share a kiss before she disappears into the party.

Book 1: Chapter 12 Analysis

Once again, Lily and Selden feel a strong connection to each other, this time letting it take them one step farther from conversation to a physical embrace. It is telling of Lily's character and determination that she is able to ignore such a strong bond, and continue to pursue her dream of finding a rich husband, in spite of Selden's proclamation of love and her own feelings, which seem to grow stronger with each meeting.

The chapter ends with Gus Trenor in a bad mood, and he criticizes Lily severely for being to revealing of her figure in public, the subtext being that she reveals too little of it in private with him. He also criticizes the Welly Brys and the nouveau riche in general for not knowing how to throw a tasteful party.

Book 1: Chapter 13

Book 1: Chapter 13 Summary

When Lily wakes the next morning, she has two notes by her bedside. One is from Mrs. Trenor, who says she will be in town and wishes to see Lily. The other is from Lawrence Selden, asking to see her the following day. She has conflicting emotions over the previous night's kiss, and resolves that she should not see him. She then writes him a note telling him to come to her "tomorrow at four."

After dinner with Carry Fischer and some of the other performers from last night's entertainment, Lily goes to Judy Trenor's house. Instead of Mrs. Trenor, she finds only Gus Trenor waiting for her when she arrives. At first, he tells her that Judy is upstairs and unwell, and then reveals to her that she is still at Bellomont, and that he has tricked her into coming to see him. He feels as though she has used him and then snubbed him, and sums up his intentions neatly, by saying that "the man who pays for the dinner is generally allowed to have a seat at the table." She is at once angered and ashamed, and at the same time scared of exactly what Gus Trenor's intentions are. Just when his violence reaches a peak, he realizes what he is saying, and orders her out of the house.

Lily is shocked and frightened by the scene, and does not know where to go. She realizes that she is close to Gerty Farish's apartment, and goes there.

Book 1: Chapter 13 Analysis

Lily's method of putting Selden off by inviting him over "tomorrow at four" is symbolic of Lily's character and outlook on life. She is enchanted by the idea of men's affections, but unwilling to face up to the realities or consequences. This theme is renewed at the end of the chapter with her confrontation with Gus Trenor. He does not believe her naïve reply to his accusations, when she asks, "What more have you done than any friend might do, or any one accept from a friend?" He takes this to mean that she has accepted financial assistance from others besides him, and this enrages him further.

At the end of chapter 13 Lily turns to Gerty Farish for comfort and reassurance, and Gerty suddenly becomes a symbol of a purity and goodness that Lily does not have, and wishes to find through her friend. Gerty is also a symbol of what Lily can and will become following her fall from good social standing.

Book 1: Chapter 14

Book 1: Chapter 14 Summary

In Chapter 14, the novel takes a nonlinear turn, and we are brought back to the morning, when Lily had woken with such hope and happiness. Gerty Farish has woken with similar feelings to those of Lily. The previous night at the party, she realized that she is in love with Lawrence Selden, and mistakenly believes that her love is returned. She mistakes their shared friendship with Lily for a bond that ties them together and will eventually cement their love.

At the same time, that Gerty is thinking of the bond that she and Selden share with Lily, the object of her desire is in Albany thinking of a very different kind of bond that he shares with Lily. Selden's background and the reason for his independence and lack of interest in materialistic pleasures are revealed. He grew up in a relatively poor household, but one that was fused with love and happiness. His parents taught him that happiness came from making the money you have work for you, not always working for more money.

He finds Lily's note upon his return to his room in the evening, and goes to dine with Gerty. He sees that she is radiant and happy, and tells her that she should marry. She takes this to mean that her happy suspicions about Lawrence's feelings for her are confirmed, until he begins to talk of Lily Bart with such passion that his true intentions are impossible to mistake. He has come to talk about his feelings for Lily, and, upon learning that she is dining at Carry Fischer's, he excuses himself immediately, leaving Gerty's poor frail heart crushed.

Upon arriving at Carry Fischer's dinner party, he learns that Lily has just left for the Trenor's. He dismisses hints that she has gone for the company of Mr. Trenor rather than Judy, and begins to walk in that direction. As he nears the Trenor house, he sees Lily leaving in a state of agitation, waving goodbye to Gus Trenor.

We return now to Gerty Farish, alone with the memory of the cousinly kiss Selden plants on her cheek before dashing off to find Lily. Gerty is just in the process of assigning all blame to Lily for her misery when she hears a knock at her door. It is Lily, who has just come from her jarring conversation with Gus Trenor, and is extremely upset.

Despite Gerty's anger at Lily, her compassionate instincts overpower her resentment. She invites Lily in, and although Lily will not tell her what is wrong, she senses that something terrible has happened. Lily has something of a breakdown before finally falling asleep in Gerty's bed.

Book 1: Chapter 14 Analysis

Wharton's decision to write chapters 13 and 14 in a nonlinear sequence serves to heighten the suspense and the crushing blow to Selden that comes the moment he sees Lily leaving Gus Trenor in the middle of the night. As the reader, we know what is taking place at the house, and what he will find when he arrives. As we see Selden's desire for Lily increase, and his feelings for her become increasingly clear to himself and those around him, the suspense builds increasingly with every step he takes towards the Trenor house.

This scene foreshadows everything that we already know to be true. In her obsession with her financial status, Lily has not only alienated her so-called circle of high society friends, but has now also succeeded in alienating her one true friend and chance at real love, Lawrence Selden.

It is also in this chapter that we learn of Lily's insomnia, which will play an important role in the events that lead to her ultimate demise.

Book 1: Chapter 15

Book 1: Chapter 15 Summary

When Lily awakes to find herself in Gerty's bed, she is met with a rush of disgust, and concerns that her aunt has discovered her absence. She returns home, and tells her aunt that she was feeling faint on her way home, and went to Gerty's place to recover. Mrs. Peniston tells Lily to go upstairs to rest, and it is under this pretext that Lily retires to her room to calculate the exact amount of her debt to Gus Trenor. She realizes that she must repay him every penny, or face the moral and physical consequences.

Realizing that she owes him over $9000, she appeals to her aunt to lend her the money. Her aunt assumes that they are dressmaker's bills, and offers to pay $1000 to her dressmaker. She tries to make her aunt realize the true nature and urgency of her debt by telling her that they are gambling debts, accrued from too many nights playing bridge recklessly. Mrs. Peniston is shocked by the thought of Lily playing bridge, and refuses to help her anymore than paying her $1000 debt to the dressmaker.

Lily is at the point of despair when she remembers that Lawrence Selden is coming to visit her at four that afternoon. She feels that she can trust him with her dishonorable secret, and is anxious to see him. 4:00 comes and goes, and Selden does not come.

Instead, Rosedale comes to call on her. After a few moments of pleasantries, he makes it clear to her that he wants to marry Lily. He realizes that she is not in love with him, and proposes to her more in the style of a business negotiation than a marriage proposal. He hints that he knows of her compromising situation with Gus Trenor, and is prepared to clear her name of all debts. Lily asks him for time to think on his offer.

The next day, Lily has all but reconciled herself to writing to Mr. Rosedale to accept his proposal, when she receives a telegram from Bertha Dorset. The telegram requests that she accompany them on a cruise in the Mediterranean that leaves the following day.

Book 1: Chapter 15 Analysis

It is true to Lily's character that the moment she wakes up in Gerty's apartment, the first thoughts she has are of the drabness of her surroundings. She is, however, quickly reminded of her night with Gus Trenor, and her worry returns. The day following her fight with Trenor shows Lily at the end of her rope. The three avenues she pursues or tries to pursue are her very last options. The first, asking her aunt for the money to repay her debt to Trenor, is a dead end. Her aunt is shocked even by the lie Lily tells her, and this foreshadows what will happen when Mrs. Peniston learns the truth of Lily's situation.

Her second avenue has something to do with Lawrence Selden, although she is vague on whether she wants to marry him, ask him for money, or simply purge her guilty soul

by telling him the sordid truth of her situation. When he does not show up for their meeting at four, she has a third avenue thrown at her in the form of a proposal by Rosedale. Considering Rosedale's swift ascent in the social hierarchy, his immense wealth, and the closure of the other two avenues, she feels that he may be a good option. She is saved by this good option with an invitation to a cruise in the Mediterranean, which, while not offering a resolution to her difficult situation, offers her at least an opportunity to postpone it for a while.

Book 2: Chapter 1

Book 2: Chapter 1 Summary

Lawrence Selden is in Monte Carlo on a week's vacation from his work in Paris. He is enjoying his time there, and likes the carnival-like atmosphere of both the people and the place. One day while there, he meets Carry Fischer, the Welly Brys, the Van Osburghs, and others from the New York City social circle. They are engaged in a debate about where to eat lunch, and when they finally decide, they invite Selden to dine with them. There Carry Fischer updates him on Lily's enormous social successes in Europe. Selden has thrown himself into work for the past three months to forget the pain she caused him the night he saw her with Gus Trenor. News of Lily's well being forces him to realize that he has not forgotten his feelings for her.

After lunch, the crowd disperses, and Selden and Carry Fischer are left to themselves. Carry complains about her charges, the Welly Brys, and about her thwarted efforts to integrate them into high society. She recounts a story to Selden that she once heard about Lily, about an Italian prince who was in love with her, and just when he was about to propose Lily started flirting with his stepson. She chastises Lily for always working hard to get men to fall in love with her, and then never follows through on it. She analyzes Lily's motives as being either flightiness or a hatred for the things she is trying to attain. She confirms that Lily is cruising with the Dorsets to keep George Dorset occupied while Bertha Dorset has an affair with Ned Silverton, and adds that George Dorset has fallen in love with Lily and would marry her if he ever found out about his wife's affair.

Selden is sickened by the conversation, and decides to move to Nice to avoid seeing Lily, while at the same time asking himself what exactly he's running away from. As he waits at the train station for the train to Nice, he meets Lily, also on her way to Nice with a group of friends. He observes that she is once again in complete command of the situation around her. Ned Silverton, Bertha's lover, criticizes her for being "dead as a stone to art and poetry," and says that she was partly to blame for their swift return to Monte Carlo from Sicily. He also hints that George Dorset is in love with Lily, and that this is causing a rift between Lily and Bertha.

Book 2: Chapter 1 Analysis

"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 over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic." Carry Fischer's description of Lily to Selden is fitting, especially in light of the fact that it neatly parallels one of Selden's first experiences with Lily. After working hard to win Percy Gryce's affections in the first part of Book 1, she decides that instead of going to church with him she will spend the afternoon with Selden.

The irony of chapter 1 is that Selden has gone to Monte Carlo to relax and nurse the wounds Lily inflicted on him. Within two days of his arrival, Lily and her entourage also arrive in Monte Carlo. He decides to go to Nice to avoid her, and meets her at the train station, drawing a parallel to the first scene of the novel where they see each other at Grand Central Station.

The chapter ends with both he and Lord Hubert Dacey, an old friend of hers, concerned for her well being. Selden describes her as "poised on the brink of a chasm," foreshadowing that she soon will fall from her elevated place. Lord Hubert is concerned for her moral well-being, and tells Selden that she has been spending time with a Duchess who has had a "liberal education."

Book 2: Chapter 2

Book 2: Chapter 2 Summary

The following morning, Lily awakens aboard the Sabrina, the Dorsets' yacht. Upon reflection, she is extremely pleased with the past three months. She has nearly forgotten her troubles with Gus Trenor in her abundant social successes and the beauty and luxury of her surroundings.

That morning she has breakfast with the Duchess, and after breakfast goes to the casino, although does not play due to a lack of funds. There she sees Carry Fischer, who has just fought with Mrs. Bry. She tells Lily that she is leaving the Brys to go and work for a different family, and offers to leave the Brys in Lily's care. Lily declines the offer, feeling that she is too good for the Brys nouveau riche standing in their circle. Carry proceeds to tell Lily that a rumor has been started that Lily and George Dorset were seen going home alone together the night before. Lily explains that they had been separated at the party they were at, and Bertha had not shown up at the station when she had said she would, so they went on without her. Carry warns her to be careful, and Lily decides that it would not hurt to begin a friendship with Mrs. Bry as she exits the casino.

On her way back to the Sabrina, she meets George Dorset, who is obviously in a state of anxiety. He tells Lily that neither his wife nor Ned Silverton had returned to the yacht until 7am that morning. He is extremely upset at the implications of this, and decides to go and talk to Lawrence Selden about a divorce.

Lily decides that although she is a friend with George Dorsets, her sympathies lay with Bertha, and she vows to help her through her crisis in any way she can. However, upon her return to the Sabrina, Bertha accuses Lily of not waiting for her at the train station, and of deliberately manipulating her husband into leaving without her. She accuses Lily of bringing on one of Dorset's attacks, due to her immoral behavior the previous night. Lily leaves the conversation feeling nervous and with a sense of trepidation for what the next days will bring.

Book 2: Chapter 2 Analysis

Once again, our attention is drawn to Lily's inability to judge what is appropriate and what is not in her friendships with men. A more careful young lady would not in those times have allowed herself to be seen alone with a man who was not "hers" at such a late hour. As we know, Lily is not careful, and this habitual imprudence that will continue to get Lily in trouble.

Carry Fischer's implications when she warns Lily of the rumor about her and George Dorset are sinister. They are echoed when Dorset confides in her his suspicions of his wife and Ned Silverton. The true extent of their severity is revealed when Bertha Dorset

makes it clear to Lily that she is going to clear her own name by assigning the blame to Lily.

Book 2: Chapter 3

Book 2: Chapter 3 Summary

Selden receives a telegram from Lily that George Dorset is coming to see him. He waits for Dorset, and hears his sordid tale. After his meeting with Selden, George Dorset returns to the Sabrina, where the air is tense. Lily is bewildered and a little afraid of Bertha's attitude, which seems to indicate that she thinks it is she who has been wronged, not her husband. Everyone aboard the ships tries to appear as though nothing is wrong. The only apparent difference is that Ned Silverton, Bertha's lover, has not been seen since the incident.

The next morning, Lily meets Selden, and he tells her that he believes the couple has been able to reconcile their differences, and that they will most likely not divorce after all. Although he reassures her that nothing will come of the incident, he is concerned for Lily's safety in the matter. He knows that Bertha Dorset is ruthless, and will stop at nothing to clear her name. He decides to tell her of his concern for her at a dinner party he has been invited to that evening. He corners her, and requests that she leave the yacht. She refuses because of the fact that she wants to be there to support Bertha in case anything does happen.

Selden's suspicions are confirmed when Bertha, at the end of dinner, announces that Lily will not be returning with them to the Sabrina that night. Lily keeps her composure, and asks Selden to see her to her cab. She asks him to take her to a hotel, and he finds her a place with the Stepneys for the night.

Book 2: Chapter 3 Analysis

In chapter 3, Lawrence Selden becomes Lily's protector, a role he will continue to assume throughout the whole rest of Book 2. His premonitions are correct, and although she does not heed his advice, he is still there to find her a place to stay after Bertha's betrayal.

It is at this point in the novel, more than anywhere else, that Wharton most criticizes both society and the mean and competitive spirit that exists between women. Through Bertha's rejection of Lily and through society's willingness to believe and condone this action that unjustly, unquestioningly banishes from society one of their own , she comments on the shallow significance that is placed on friendship.

Book 2: Chapter 4

Book 2: Chapter 4 Summary

Two weeks after Lily's humiliating return from Europe, her aunt dies. Her grieving was admittedly laced with some consolation that her assured impending inheritance would bring. Lily has yet another rude awakening when she is left a mere $10,000, and the rest of her aunt's $400,000 estate is given to her cousin, Grace Stepney.

Upon the realization that she has been cast off both by society and her aunt, the rest of her family effectively abandons her. Lily's only friend who has shown her any loyalty is Gerty Farish. Lily speculates with Gerty that she was disinherited because her aunt had heard rumors that she was trying to marry George Dorset. Gerty advises her to tell everyone the truth about the situation in Monte Carlo, and clear her name, but Lily merely laughs at her naivete, telling her that the only difference between a falsehood and a truth is whom people choose to believe.

One day when Lily and Gerty are out having lunch, they meet Carry Fischer and Judy Trenor. Lily reads the plain accusation in Judy Trenor's eyes, and vows to pay back the money she owes Gus Trenor with her inheritance. She then finds out that the $10,000 will not be paid to her for at least a year. She asks her now wealthy cousin, Grace Stepney, if she could borrow the sum until her inheritance was paid. Grace replied by accusing Lily's unethical lifestyle of being the sole cause of Mrs. Peniston's death.

Book 2: Chapter 4 Analysis

Upon her realization that she has been disinherited, Lily is struck by the ironic coincidence that her inheritance amounted almost exactly to her debt to Trenor. Although the injustice of her disinheritance is a shock, she tries to make light of it in typical Lily fashion. She tells Gerty that she is laughing about her situation because she "discovered early that crying makes my nose red, and the knowledge has helped me through several painful episodes."

Wharton further illustrates the irony of the situation in Lily's comment about truth being relative to the respective wealth of each party telling the story. Being poor, Lily's side of the story is not heard, which worsens her financial situation through her disinheritance. Wharton once again demonstrates her disgust for New York's high society in the actions of Lily's family members directly after the reading of the will. Despite her disgraced social position, she is treated cordially by her family until the will is read and they realize that her financial position will not change significantly. In that instant, there is an immediate and noticeable change in their attitudes towards her.

Book 2: Chapter 5

Book 2: Chapter 5 Summary

One day Lily sees Carry Fischer in the street. Carry apologizes profusely for not speaking out in Lily's defense against Bertha Dorset, and invites her to stay for a while with the Gormers, the new family Carry is working with. The Gormer crowd is a completely different social set than the in which circle Lily used to be included. Carry describes it as a "social Coney Island," where all oddballs, misfits, and troublemakers are welcome, as long as they are contributing to the merriment. Lily accepts the invitation, and although she has previously snubbed this particular area of society, she is grateful for their friendly acceptance of her.

Lily gets on well with the Gormers and their friends, and at the end of the weekend, Carry Fischer suggests that Lily take her place for a summer in Alaska. She accepts, despite Gerty Farish's disapproval, and becomes an integral part of the Gormers' circle.

Upon her return from Alaska, Carry Fischer gives her a piece of advice. She must marry as soon as possible, adding that she has two very good possibilities. George Dorset is once again on the brink of divorce with Bertha, and he would marry Lily immediately if he were given the opportunity. In addition, Simon Rosedale, whose enormous wealth has continued to grow in the past few months since his first proposal to Lily, has made it obvious to her on the few occasions that they've seen each other that his offer still stands. She decides that she will fix her sights on Simon Rosedale, and now that she does not have her social ladder to offer him, she will make him marry her for love.

Book 2: Chapter 5 Analysis

Lily's shallowness is now unmistakable. She shamelessly uses her new friends, the Gormers, who she had once shunned, for social status and material comforts that she can now no longer find anywhere else. She is now attracted to Simon Rosedale and the wealth he represents, and for his success in beginning to ascend the social ladder that she once was at the top of. It is interesting to note that her concept of love is getting Simon Rosedale to marry her now that she has nothing to offer him.

Book 2: Chapter 6

Book 2: Chapter 6 Summary

One day, when Lily is attending her hostess at their country house on Long Island, she meets George Dorset. He apologizes profusely to her for his leading role in her status as a social outcast, and in a roundabout, beseeching way, asks her to marry him. Lily is tempted for a moment by the "revenge and rehabilitation" that his offer would bring, but decides not to give into weakness, and refuses him. Upon returning from her walk, she sees that George Dorset was on the Gormer grounds because Bertha Dorset was at the house visiting with Mrs. Gormer. She senses that Bertha is up to something in Mrs. Gormer's attitude towards Lily, and returns to New York City for the winter. Soon after her return, she is visited by George Dorset, who renews his marriage proposal earnestly. She once again refuses him, asking that they not see each other again.

This visit reinforces her conviction that she must try to marry Simon Rosedale as soon as possible, as she considers him the lesser of two evils. She sees him at Carry Fischer's house one evening, and she is struck by his gentle playing with Carry's daughter. After dinner, Carry accompanies Lily to her room. She once again stresses the importance of Lily's swift marriage to one of her suitors, and reveals that Bertha Dorset has begun to start rumors about Lily to Lily's new friends the Gormers. Carry reiterates that if Lily does not retaliate against Bertha's meanness by marrying her husband, she should at least acquire the social advantage to fight her by an alliance with Simon Rosedale.

Book 2: Chapter 6 Analysis

Lily's assessment of her two options is summed up as "baseness for baseness, she hated the other least." In saying this, Wharton once again speaks out against the shallowness of Lily's feelings, and her inability to marry for anything resembling love. She feels slightly less repulsed by Rosedale than by George Dorset, and that is how she chooses whom she will marry. Carry's urgency for Lily to marry foreshadows that she will make this decision characteristically too late.

Book 2: Chapter 7

Book 2: Chapter 7 Summary

The morning after Carry's words of caution, Lily has made up her mind that she will marry Rosedale. She takes a walk with him, and without hesitation, accepts his previous marriage proposal. He surprises her by telling her that although he loves her more than ever, he has no intention of marrying her now that her place in society has changed. He speaks frankly with her, accusing her of only wanting to marry him because she now doesn't believe she can do any better. He compares his thirst for society to a wealthy man with a taste for horse racing or art. She is refreshed by his honesty, and tries to bid him goodbye on friendly terms.

Rosedale then surprises her once again. He acknowledges that he knows about the letters of Bertha Dorset's that she purchased from the cleaning lady of the Benedick, and urges her to use them to blackmail the Dorsets into clearing her name. She balks at the idea, and he thinks it is because the recipient of the letters, Lawrence Selden, is the man she truly loves.

Book 2: Chapter 7 Analysis

Lily's first thought as she begins her walk with Rosedale is to compare the loveliness of the day with her walk with Lawrence Selden, when she chose an afternoon in Selden's company over a marriage proposal from the wealthy Percy Gryce. The author makes us think that she will once again refuse a proposal from a wealthy suitor based on her feelings for Selden. Ironically, the novel takes a very different turn, and she is refused by Rosedale.

The first theme Wharton illustrates here is Lily's confused idea of the morality of a given situation. Whereas she does not see the immorality of taking money from the husband of her best friend, she does see the immorality of using the letters she acquired for the blackmail of her enemy. The only difference the reader is led to see in the morality of these two incidences is that one is destructive to Lily's future, and the other would be the final answer to all her hopes and desires. The only way the reader can rationalize Lily's decision-making process is by assuming that her confused love for Lawrence Selden is the key to every decision she has made throughout the novel.

This ambiguous love for Lawrence Selden is the second theme Wharton indirectly highlights in this chapter. Would Lily have used the letters to blackmail Bertha had they been to a different man? We can only speculate that she would.

Book 2: Chapter 8

Book 2: Chapter 8 Summary

Upon Lily's return to the city following her refusal of Rosedale's proposal, she feels more than ever the burden of her social isolation. Even her friendship with Gerty has dulled slightly, as Gerty's sympathetic presence grates on her frayed nerves. One day, on an infrequent visit to Gerty's shabby apartment, she sees relatives of Ned Silverton. Gerty tells them that Bertha has cast Ned off, and he is so devastated that he has taken to gambling. The family is now destitute, and looking for ways to support themselves. Lily sees this as a future possibility for herself, and it saddens her . She confides in Gerty that she cannot sleep, and is tortured by thoughts of both her past and her future. Gerty makes the mistake of telling her she looks unwell, which upsets her further. She tells Gerty that Carry Fischer has promised to look for work for her as a social secretary, as she now has no other way of supporting herself.

Lily leaves Gerty worried for her mental and physical health, and confides her worries to Lawrence Selden, who has returned from Europe. She suggests that Lawrence goes to visit Lily to try to cheer her up, and get her to see that the only way Lily will survive the upheaval of the past year of her life is to completely cut ties with everyone from her former social circle.

Selden agrees to go to Lily, although he is sure that nothing he will say can change Lily's mind. Despite his apprehension, the mere thought of Lily in distress makes him realize that he will never be truly free from her hold on his heart. When he arrives at her hotel however, he is surprised to find that she is gone.

Book 2: Chapter 8 Analysis

While speaking to Lawrence Selden, Gerty recounts a story from her childhood about Lily. After a long separation from her friend, Gerty had run up and tried to embrace her. Lily admonished her, asking her not to kiss her until she was asked. This story parallels the poor treatment that Lily habitually gives Gerty. As her only loyal friend, Lily takes it for granted that Gerty will always be there for her, and treats her as such.

Lily is frightened at the prospect of having to work, a fate she would have thought unthinkable even a few months prior. She puts on a brave face for Gerty, however, and writes to her that she has found a position through Carry Fischer as a social secretary. This position, however, will only serve to further sully her name and begin the final stage of her descent.

Book 2: Chapter 9

Book 2: Chapter 9 Summary

Lily awakens the morning after beginning her new job once again in the lap of luxury. She has taken a position as the social secretary to a divorcee who has recently moved to New York. Through her position, Lily is introduced to yet another circle of New York City high society. This circle has neither the class of Lily's first circle, nor the fun-loving grace of her second. It was a world "over-heated, over-upholstered, and over-fitted with mechanical appliances for the gratification of fantastic requirements, while the comforts of civilized life were as unattainable as in a desert." Lily's employer, Mrs. Hatch, was the center of this circle, along with her friend, Mr. Melville Stancy, and some of Lily's previous acquaintances, including Ned Silverton and Freddy Van Osburgh. She is not particularly happy in her new position, but feels that it is better than the shabby hotel that is now her only alternative.

One day she is paid a visit by Lawrence Selden. They exchange their usual friendly banter, although it is tainted by her faint accusation that he had not been to see her sooner, and he retaliates by saying that he knew she would not want him unless he could be of use to her. Despite the bitter turn the conversation takes, she acknowledges to herself that even the most insignificant aspects of his being were "inwoven with her deepest life." She fights her feelings for him, and is cold to his offer of assistance. He tries to talk her into leaving her position to live with Gerty, but his suggestion makes her even more determined to stay where she is.

Book 2: Chapter 9 Analysis

Lily's decision to take up a secretarial position with the vulgar Mrs. Hatch symbolizes the last rung on Lily's social ladder, before plummeting into the darkness of the manual workforce and poverty. She is uncomfortable in her position within the circle, as well as with its moral ambiguity. However, Selden's suggestion that she should leave with him is met with strong resistance.

This meeting with Selden is a symbol of their last chance at happiness. For Selden, it is the last time he will try to reach out to her on a romantic level, although it takes the form of protection. Lily, despite the fact that she finds herself still in love with him, cannot allow herself to overcome the stubbornness with which she clings to her ideals of creature comforts. Hereafter, she will be given no more chances, and she will begin her final, continual, downward spiral.

Book 2: Chapter 10

Book 2: Chapter 10 Summary

Although Selden's advice went unheeded, she was soon on her own again following a scandal involving Mrs. Hatch and Freddy Van Osburgh. She takes a position trimming hats, although she is terrible at it, and is constantly being reprimanded for her poor performance.

Due to her inability to sleep, she has developed an addiction to a sleeping medication, which she purchases with a stolen prescription of Mrs. Hatch's. One day as she is making her illicit purchase, the chemist warns her that the medicine could be lethal if the dosage was increased. She hardly listens, simply relieved to have the small vial in her possession. On her way home from the chemist, she runs into Simon Rosedale, and he invites her to tea. She confesses the past details of her transaction with Gus Trenor, and of her current sordid living conditions. She does so out of loneliness, but also begins to recognize a kindness in him that she had not seen before. He offers to help her, but she refuses him, allowing him only to escort her home.

Lily has thoughts of using her inheritance, once paid, to establish a small hat-making business of her own, but knows that she cannot live under the hefty weight of her debt to Gus Trenor. These are the thoughts that trouble her during her waking hours and plague her at night. Her only respite from her thoughts is the small but deadly vial of chloral (chlorinated ethyl alcohol) by her bed.

Book 2: Chapter 10 Analysis

At the end of chapter 10, Lily utters her first sincere words to Rosedale, that she would be happy if he would come and visit her. The irony of the situation is that her fallen status has given her a more humble, sincere outlook on life, and contrary to her past snobbery, she now feels that she is in no way better than anyone else. She does not even feel herself superior to the common women with whom she works, as some of them have shown her a kindness and acceptance that she never had in her own social circle.

Book 2: Chapter 11

Book 2: Chapter 11 Summary

Lily has been fired from her job, and she wanders the streets aimlessly to avoid the loneliness that plagues her when she stays in her small room at the boarding house where she lives. One day she arrives home to see Mr. Rosedale waiting for her. He is once again appalled at her living conditions, and offers to loan her the money to pay Gus Trenor, in a "plain business arrangement, such as one man would make with another." She once again declines his offer, since it was exactly the type of arrangement that Gus Trenor proposed. He is unable to understand her stubborn refusal of his kind intentions, but the same stubbornness makes her more attractive to him.

Lily takes no sleeping drops that night. She lies awake and ponders the offer that Mr. Rosedale's visit had obviously renewed. She herself is unable to understand why and how her moral values are constructed, but once again, she is unable to reconcile herself to blackmailing Bertha.

She rises the next morning tired after her sleepless night of contemplation. She leaves the boardinghouse early for her morning walk, and stops for a cup of tea along the way. Inside, she reaches the decision that she will confront Bertha with the letters and marry Rosedale. She hurries home, takes the letters out of her trunk, and begins to walk to the Dorset's house.

On her way, she passes by the Benedick, and she is suddenly stung by the realization that her actions would harm the one person who has given her "the only spring her heart had ever known." She once again changes her mind, and decides instead to visit Selden at his apartment.

Book 2: Chapter 11 Analysis

In Chapter 11, Lily realizes that Rosedale's love for her is not simply based on her beauty. She recognizes that "it was as though the sense in her of unexplained scruples and resistance had the same attraction as the delicacy of feature, the fastidiousness of manner." It is a unique experience for Lily to realize that she has lovable qualities other than her beauty and social graces.

Once again, Lily has arrived at a moment that could change her life forever, that could fulfill her desires in every way imaginable. Once again however, she is detained by the thought of her love for Lawrence Selden.

Book 2: Chapter 12

Book 2: Chapter 12 Summary

Lily goes up to Selden's apartment. It is as she remembers it the day she came to visit while waiting for the train, two years ago. Her first words are an apology for the awkwardness of their parting the last time he came to visit her. He also apologizes, and she begins to cry, suddenly confused by her reason for being there. She feels that her presence is becoming embarrassing to him, and she tells him she must go. Before leaving, she tells him that she will always remember their conversation at Bellomont, and that he has helped her unknowingly through difficult times. She confesses that she realized too late that she loved him, but is helped by the knowledge of what might have been. She tells him she will marry, and asks if she could leave the old Lily Bart with him for safekeeping. They touch for a moment, and in that moment she realizes that she cannot betray him by giving his letters to Bertha. She asks him to make up the fire, and before she leaves, drops the bundle of letters into it.

Book 2: Chapter 12 Analysis

Lily is more than ever torn by the two paths she may take. Her decision has been made and remade more than once through the course of the day. She knows that choosing the life of luxury with Rosedale will mean saying goodbye to Selden, whom she finally recognizes her love for, and to a certain extent herself. She realizes that it is the best part of her that she would have to leave behind in Selden's study, and realizes that although she no longer has a future with Selden, she cannot betray him and marry Rosedale. Her burning of the letters she has kept for so long as a possible way out of her lot of poverty symbolizes her rejection of that course of action, finally. She is resigned to her fate, and she will keep her integrity by saying goodbye to the life of luxury of which she has always dreamed.

Book 2: Chapter 13

Book 2: Chapter 13 Summary

She is held up for a few moments by the nobility of her actions, and is happy with her final decision. Before long however, she is weighed down by her fatigue and the rain. She sits down in the park to rest, and her thoughts turn to the Chloral and its waning effects on her sleep. Her main preoccupation now is the fear that Chloral's effects will disappear completely, and she will be left night and day with her thoughts.

A young woman appears by her side, asking if she is sick. Lily recognizes her to be one of Gerty's charity cases she had met during her momentary philanthropic phase. The girl, Nettie Struther, had been ill, and Lily had donated the money for her to receive treatment. Nettie has since recovered fully from her illness, married, and had a child. She is extremely grateful for Lily's past assistance, and has ever since looked up to Lily as a role model. She sees that Lily is not well, and invites her to her house for tea until she has recovered. Seeing how contented the girl is with her meager lifestyle is refreshing and gratifying for Lily, and after a cup of tea she feels her strength return to her, and she leaves.

When she returns to the boardinghouse, her spirits are further buoyed by the unexpected arrival of a letter. It is her inheritance check for $10,000. She balances her accounts, and finds that once her debt to Gus Trenor is paid, along with the incidental expenses accrued during her time with Mrs. Hatch, she would have barely enough to live on for three or four months. Lily realizes that she is less concerned with material poverty than she is about the solitary loneliness and rootless existence it necessitated. She finds herself envious of Nettie Struther's frail grasp of happiness, and understands finally that although she is poor, she has the love of a devoted husband and child.

She dreads the thought that she may not be strong enough to use the money to repay her debt to Trenor, so she makes him out a check of $9000 immediately. After doing so, she is seized with exhaustion from not sleeping for two nights, and from the stress of the day's important decisions. Still she cannot sleep, and decides to increase her nightly dosage of Chloral despite the warning of the chemist.

As she sinks into a deep sleep, she begins to dream. She dreams first of Nettie Struther's child lying next to her in bed, and then of a word that she must tell Selden. She is unable to remember what the word is, but feels the urgency of communicating it to him.

Book 2: Chapter 13 Analysis

The strength that Lily gains from her few moments with Nettie Struther and her child is a powerful force that in many ways shapes the ambiguous ending to the novel. In Nettie's apartment, Lily glimpses a love that exists not because of material comforts, but in spite

of it. Realizing that as much as she may want this and to finally be able to understand that it can exist, she is a product of her society and can never attain it. Although her death is ambiguous, one conclusion is that the realization of what she could have had with Selden, but now has lost through her need for material wealth, drives her to suicide. A second conclusion is that her death was an accidental overdoes, and that upon understanding the existence of this love, she would not have killed herself, and hoped to wake fresh from a sound night's sleep, ready to start the rest of her life with Selden.

Book 2: Chapter 14

Book 2: Chapter 14 Summary

Selden wakes the following morning with a sense of urgency. He feels there is something he must say to Lily, a word left unsaid during her visit the previous night. He goes immediately to her boardinghouse, but to his surprise, he is greeted not by Lily, but by Gerty. The doctor has confirmed that it was an accidental overdose of Chloral, which she was taking for her insomnia, not a suicide attempt. He has gone to initiate the formalities of the death announcement in order to keep up the appearance of an accidental cause of death, and Lawrence is left alone with Lily to go through her belongings. He is repulsed by the sight of a letter to Gus Trenor, and he realizes its implications when he finds the check made out to Trenor for $9000. He finally understands the truth of her arrangement with Trenor, and can make peace with her memory. He realizes that despite all external factors contriving to keep them apart, they had loved each other, each in their own way, but that the love had been real. In their last moments alone together, he utters the word that he had came to tell her, the same word that had been on her lips when she drew in her last breath.

Book 2: Chapter 14 Analysis

The novel ends with a word on the lips of both Lily and Selden. That word, presumably, is love. It is interesting that Wharton chooses to summarize the complexities of the story with this one simple word, but it is also indicative of the genre. The novel of manners was developed during the Romanticism movement, a movement based on emotion rather than reason, the ideal rather than reality. Wharton points to this reality when Selden concedes through his grief that although they had not been fated to enjoy their love, at least "it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives." This would indicate that while the reality of their love never materialized, the ideal of it stayed whole and nourished both he and Lily through the difficult years they shared together.

The House of Mirth combines elements of both Romanticism and Realism, while not belonging strictly to either. The Realism movement emerged from Darwinian ideas of natural selection and the survival of the fittest. Wharton's portrayal of New York's high society certainly can be said to have an animalistic survival element to it, and we see the combination of both Romanticism and Realism in Lily's death. The dark truth of Realism shows us that through the novel we see a very long downward spiral from high society to the depths of poverty, with the naturally selective process of New York high society squeezing Lily out into the cold. However, Romanticism plays a role in the end of the novel, as we see that the one element of Lily that remained after her death was love for Selden.

Characters

Lily Bart

As *The House of Mirth* opens, its heroine, Lily Bart, is an unmarried woman in her late twenties. Though Lily was born into New York society, the financial ruin of her father brought to an end her world of ease, luxury, and social stability. While she enjoys the comforts of home afforded by her wealthy Aunt Julia, Lily lacks the means to keep up with her circle of friends, who enjoy the finest objects and entertainment their wealth can bring them. As Lily scrambles to keep up with her mounting bills, she knows that her only hope to maintain her social position is to marry and marry well.

The House of Mirth traces Lily's course as she unsuccessfully attempts to fulfill this goal. She is unable to marry any of the men who offer their hand because of her own ambivalence. Every time Lily comes close to winning a husband, such as Percy Gryce, she finds herself unable to follow through on her plan. Her attraction to Laurence Selden is partly responsible for her changes of mind, but so is her own recognition of the coarseness, dullness, and pettiness that inhabit many of her acquaintances. In marrying for money, Lily would join their ranks, and a stubborn core prevents her from doing so. Lily continues to maintain hold of her finer spirit by refusing to use Bertha Dorset's love letters to Selden to blackmail her way back into society, and by denying herself a means to live by using her inheritance to repay Gus Trenor.

Although the book opens with Lily at the peak of New York society, by its end she has descended into its depths. She has been ill-used by her socalled friends and cast out of their society. Her attempts to earn a living fail miserably, for as she tells Selden in her final days, "I have tried hard but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person." Alone and penniless, Lily turns to Selden, who once loved her and who she once loved, but when he fails her, she takes an overdose of a sleeping draught. She dies the victim of a society that does not value a woman who plays by a more noble set of rules.

Bertha Dorset

Once Lily's friend, Bertha becomes her worst enemy. Bertha is a married woman, who in the course of the two years the novel takes place, has several affairs, including one with Selden. In the midst of an affair and needing to keep her husband George occupied, Bertha invites Lily to accompany the couple on a trip to Europe. When her husband discovers the affair, Bertha sacrifices Lily to save herself by implying publicly that Lily has attempted to seduce George. Not content with destroying Lily's reputation in Europe, Bertha also spreads rumors and gossip in New York, to the extent that Lily is completely cast aside by her former friends. Unbeknownst to Bertha, Lily holds power over her in the form of love letters that Bertha sent Selden. Lily refuses to capitalize on these letters, and when she burns the letters and dies, Bertha's secret is destroyed at the same time.

George Dorset

Cuckolded husband George Dorset is married to a woman who disrespects him and is unfaithful to him. After he finds out about his wife Bertha's affair in Monte Carlo, he turns to Lily for help. He asks her to help him prove Bertha's unfaithfulness, and says if she does so, he will marry her, but Lily refuses his request.

Gerty Farish

Considered to be drab and colorless, Gerty Farish is a social worker. She represents the "new woman" of the early twentieth century with her economic independence and career. Although she enjoys an enriching career, Gerty is unable to find romantic fulfillment. She devotes herself to Lily as she would devote herself to any of the other poor people to whom she ministers. As society abandons Lily, Gerty tries to help her. She obtains a job for Lily at the millinery shop and begs Lily to turn her back on her former way of life.

Carry Fischer

Carry Fischer, a divorcée, is a professional companion to wealthy society women. She befriends Lily after Lily's trip to Monte Carlo and tries to set Lily up in a profession similar to her own back in America. She also urges Lily to marry either George Dorset or Simon Rosedale.

Mattie Gormer

Mattie Gormer is a nouveau riche woman (meaning her fortune was recently acquired, as opposed to being "old money") who Lily meets through Carry Fisher. Lily travels as a companion to Mattie after her return from Monte Carlo, but once Mattie becomes friendly with Bertha Dorset, Lily's presence is no longer welcome.

Percy Gryce

The shy, dull Percy Gryce is one of Lily's suitors. Ignored by Lily, he marries a wealthy young woman instead.

Norma Hatch

Lily obtains employment as secretary to Norma Hatch, a rich woman from out West who has no place in New York society. Mrs. Hatch and her friends are conniving to get a young wealthy New Yorker to marry an older woman, and Selden, aware of Mrs. Hatch's unsavouriness, begs Lily to leave her employ. However, Lily does not leave until she is already implicated in the unsuccessful plan.

Aunt Julia Penniston

Aunt Julia, with whom Lily lives, helps out her niece with some bills like the dressmaker's, but does not provide any regular allowance. She is dismayed by some of Lily's behavior, such as her gambling, about which cousin Grace informs Aunt Julia. When Aunt Julia learns of Lily's adventures in Monte Carlo, she disinherits her. Aunt Julia dies before Lily returns to the United States, having left Lily only $10,000.

Simon Rosedale

Simon Rosedale is an interloper in New York society. Not only is he nouveau riche, he is Jewish. He speaks coarsely and uncouthly, yet at the same time he is one of the few people who show sensitivity to Lily's plight. For instance, he recognizes the difficulties foisted upon her by lowerclass life. At one time Rosedale wanted to marry Lily, believing she would win him entry into New York aristocratic society. Later, when Lily wants to marry him, he refuses since her social banishment has stripped her of value.

Laurence Selden

Laurence Selden is a lawyer who inhabits the same circles as Lily. Like Lily, he is not wealthy but because he is a man, he is able to work at a profession that allows him economic and social independence. Selden and Lily have been acquaintances for close to a decade. The two are attracted to each other, yet Selden does not have the financial means to marry Lily, nor is he convinced that he would like to do so. However, it is Selden's voice and opinions that continually prevent Lily from following through on her plans to marry a wealthy man. In a sense, Selden acts as Lily's moral arbiter. For example, he implores her to leave the Dorset's yacht and Mrs. Hatch's employ. At the same time, Selden is unable to offer Lily any support other than words, and, more importantly, fails Lily by believing the worst about her, such as that she had an affair with Gus Trenor. Before she takes the fatal overdose, Lily turns to Selden, looking for the love he felt for her in the past. Selden allows Lily to leave that night, but he goes to visit her the next day, for "he had found the word he meant to say to her." It is too late, however; Lily is dead.

Grace Stepney

Cousin Grace Stepney makes sure that Aunt Julia knows of Lily's "bad" habits, like playing cards for money, along with the rumors society is spreading about Lily and Gus Trenor. After Lily is disinherited, Grace becomes the inheritor of Aunt Julia's estate. When Lily approaches Grace, desperately seeking money, she turns her down.

Nettie Struther

Nettie Struther is a former prostitute to whom Lily once gave money. She reemerges at the end of the novel, married to a man who accepts Nettie's past and the child she bore out of wedlock. Nettie runs a slum kitchen.

Gus Trenor

Judy's husband Gus develops an infatuation with Lily. Asked by Lily to help with her investments, he deceives her by giving her his own money. However, Lily does not learn of this deceit until much later. Gus attempts to use his financial power over Lily to make her his mistress. She refuses, but feels that she must pay him back the $10,000 he has already given her.

Judy Trenor

Judy Trenor is a force in New York society. As Lily notes, "Where Judy Trenor led, all the world would follow." After Lily's return from Monte Carlo, and after Judy learns that her husband has given Lily money, she cuts her former friend out of her life.

Social Concerns

Before The House of Mirth took the literary world by storm, Edith Wharton's writing garnered little attention; most reviewers considered her first works amateur efforts. The House of Mirth's overwhelming success proved that Wharton was not a dilettante. Though her position of privilege (Wharton was born and remained a very wealthy woman) slowed her rise to literary fame, it gave her an excellent vantage point from which to observe and critique the mores of America's upper crust. Unlike Jane Austen, Wharton was a writer who wrote novels about a high society to which she actually had membership. Wharton notes the advantage this membership gives her in the text of The House of Mirth: while Lawrence Selden and Lily Bart (the novel's heroine) languish on the grass at Bellomont, Selden notes that "the people who take society as an escape from work are putting it to its proper use." For Wharton, though, society is work. Here, she suggests that the idle reader or writer of novels of manners might take pleasure in the activities of the idle rich. Wharton's upbringing gave her a great affection for the old manners, which, by the end of the nineteenth century, were made increasingly obsolete by a new class of high society members whose inclusion depended more on their bank accounts than their breeding. In The House of Mirth, she expresses anxiety about how this new and frivolous society had so lost its connection with the old codes of conduct that it could destroy one of the finest members of its inner circle.

A leading social concern, then, is with the emergence of the noveau riche in polite society. Characters such as Wellington Brys and Simon Rosedale represent a new class of wealthy people who have entered society by the unheard-of means of earning their money. These people are, in Wharton's estimation, unfit to move in genteel circles because of their vulgarity and lack of restraint. To Wharton's mind, the purpose of the idle rich is to adorn, to serve as arbiters of taste. The Bryses show a great lack of taste in the gaudy design of their new home where "one had to touch the marble columns to learn they were not of cardboard, to seat one's self in one of the damask-andgold arm-chairs to be sure it was not painted against the wall." This pervasive artificiality betrays a lack of dignified taste, the hallmark of a healthy aristocracy.

This concern over the infection of genteel society by gauche businessmen might seem trivial, another manifestation of the country-club mentality that seeks to isolate the privileged from the unclean masses. For Wharton, however, there were real consequences for the general health of the republic when its elite lost its dignity. In her study of interior design, The Decoration of Homes (1897), Wharton cites architectural history and claims that taste is a hallmark of civilization. Ostentation marked the decadence of the Roman Empire and contributed to its degeneration and collapse. The drama of high society's struggle against the uncultivated, then, becomes one that affects the republic-as-empire.

Wharton's implication is that after the upper crust loses dignity to decadence, the lower classes follow suit, beginning a general downward trend for the nation or civilization. Lily, who is eventually destroyed by the more frivolous element of New York society, embodies the old values of taste, beauty, and decorum that Wharton admired.

In the pivotal tableaux vivants scene, Lily alone designs her own performance, displaying her ability to stand out as a pillar of nobility. Unfortunately, as Selden notes at one point, "a society like ours wastes such good material in producing its little patch of purple." In the Gilded Age of the 1890s, Wharton argues, the elite are no longer content to lead the democracy by example of good taste but are increasingly engaging in wasteful acts of what Thorstein Veblen (Wharton's contemporary) called "conspicuous consumption."

Today, though, this somewhat antiquated concern about the health of a democracy's aristocracy is lost beneath the din of Wharton's attacks against patriarchy. The House of Mirth is generally read today as a feminist book; Lily's fate is that of all women whose only vocation is marriage. In describing Lily's upbringing, Wharton makes clear that she "had been fashioned to adorn and delight."

The few skills she has— the ability to trim hats or make a good cup of tea— serve only to secure and satisfy a husband. This becomes clear in the final scenes when, abandoned by the friends who once support her, Lily fails to earn her own living. Where Lily fails, Selden's cousin, Gerty Farrish, succeeds, offering something of a role model for Wharton's readers. Gerty lives alone and is therefore free to pursue her own philanthropic interests. Aside from Lily, Gerty may be the most sympathetically handled character in The House of Mirth, suggesting that Wharton did place a great deal of value in a woman's ability to become self-sufficient. Lily's own language suggests that such autonomy is her own goal; in conversation with Selden, she speaks of the "republic of the spirit." This phrase almost seems like something that could come out of Emerson's writing, implying that Gerty's character gives Wharton an opportunity to apply Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance (usually gendered male) to women.

More than the dependence on the others caused by the inadequacy of her education, though, Lily's doom comes as the result of a double standard that lets men and married women engage in questionable behavior without consequences while the unmarried girl must remain especially careful of her behavior. Put simply, Lily is an innocent whose only transgressions are lapses in her vigilant maintenance of appearances. Nevertheless, because some of the behavior gives the impression of a possible impropriety, she becomes a victim of unwelcome advances, is disinherited by Mrs. Penniston, and is pushed away by Selden. Wharton is highly critical of a society so obsessed with appearance that even a girl as innocent as Lily can be banished. In such a society, Lily herself becomes a kind of jailer, imposing great restrictions on her own behavior. At one point, Wharton describes society as a kind of cage in which Lily locks herself:

How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its 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.

What makes Lily's death in the final pages so tragic is not that she is forced into a society that would ultimately destroy her but that she chooses to remain in its ranks

even after she lost the funds to support her membership. Though she chafes against its rules, she subscribes to them, engaging in a self-discipline that borders on sadism.

Techniques

The House of Mirth certainly qualifies as a realist novel, even while revealing the inadequacy of that term. Looking back at the literature of a century ago, scholars and teachers often use the word realism as a blanket term for the novels that experimented with new techniques for capturing authentic experience. Coming on the heels of many of these experiments, Wharton's book employs the styles developed as a result of several of them.

Books of this period are generally long, filled with what seem to the reader to be trivial details. In books by authors like William Dean Howells and Theodore Dreiser, however, detail played a crucial function.

As the industrial machine expanded its capacity and replaced goods once made in the household with readymade wares, the United States increasingly became a consumer society. As this happened, people began to make judgments of character based on the products people bought and used. The prints on the walls, the books on the shelves, and the soap on the counter all communicated a great deal about an individual's class status. Realizing this, authors began to include these details as an elucidation of character, often going so far as to give brand names to the goods characters use. Though our familiarity with these products is lost, it is important to consider the resonance they had with contemporary readers.

Wharton, writing about individuals in high society, did nothing so vulgar as give brand names, but The House of Mirth is very interested in the objects its characters use.

Before becoming a novelist, Wharton published treatises on interior decoration. For her, how one decorates a room says everything about one's taste. Therefore, it is essential when reading this work to pay close attention to the descriptions Wharton offers. When Wharton describes Selden's rooms in the opening scene, for example, it becomes clear that though small and poor, Selden's space is dignified. This nobility of design reflects on him, and gives the reader a valuable clue about his character.

In addition to the rich description, The House of Mirth has a good deal of excellent dialogue. Only a year after the novel came out, Wharton, in conjunction with a playwright named Clyde Fitch, produced a theatrical adaptation of the work. Though the play failed, the decision to dramatize the novel underscores its reliance on dialogue.

Unlike the novels of Henry James, Wharton's friend and contemporary, The House of Mirth focuses on characters' surfaces: what they say and do. Though she does effectively portray Lily's interior life, Wharton gives more space to the manner in which she moves through the world, making the novel much more readable than James' ponderous works.

Thematic Overview

One of the most consistent themes in The House of Mirth concerns the inevitability of one's fate. From the opening pages, the novel is permeated with a sense of doom.

That the mood of the novel's early pages predicts the ultimate destruction of the heroine comes as no surprise; in her autobiographical writing, Wharton asserts that she always tries to work backward from her ending. But Wharton deals with fate— a highly conventional theme in literature—in an altogether unorthodox way. It would not be unfair to accuse Wharton of mixing her allusions. She often presents Lily's doom as mythical, tying her heroine to the illfated nymphs of Greek lore. At the same time, she employs the language of social Darwinism, seeming to argue that Lily's death is inevitable because her lack of funds makes her unfit for the new social order.

Another theme is explored via the relationship between Lily and Selden. Like Romeo and Juliet, their love seems doomed from the very beginning. But where Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers were separated by their families, Lily and Selden are, paradoxically, separated by their similarities.

Both are poor members of an aristocracy, given membership to high society because of their heritage and breeding but unable to live comfortably off old money. Though they would clearly not starve if they married, Wharton makes it clear that their shared poverty is the only true bar to their happiness. She thus makes their failure to come together doubly tragic: they must remain apart even while they recognize the absurdity of deferring passion for financial reasons.

Wharton also deals with the theme of the American Dream in The House of Mirth.

Unlike the novels of Horatio Alger, which were still quite popular in her day, Wharton's book reveals the impossibility of the dream of success. People in Wharton's story do pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but these are all men. Lily, dependent on men for her financial security, cannot even participate in the mythical quest to become self-made. Thus, Wharton turns the American Dream on its head, uncovering the central hypocrisy of an ideal self-reliance that is ultimately gender restrictive.

Themes

Women's Roles

As seen in *The House of Mirth*, women in early twentieth-century society had little chance to play any role other than wife and mother. The female leaders of society, Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset, derive their power and social standing from their marriages. The women who work as companions, such as Carry Fisher, have been married in the past. Lily's only goal in life, the only "profession" for which she has been trained, has been to make a good marriage. When she fails to reach this achievement, she has no skills or even inner resources upon which to draw. Though she attempts to work, first as a professional companion and then as a milliner's assistant, her attempts are woefully inadequate, and Lily sinks deeper and deeper into poverty.

Only a few women in the novel choose alternate paths. Nettie Struther, a working-class woman, works out of her home and cares for her baby and husband. The unmarried Gerty Farish finds professional fulfillment as a social worker. Notably, Gerty is one of the few characters in the novel who truly cares for Lily. Even though she is neither a mother nor a wife, she is best at fulfilling the typically female role of nurturer.

Betrayal

Betrayal is at the heart of *The House of Mirth*. At almost every turn, Lily's friends and acquaintances betray her. Grace Stepney makes sure that Aunt Julia knows of Lily's bad habits, such as playing cards for money, and informs Aunt Julia that rumors are flying about Lily and Gus Trenor. Other times, the novel presents chains of betrayal. For example, Lily accepts money from Gus Trenor, thinking he is investing her own money, when in reality he is giving her his money in hopes of making her his mistress. When Judy Trenor finds out about Lily's acceptance of her husband's money, she casts Lily aside. The most damaging act of betrayal is played out by Bertha Dorset, who deliberately and falsely accuses Lily of trying to seduce her husband. In addition, Bertha actively sets out to ruin Lily's reputation and new acquaintanceships, to the extent of seeking out a friendship with Mattie Gormer, even though she occupies a lower rung on the social ladder, simply because she has employed Lily as a companion.

Ironically, Lily has at her disposal tools to betray her former friend in turn. She possesses Bertha's love letters to Selden. The public revelation of these love letters could bring about many different outcomes. She could give them to George Dorset, who would use them to get his muchwanted divorce, and then Lily could marry him. She could use them to force Bertha to befriend her again, and then reenter society as Simon Rosedale's wife. Lily, however, refuses to betray Bertha, even though her betrayal would be based in reality, not a lie. If she betrayed Bertha, Lily feels she would be betraying herself.

Appearances

Much is made of Lily's beauty throughout the novel, and this fixation on the physical body implicitly points to one of the novel's themes: the mutability of appearances. Lily's physical beauty leads men to desire her, but none of these men, including Percy Gryce and Gus Trenor, actually have any interest in knowing the "real" Lily Bart. They only want to possess her beauty. Selden, on the other hand, gets to know Lily better than almost anybody else. He learns that she feels conflicted both about marrying for money and the whole social milieu in which they move. However, when he sees things that look suspect, such as Lily leaving Gus Trenor's home, he immediately believes the worst of her, never troubling himself to look into the circumstances and discover the truth.

The appearance of impropriety is also key to Lily's situation and eventual downfall. From the opening chapter, when she is seen by Simon Rosedale leaving the lobby of Selden's apartment building, to the final chapter, when Selden views the letter she wrote to Trenor, she is constantly putting herself in positions where, without careful investigation, she could be judged harshly. At these times she is usually found wanting in propriety, even though in each case she has done nothing wrong. For example, she is accused of attempting to seduce George Dorset, an accusation that can be upheld because she was on the Dorsets' yacht alone with George. New York society also believes that Lily connived to marry one of their wealthy young men to an arriviste (a person who has recently attained high social status without merit) divorcée, a belief that can be upheld because Lily was in this divorceé's employ. In both of these instances, Selden begs Lily to leave her situations prior to the implications of her wrongdoing, but Lily, lacking the capacity to understand how deeply people can ill use others, refuses to do so.

Style

Symbolism

Lily is the most potent symbol of *The House of Mirth*. Like the flower, her name signifies her to be a beautiful, delicate breed. Indeed, Lily's uniqueness and exquisiteness is often noted by people around her. For instance, at the tableau party: "It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into Reynolds's canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace." The guests at the party note as well the "noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace, . . . [and] the touch of poetry in her beauty."

Lily has a finer sensibility than those around her. While Lily often acts in accordance with the social mores of her class, her actions demonstrate a more stringent moral calling than any of the other people who populate her world. She refuses to give Bertha's love letters to Selden to make her way back into the social scene, even though Bertha's deceit is what leads to her ultimate ostracism. She insists on paying back Gus even though he deceived her as to what the "investments" were, and despite the fact that he gave her money so she would sleep with him□in essence, attempting to turn her into a prostitute.

Metaphor and Imagery

The metaphor of the sea and water is crucial to *The House of Mirth*. Lily uses a seal that reads "Beyond! beneath a flying ship" to close her letters. As Katherine Joslin writes in *Edith Wharton*, this seal "symbolizes an impossible quest, the romantic flight to another world." Joslin points out how Wharton uses sea metaphors and imagery to depict Lily's plight as well as the environment of old New York. The world that Lily inhabits is one where the "new people" in society "rose to the surface with each recurring tide, and were either submerged beneath its rush or landed triumphantly beyond the reach of envious breakers." When Selden envisions rescuing Lily from marrying for money, he sees himself as dragging her back to land from a dangerous ship. He must carry her, not through "a clear rush of waves," but through "a clogging morass of old associations and habits." In many instances, Lily takes action that has a serious effect on her future, as when she neglects Percy Gryce at Bellomont. That day, the authorial voice notes, "She was like a water-plant in the flux of the tides, and today the whole current of her mood was carrying her toward Lawrence Selden." At other times, without money or a husband, Lily feels herself to be in the "dark seas," but when she feels safe again, it is as if she had "enough buoyancy to rise once more above her doubts."

Notably, the trip that Lily takes on the literal seas aboard the Dorset's yacht is what brings about her eventual downfall. After her return to New York, Lily continually perceives her position through water imagery. Unable to repay her debt to Trenor, she thinks about confiding her troubles in Selden, a thought that "became as seductive as

the river's flow to the suicide. The first plunge would be terrible□but afterward, what blessedness might come!" After she is snubbed by Judy Trenor, she "had the doomed sense of the castaway who has signaled in vain the fleeing sails." Water imagery is not used in Lily's final moments, but when Selden finds out that she is dead, and how wrongly he judged her, the "bitter waters of his life surged high about him, their sterile taste was on his lips."

Pacing

The first half of *The House of Mirth* details Lily's travails at a leisurely pace. The reader follows Lily in her attempts to make a good marriage within the New York social milieu and her overall dealings with society members. Life seems at Lily's fingertips; she can marry Percy Gryce if she so desires, she is making money from investments, and she is growing closer to Selden. Despite her "advanced" age of twenty-nine, she is still the belle of New York.

The second half of the book moves at a much quicker pace as it chronicles Lily's ejection from society because of rumors spread by her "friend" Bertha Dorset. After this treachery, Lily's downfall is swift. She is disinherited, forced to sell her services as a companion to the nouveau riche, and even fired from her apprenticeship as a milliner. The end of the novel finds Lily in far distant circumstances from where she was as its beginning. She occupies a dingy little room that she cannot even afford and finds herself cast out of her former circle. Alone and friendless, she dies, perhaps committing suicide. The pace of the writing in this half of the book fairly jumps from one terrible event to the next, an apt stylistic decision as it reflects the feelings of being unable to escape that which engulfs Lily. As the writing demonstrates, Lily is quickly drawn from one bad situation to a worse one. The pace of the book is perhaps nowhere as tellingly demonstrated as when Lily works for Mrs. Hatch: within the space of one chapter, Lily is exposed to an immoral circle that hopes to marry off a wealthy young bachelor to a much-older divorcée, is implicated by her role in this affair, and is accordingly ill judged by society.

Historical Context

New York City

The New York upper-class society of which Wharton writes in *The House of Mirth* could be characterized as one of affluence and relative ease. At the height of the social ladder were the aristocrats, such historical families as the Astors and the Vanderbilts. They came from old names and old money, and members of such families set the standards for other members of their social class. Arrivistes or the nouveau riche, people who had more recently earned their fortunes, also made up an important part of old New York society. Though they did not have a lustrous family history, they often held even greater wealth than the aristocratic families. The upper-class entertained themselves by attending the theater and opera; paying and receiving social calls; attending lunch, dinner, and house parties; traveling abroad; and summering in such fashionable spots as Newport, Rhode Island.

By contrast, New York was also associated with immigrants and poverty. Beginning in the mid-1800s, streams of immigrants, mostly from Europe, made New York their home. They sought opportunities for a better life, both economically and religiously, but many existed in miserable conditions. They lived in unhealthy, unsanitary, overcrowded tenement buildings. To earn enough money to survive, many families had to send their children to work as well. By the turn of the century, the percentage of the population living in poverty was swelling. In response to such problems, reformers worked to clean up the city. For example, a law passed in New York in 1901 required that all new tenement buildings have an open courtyard to let in light and air.

The End of the Victorian Age

At the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, "the cult of true womanhood" or "the cult of domesticity," still dictated the roles that women played in society. It was widely believed that a woman should devote herself to her family and the home. Women had almost no external personal identity; their social positions were primarily determined by their husbands' achievements and social status. A woman's role in life was to be a homemaker, and her single-minded purpose was to make a good marriage.

With the death of Britain's Queen Victoria in 1901, the Victorian era came to an end in Britain and the United States. Gradually women took on greater roles outside of the home. Wealthy women traveled, attended plays and concerts, became patrons of the arts, and joined service clubs that were a driving force behind the reform movements of the day. Women began to take up activities, such as smoking or gambling, which had previously been forbidden to them.

Working Women

By the close of the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of women, primarily members of the working class, were taking jobs outside of the home. Single women began to flood the workplace, often taking jobs as nurses, teachers, or childcare workers. Married women might also be employed as clerical workers or as sales clerks in department stores. However, many married women had difficulty obtaining employment. Some people refused to hire them at all, while others forced female workers to resign upon marriage. Women also worked in factories and sweatshops, often under dangerous conditions. They labored long hours for little money. In response, some reformers fought for laws that would limit work hours for women and increase their wages. In the first few decades of the 1900s, many individual states passed such laws.

Critical Overview

The House of Mirth, Wharton's second novel, was published in 1905 to immediate critical and popular acclaim. Her editor at Scribners noted that it enjoyed the publishing house's quickest sales of the time. In comparing the novel to Wharton's earlier works, many critics found its complexity, characterization, and emotional resonance to show her important advances as a writer. The *New York Times Book Review* praises Wharton as the "most scholarly and distinctive writer of fiction of the day," while the *Saturday Review* notes that it is "one of the few novels which can claim rank as literature." *Review of Reviews* has extremely high praise, announcing that *The House of Mirth* is "worked out in a manner to stamp the writer a genius, and give her name a place in the history of American literature." Writers as celebrated as F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Dean Howells, Sinclair Lewis, and Joseph Conrad all valued *The House of Mirth*, which was recognized even in its day as Wharton's breakthrough novel.

The *Times Literary Supplement* commends Wharton's "trenchant knowledge of the human spirit and its curious workings," which is perhaps seen most clearly in Wharton's depiction of Lily Bart. As Henry James astutely comments, Lily was "very big and true□and very difficult to have *kept* big and true." One reviewer, Alice Meynell of London's *Bookman*, focuses her attention on Lawrence Selden, finding him the spokesman for a "better" world and thus the novel's important character.

At its publication, there were a few naysayers who responded to the moral purpose of Wharton's novel. As summed up by Linda Wagner-Martin in her book-length study *The House of Mirth*, these critics "claimed that unpleasantness was not the province of fiction, that by stressing the 'sordid,' Wharton did not only her work but her reader a grave disservice."

The House of Mirth has remained an important piece of literature through the years since its initial publication. In the 1960s, Irving Howe wrote in his introduction to *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays* that with this novel, "Mrs. Wharton composed one of the few American novels that approaches the finality of the tragedy." In the 1970s, feminist scholars found interest in *The House of Mirth*, along with Wharton's other novels. Some scholars examined characters such as Lily Bart in light of the male-dominated society in which they lived. In *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, Elizabeth Ammons writes of American culture as Wharton saw it:

> [It] offers them [young women] no means of realizing
> their dreams. Lily Bart, [and others] . . . all end
> up in bondage to the past not because Edith Wharton
> was cruel but because the liberation, the
> 'progress,' that America boasted of for women was,
> in her view, a mirage.

Since the 1970s, interest in Wharton's work has grown tremendously, as testified by the numerous books, essays, and studies published on her writing. As long ago as the

1920s, Arthur Hobson Quinn wrote in a pamphlet, "Which of *us* are truly alive as Lily Bart [and other Wharton characters]? And which of us will live as long?" The ongoing popularity of *The House of Mirth* bears out Quinn's prophecy.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, Korb explores the types of power that Lily Bart holds and does not hold.

In the first scene of Wharton's masterpiece *The House of Mirth*, Laurence Selden queries Lily Bart, "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?" Lily replies with a sigh, "I suppose so. What else is there?" This brief, simple exchange underscores one of the most crucial truths to the tragedy of Lily Bart. As the characters who populate Lily's world accurately understand, a young woman's sole calling at the turn of the century was to marry, and in Lily's case, to marry well. In this era the country was firmly entrenched in "the cult of true womanhood," which called for a woman to devote herself to her family and her home. On the whole, Americans had little use for an unmarried woman nor did they see reason why she should enjoy any measure of that which is so important to Laurence Selden (Lily's male counterpart): "personal freedom." Note that the only major female character who deviates from this pattern is Gerty Farish, for whom Lily feels pity.

In Lily Bart, however, Wharton creates a woman with sensibilities far more modern than those of her environment. Lily refuses to wholly submit to society's gender roles, and is unable to marry a man who is beneath her simply to fulfill her expected purpose. Such incendiary behavior does not go unpunished, and Lily is ejected from society. However, she has been trained for no other direction in life than to ensnare a husband, and Lily comes to believe she has no options. She frankly tells Selden on the last day of her life, "I am a very useless person. . . . I was just a screw or cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else." Rather than model herself after other women she knows, perhaps Gerty Farish or even Nettie Struther, Lily chooses to give herself up to a deep sleep□which notably is the only place where she allows herself to give in to the "the soft approach of passiveness"□that becomes her final sleep.

Unlike traditional protagonists, Lily lacks the power to create her own life. She is not unusual in this respect, for Wharton clearly shows the reader a society in which women only hold power through the men they marry. Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset are both paradigms in society, but their power derives from their husbands' wealth, not through any intrinsic value of their own. As the authorial voice notes, "Bertha Dorset's social credit was based on an impregnable bank-account." In addition to grasping power through financial prowess, power for women may be obtained through personal connection. This method is epitomized through the character of Mattie Gormer, an arriviste to old New York who nevertheless is able to ascend the social ladder through her friendship with Bertha.

For Lily, an orphan with little money of her own, marriage remains the sole means to obtain a firm place in New York society and become powerful in her own right. The only tool at her disposal is her uncommon beauty, whose value was exalted by her mother

Mrs. Bart, a woman who, after her husband's financial ruin, regarded Lily's beauty as "the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. She watched it jealously as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian." Thus, while still in her formative years, Lily became a prisoner of her own body. Further, when Mrs. Bart looked at Lily's beauty she also saw a force of destruction, "some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance" against the society that did not accord her enough respect because of her lack of great wealth. Although Lily also recognized her unique physical attraction, 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." Unfortunately, Mrs. Bart's belief system reflected that of the world around her; since her debut at the age of eighteen, Lily had several chances to wed wealth, but as she reveals to Selden, a marriage such as her mother envisioned is, at its very core, "disagreeable."

The novel introduces Lily to a series of men whom she might marry, none of whom are Lily's moral equal but all of whom carry far more weight in society. Lily, however, cannot bring herself to make such a marriage. Lily recognizes the inadequacies of the men: the dull Percy Gryce, who wants to collect a beautiful wife the same way he collects Americana; the frank-talking Simon Rose-dale, who wants a wife with social standing who will move him up the New York social ladder; and the pathetic George Dorset, who allows himself to be bullied and cuckolded by his wife. Even Laurence Selden, as summarized by Linda Wagner-Martin in her study *The House of Mirth*, has "a history of affairs with married women, a love of rhetorical games and flirtations, a tendency to make pronouncements and give orders, and a history of running away from confrontation." Indeed, Selden, whom Lily believes to be her one chance at love matched with happiness, shows little true regard for her happiness or even fundamental welfare.

Lily cannot marry any of these men, or such types of men□which is all society offers her□ because she holds a power that is rendered useless by her shallow society: the power to make superior moral judgments. She is unable to ignore this quiet, ever-present inner voice, which alerts her to the banality, tedium, or downright distastefulness of these men and all that they offer. At Bellomont, after practically guaranteeing herself a wedding proposal from Percy Gryce, Lily suddenly looks at these people who would forever populate her world in a different light: "That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; . . . [now] Under the glitter of their opportunities she saw the poverty of their achievement." Lily blames Selden for forcing her to acknowledge the ugliness of her marital intentions. "Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me?" she asks him at Bellomont. In truth, she functions as her own moral arbiter, for it is only Selden who is confident that wealth and social standing are the only things Lily cares for. Lily's actions□or her inaction when it comes to men□show that for all her talk, she cannot simply marry to reach those goals.

Because Lily aspires to a higher value, even though she fails to acknowledge it consciously, she sacrifices her other form of power: the power over other's reputations. Despite her lack of wealth or social standing, Lily holds power over Bertha Dorset in two ways, through Bertha's love letters to Laurence Selden and through knowledge of the

affair that Bertha engaged in aboard the Dorset's yacht. These love letters are key to Lily's ability to dethrone Bertha and take her place in society by marrying George Dorset, or at the least, force her former "friend" to stop the malicious slander that has caused everyone in their circle to forsake Lily. Yet, Lily refuses to use either of these tools to unmask Bertha.

Many people encourage Lily to stoop to Bertha's level of blackmail and malicious talk. George Dorset pleads with Lily to save him from his loveless, miserable marriage: "'you're the only person'□his voice dropped to a whisper□'the only person who knows. . . . I want to be free, and you can free me.'" Carry Fisher, who becomes one of Lily's closest friends by the end of the novel, urges Lily to take up George's plan, provide the proof that Bertha was unfaithful so he can divorce and then become his wife. "He wouldn't stay with her ten minutes if he *knew*," Carry says. Lily lies to both George and Carry, claiming she knows nothing, thus preserving Bertha's reputation and extending the opportunity for Bertha to cause more damage to Lily's reputation. Simon Rosedale also knows that Lily has Bertha's letters. His words to Lily, "I know how completely she's in your power," emphasize that by taking up the devious tactics employed by others in their New York circle, Lily will assure herself a place within it. He proposes that Lily use the letters to force Bertha to let her back in society, and then he will marry her.

Such encounters make Lily comprehend that she actually holds power. George's pathetic demeanor and his obvious desire to divorce Bertha make it clear to Lily that it is within her power to marry him. Such ability, however, is hardly very far removed from the power that her beauty afforded her in the days before she was ousted from society, when she could have married Percy Gryce. Much more importantly, Lily's knowledge gives her the power to enact "revenge" against Bertha and attain "rehabilitation" into society. Although "there was something dazzling in the completeness of the opportunity," Lily refuses to follow such a course of action, even though holding on to such high standards holds no value in New York. Indeed, as Lily acknowledges in thinking over Rosedale's offer of marriage, "What debt did she owe to a social order which had condemned and banished her without trial?" It is no coincidence that Lily dies the night she burns Bertha's love letters. She deprives herself of the last material representation of power and her primary means to regain a place in society. That evening, she takes a few extra drops of her sleeping draught, and as it takes effect, as "gradually the sense of complete subjugation came over her," she gives up her will to live and sinks into her final sleep.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on *The House of Mirth*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Olin-Ammentorp challenges traditional feminist interpretations of Wharton's The House of Mirth*.*

In the past decade, feminist critics have done much to restore Edith Wharton to her proper rank among American novelists and to shed light on many aspects of her work previous critics had overlooked. Scholars such as Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Elizabeth Ammons, Judith Fetterley, and recently Wai-Chee Dimock have changed the understanding of Wharton's work through their perceptive analyses, focusing particularly on Wharton's insights into the social structures of the early part of this century and the ways in which these structures influenced and limited women's lives.

Yet the work of these feminist critics also raises issues of the limitations, or perhaps blindspots, of current feminist literary criticism, issues which go beyond their application to Wharton and her work. For instance, most feminist critics seem to imply that Wharton, though never one to ally herself with the feminist movements of her day, was a kind of inherent feminist, someone who both fought for and attained her rightful place as a novelist in a period when the novel was dominated by male authors and when upper-class women were taught, as Wharton was, to be more ornamental than intellectual. Moreover, these critics point out, Wharton protested the treatment of women through her portrayals of women caught in the inescapable bonds of social constructs. These points are fundamentally correct; Wharton was and did all these things. Yet in focusing only on these aspects of her life and career feminist critics overlook the Edith Wharton who, despite her mature anger over the random education her parents gave her, wrote that

> I have lingered over these details [describing the cooking she enjoyed as a child and young woman because they formed a part□a most important and honourable part□of that ancient curriculum of house-keeping which . . . was so soon to be swept aside by the "monstrous regiment" of the emancipated: young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilized living . . . I mourn more than ever the extinction of the household arts. Cold storage, deplorable as it is, has done less harm to the home than the Higher Education.

One point where feminist criticism seems particularly weak is in its treatment of the men in Wharton's fiction. This is particularly true in criticism of *The House of Mirth*, probably the bestknown as well as the most astutely criticized of Wharton's novels. Judith Fetterley has claimed that in Wharton's novels, social waste is female; when one uses

this as the guiding principle in reading *The House of Mirth*, the novel becomes the story of a young woman's destruction by a social system that maintains that upper-class women are meant to be ornamental, even while it forces them to prostitute themselves on the marriage market. A woman like Lily, Fetterley argues, has to accept her status as "a piece of property available for purchase by the highest bidder." Elizabeth Ammons joins Fetterley in arguing that power in the novel is patriarchal, pointing out that men are the makers of money in the novel and, thus, as the novel focuses on the economics of marriage, the source of all power. These points are important and undeniably true and help to explain the social structure in which Lily moves.

But a re-examination of Wharton's fiction in general, and of *The House of Mirth*, in particular, demonstrates that the social structures of Wharton's fictional world cause male waste as much as female. As Dimock has noted, "the actual wielders of power in the book are often not men but women," indeed, women like Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor are hardly subservient to their husbands, despite their economic dependence on them; both of these women seem to have more freedom and power than their spouses. At no point does Wharton suggest that they warrant pity nor that they are victims of the system in the way Lily is. Lily herself is eager to grasp the money that could make her as great a social force as either of her friends, as is implied by her successive evaluations of the personal and economic attractions of men as different as Percy Gryce, Sim Rosedale, and Lawrence Selden. Women in this novel spend at least as much time assessing men as men do evaluating women. Despite the weakness of Wharton's males□a weakness that has become almost proverbial among Wharton critics□Wharton presents her male characters as meriting as much (or perhaps almost as much) sympathy as her female characters.

Three of the men most important to this novel, Gus Trenor, George Dorset, and Lawrence Selden, have been pretty much dismissed as a brute, a spineless coward, and a coward who should have known better, who should, in fact, have come to Lily's "rescue." Yet to re-examine these characters within the social context that Wharton so carefully establishes is to see that they cannot be judged quite so simply. Gus Trenor, despite his attempt to rape Lily as a way of making her "pay up" for the money he has given her, verges on the pathetic at moments. Not only is he ugly in a society which, as Wharton says in her autobiography, had "an almost pagan worship of physical beauty," but he is aware that his wife uses him as a pawn in the socio-economic system. Indeed, Judy Trenor values him only for his wealth while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the costs of running a household or building a ballroom. Although Gus' violence in demanding that Lily "pay up" is in no way excusable, it is perhaps understandable in the context of a social system that views him primarily as a workhorse.

George Dorset may be Wharton's most pointed example of a man diminished by the social system. Early in the novel Judy Trenor remarks to Lily that the dyspeptic George "is not as dismal as you think. If Bertha [his wife] didn't worry him he would be quite different." As the novel develops Wharton reveals the uneven nature of the Dorsets' marriage: Bertha, "out of a job" when her affair with Selden ends, takes up with Ned Silverton, while George becomes increasingly dismayed. Rather than accusing Bertha

of unfaithfulness and demanding her fidelity or, alternately, divorcing her, George allows Bertha to blackmail him into silence. At the same time he begs Lily to help him, telling her that she is the only one who can "save" him. When Lily refuses even to acknowledge that she could help George, he sinks into apathy. That Lily feels she cannot help George makes a double point: that the system of marriage wastes male potential as it does female, and that the Dorset marriage, although it continues, is a failure from every point of view except that of Bertha, who happily goes on spending George's income. Moreover, Lily's inability to "save" Dorset also has important implications for Lily's own need to be "saved."

While George Dorset and Gus Trenor have received their share of critical scorn, Lawrence Selden has received the brunt of critical wrath. Claiming that Lily is solely "victim" within the system, many critics have argued that Lawrence Selden, despite his relative moral attractions, is to be condemned for his failure to "save" Lily. Though not necessarily someone who would identify himself as a feminist, R. W. B. Lewis established the normative view of Selden in his biography of Wharton. Selden, Lewis argues, "is the one human being who might have supplied" a "viable alternative life for Lily." Lewis continues, "Selden himself, as she [Wharton] told Sara Norton, was 'a negative hero,' a sterile and subtly fraudulent figure whose ideas were not much to be trusted." Cynthia Griffin Wolff claims that "far from being Wharton's spokesman, Selden is the final object of her sweeping social satire." Similarly, Wai-chee Dimock believes that Selden "remains, to the end, a closet speculator . . . The 'republic of the spirit' turns out to be less a republic than a refined replica of the social marketplace, of which Selden is a full participating member." Three fundamentally faulty assumptions about Wharton's novel underlie such judgments of Selden. First, readers assume that Selden *could* have "saved" Lily and thus is culpable for not having done so; second, they judge Selden by a standard far harsher than that they use to judge Lily; and third, their expectations that Selden "save" Lily at all are problematic in terms of the novel as a whole.

First of all, readers and critics alike cannot assume fairly that Selden could have saved Lily. Whatever the limitations of Selden's heroism, Lily herself hardly makes the path to complete rescue an easy one. Selden, after all, proposes to her repeatedly in the novel, but she is as imbued with the idea of marriage for money and power as Selden is with the notion of romantic love. In addition, her inability to govern her own life stems from a fundamental indecisiveness, the result of the values inculcated in her by her culture, that prevents her from developing either a firm friendship or a love relationship with Selden. Finally, Wharton stresses repeatedly the social indoctrination that has made it almost impossible for either Lily or Selden to break through their carefully-cultivated emotional reserves. It is extremely problematic to fault Selden for not "saving" Lily; she will not permit herself to be saved.

Second, it is important not to set up a reverse double standard for judging Selden. While feminist critics see Lily generally, and correctly, as a product and a victim of society, they conveniently ignore Wharton's hint that "in a different way, [Selden] was, as much as Lily, the victim of his environment." They somehow expect Selden to transcend the codes of his class and place. It is generally understood that Lily's reluctance to wed is

an expression of her "repugnance toward a relationship in which a woman is powerless" and a result of her examination of the hatred and hypocrisy in the marriages of her friends; yet the same considerations and observations are somehow supposed not to concern Selden. There may, indeed, be some grounds for judging Selden by standards different from those used for Lily: the stakes are different for the two of them. Because of her extreme specialization, Lily must "go into partnership"□that is, marry□in order not to "drop"; by comparison Selden's implied return to books and his law practice looks fairly comfortable. Nevertheless, these disparities do not justify condemning Selden for the same responses that are respected in Lily.

The novel as a whole reveals that such condemnations are in themselves wanting. Despite their efforts to live independent of the standards of their class, both Selden and Lily are limited by these standards: Lily cannot teach herself an independent existence, and Selden, although he is somewhat independent of others, cannot see the system in which both live as wholly as readers can. Readers, after all, have the advantage of Wharton's narration and of extended exposure to Lily's consciousness; by comparison, Selden's knowledge is extremely limited. Moreover, moral cowardice□of which both Selden and Lily have their share□is hardly a disgrace in Wharton's novel. It would take an almost superhuman effort to break out of a system so rigid and yet so flexible that it can, for instance, maintain with perfect equanimity that marriage is a romantic connection while demonstrating over and over that it is an economic relation. Irving Howe's relatively early (pre-feminist, one might say) remark on Wharton's work may still stand among the most perceptive summaries of her stance toward such characters as Lily and Selden:

> Mrs. Wharton understands how large is the price,
> how endless the nagging pain, that must be paid for
> a personal assertion against the familiar ways of the
> world, and she believes, simply, that most of us lack
> the strength to pay.

Lily finally manages to "pay up" her debt to Trenor, but this payment robs her of any further strength. In spite of his relative independence of social standards, Selden as well "lack[s] the strength to pay" for his release from the social system. Wharton's point is not that Lily is victim, Selden victimizer, but that in spite of their different standings within the system, both are pitiable in their entrapment.

In planning her novel, Wharton wrote that the most difficult obstacle to overcome was determining how to give "a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers" the "typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another." The solution, she discovered,

> was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance
> only through what its frivolity destroys. Its
> tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people
> and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine,
> Lily Bart.

It is with such remarks in mind that feminist critics have claimed, as Fetterley has, that "social waste is female" in *The House of Mirth*. But in context, Wharton's remark is almost synecdochic: Lily Bart represents not just herself, not even her sex, but the whole group of women *and* men destroyed by a grappling and vicious social system which they are intelligent enough to understand but too weak to change.

In this way, Lily herself□along with Ned Silverton, who once aspired to writing epics, and Lawrence Selden, with his passion for the beautiful□can be seen as failed Edith Whartons: all fail to find a channel into which they can direct their creative energies productively. Wharton's portrayal of Lily's defeat and death suggests not only Wharton's appreciation of the binding force of social norms, but perhaps as well□and more disturbingly□a certain acceptance of these norms.

Indeed, if one accepts the notion that Selden as well as Lily may be a sympathetic character, one faces once again the problem of interpreting the novel's conclusion. It is entirely possible that Wharton intended the conclusion to be read as it is written□that, in fact, "in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear." As much as Wharton regrets the waste implied in Lily's life and death, she may reconcile herself to it as well. For Wharton constructs her novel to imply the impossibility of one individual saving, or even helping, another; this is clearest in Selden's failure to help Lily but is reinforced as well by Lily's refusal to save George Dorset by supplying him with the information he needs to divorce Bertha.

Wharton may in fact have accepted her status as what Adrienne Rich has described as a "token" or "special" woman. Speaking to a group of women at the Modern Language Association, Rich noted that she, like Virginia Woolf addressing a women's college, was

> aware of the women who are not with us here because
> they are washing the dishes and looking after
> the children . . . We seem to be special women here,
> we have liked to think of ourselves as special, and
> we have known that men would tolerate, even romanticize
> us as special, as long as our words and actions
> didn't threaten their privilege of tolerating or
> rejecting us and our work according to *their*
> ideas of what a special woman ought to be.

Surrounded by Henry James and a host of other admiring men, Wharton was clearly in the situation that Rich describes, that of the special woman who accepts her own success as something due to her, something she has earned. Wharton saw herself as someone who had made it on her own, through hard work and will power, and who□despite her compassion for those like Lily Bart□seems fundamentally to accept the failure of others as the natural result of social Darwinism. Other women, she implies, should not bother to educate themselves, much less write; they should instead learn the arts of household management. Despite her gratitude to those (all men) who helped her develop her intellect and her skill as a writer, Wharton prefers to ignore the possibility

that women could benefit from systematic education or the cultivation of their potential as artists, as full human beings. Her attitude toward others seems, in short, to be a version of the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" approach, one which most feminists now find somewhat wanting, given that society may leave some individuals with bootstraps that are very short, or even non-existent.

Yet this view of Wharton, too, is limited. Like both Woolf and Rich, Wharton was aware of the women who were in fact "washing the dishes and looking after the children." In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton portrays not only the Olympian heights of social glitter but also the wrong side of the "social tapestry", the lives of the numerous women who suffer that a few might be wealthy: charwomen, girls working long hours at an overheated and underlit milliner's shop. Wharton herself is something of an enigma when it comes to issues both of class and of self-perception. The professional writer every morning, she emerged meticulously, fashionably coiffed and clad, every noon to take over the role of the perfect hostess. Nor, apparently, did she see any contradiction between these roles, nor between the little girl who early experienced a love of fine clothing and admiration and the society that so long kept that girl from attaining her potential as a thinker and a writer. Similarly, Wharton was reputed to be unusually kind to her servants□a trait she passes on to Lily Bart□and she worked long hours to help relocate refugees from Belgium during World War I.

Yet it appears that she never questioned her right to ask a dozen individuals to run her household. She was, perhaps, aristocratic ("special" in Rich's terms) in the way that Woolf was as well: She saw no problem in preventing others from developing their potential so that she might develop her own. At the bottom of this is a certain classism that is, or so one would hope, inimical to feminism in the 1980s.

Edith Wharton's challenge to feminist criticism is the challenge created by historical distance and by shifting definitions of feminism itself. Many feminist critics seem to have expected Wharton to be fifty years ahead of her time; further, they have shaped a Wharton who conforms to such expectations. In doing so they have oversimplified the complexities of Wharton's personality and times; they have brilliantly represented and respected a part of her genius, but they have detached it from the woman as a whole.

Source: Julie Olin-Ammentorp, "Edith Wharton's Challenge to Feminist Criticism," in *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Autumn 1988, pp. 237-44.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Gargano considers faith and social futility in Wharton's The House of Mirth*.*

Almost inevitably, critics of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* focus their comments on the "moral" vitality of its social criticisms. Clearly, the novel's scenic art and the author's pointed intrusions into her narrative justify this critical emphasis. It is true, as Irving Howe asserts, that "the meanings of the book emerge through a series of contrasts between a fixed scale of social place and an evolving measure of moral value." In one of the most original essays on the novel that I have encountered, Diana Trilling ends up by seeing the heroine's fate in socio-moral terms: "Like the old Bolshevik who confesses to uncommitted crimes in attestation of the superior moral authority of the state, Lily affirms the absolute power of society over the life of the individual by her demonstration that she is finally incapable of effective action on her own behalf." Though he dwells primarily on the "naturalistic" aspects of the novel, Blake Nevius describes its theme as "the victimizing effect of a particular environment on one of its more helplessly characteristic products." Even Richard Poirier, whose brilliant analysis of *The House of Mirth* is almost a last word, finally traces Lily's doom to the absence in her society of "an ordering principle for her good impulses."

I believe that in the curiously didactic last chapters of the novel, Mrs. Wharton reached beyond her immediate social concerns toward a larger, perhaps ultimately philosophical vision. She permits her two sympathetic characters, Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden, to come into triumphant possession of a secret that reconciles Lily to death and Selden to life. This secret, contained in a "word" never divulged by the author, endows the seeming *absurdity of* existence with sanctity and ultimate grace. It affirms that a force of mysterious origin and sanction is to be found at the center of all life. Because Lily and Selden hear and finally respond to this word, their lost opportunities result in discovery rather than in waste and futility. Lily makes her clarifying discovery of the word on her deathbed. What might appear to be the tragic consequence of a misguided life is suddenly transformed into self-fulfillment. Her last struggle begins as a crisis of hope:

> As she lay there she said to herself that there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them. She tried to repeat the word, which lingered vague and luminous on the far edge of thought□she was afraid of not remembering it when she woke; and if she could only remember it and say it to him, she felt that everything would be well.

For a moment, the thought of the word fades and she relapses into terror and loneliness. Then, the word becomes flesh as she feels a baby lying in her arms. Once again, she suffers misery and shock as she loses "her hold of the child." In her dying

seconds, however, "the recovered warmth flowed through her once more, she yielded to it, sank into it, and slept."

In the last chapter of the novel, the word that consoles Lily is almost mystically transmitted to Selden. In a setting romantically appropriate to his mood, he acts with a kind of morning vigor and a spontaneous disregard for social ritual. Hurrying to see Lily at an unconventionally early hour, he is liberated and excited because "he had found the word he meant to say to her, and it could not wait another moment to be said." Amazed that he has not spoken it sooner, he now regards it as proclaiming a new day, as establishing a new order. Joyfully, he treats the word as if it were revelatory and revitalizing: "It was not a word for twilight, but for the morning." Although his commitment to the word is checked by Lily's death and by a brief resurgence of cynicism, he struggles past doubts into an enduring faith in it. The novel concludes, not with the naturalistic or moral harshness usually imputed to it, but with the serenity of a religious affirmation: "He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear."

None of the critics I have mentioned appear to take the ending of *The House of Mirth* seriously. None of them ask what the redemptive word is, and, finally, none of them try to determine the extent to which it attenuates Lily's tragedy. It seems advisable, then, to begin a critical quest for the meaning of Mrs. Wharton's novel with a search for the word and its implications.

The quest can appropriately begin with a look at the society in which Lily Bart schemes for success. Uninspired by the "word," the social circle derisively pictured in *The House of Mirth* rarely rises above elegance and comfort and often descends into sordid conniving and petty Grundyism. Money assures privilege, but privilege, too cheaply construed, dissipates into an expense of spirit and a waste of shame. Mrs. Wharton's smart set and its wealthy hangerson are curiously mindless and soulless, and those seeking entrance into the charmed circle wish to be assimilated into an expensive but not very expansive culture. The few old families not drawn into luxurious frivolities and vices derive their immunity from narrow imaginations and pinched spirits.

Mrs. Wharton exhibits her world in all its negative indifference to thought and idealism. She shows Lily's nascent hope blighted and Selden's life in the "republic of the spirit" reduced to a sterile posture. The calculating Bertha Dorset holds on to her fortune and her cowed husband, and the Brys and Rosedale are ready to pump their new-made millions into the perpetuation of a system that cruelly snubbed them. Goodness and the freedom to achieve it are commodities too fragile to survive in such a civilized social state; indeed, if one disregards the crucial last chapter of *The House of Mirth*, one may feel that the author is attempting to expose the existence of a social conspiracy against creative and moral impulses.

Nevertheless, despite her lively perception of human stupidity and weakness, Mrs. Wharton does not intend her novel to be misanthropic or merely satirical. Her theme, instead, insists that personal integrity represents an act of faith in a spiritual order

beyond the of the world of appearance. In other words, Lily's worldly mistakes are disguised blessings: her final inability to marry Percy Gryce, after all her preparations have been seductively made, stems from an innate trust in something less musty than a moneyed imbecile. In addition, in refusing to be self-serving by helping herself to Bertha Dorset's husband or Rosedale's fortune, she actually serves a higher concept of self. In spite of her banalities and excesses, Lily finds it impossible to commit a final act of self-desecration. She renounces the prizes she was trained to seek and hearkens to Selden's timid confidences about the republic of the spirit. She knows that she cannot be saved by a society which in one way or another, can only destroy as it gratifies: to be a Judy Trenor is to be a comfortable lost soul, to be a Bertha Dorset is to be a desperate one. To initiate the newly-rich into society's inner sphere as Carrie Fisher does, is to live as a parasite in a wellfurnished vacuum. Though Lily shares the vices and follies of all these women, she differs from them in possessing a vision, at first disquieting but ultimately consoling. Her apparent social descent is□besides being the frightful thing that haunts the critics of the book□largely a subconscious search for meanings fixed beyond the flux of wealth and social status.

What permanent truth embodied in what "word," it might be asked, does Lily discover? I cannot agree with Mrs. Trilling that Edith Wharton intends her heroine to acknowledge the tyrannous primacy of the "state." Indeed, Mrs. Wharton seems to be saying *that from a spiritual perspective, society, considered as the supreme* lawgiver, is an illusion or a downright fiction. It is an arena of distraction, a kind of Vanity Fair. What *The House of Mirth* asserts is that no life possesses spiritual vitality until it is motivated by belief in its own significance. Obviously, the enigmatic and revelatory word that Lily does not achieve until the end of her life is "faith". Only with it can a successful quest be pursued against all the equivocating counter-claims and inducements of society, against the ostensible absurdity of life itself. Lily's persistent problem is that she lacks conscious faith even while she evades evil: of course, she resists grossness, but she is on good terms with the spiritual compromises that grow into horrors. In short, she will not allow her spiritual possibilities to be more than a polite conversation piece between herself and Selden. The shock of Gus Trenor's abortive sexual assault awakens her to the ugly possibilities of life: "Yes, the Furies might sometimes sleep, but they were there, always in the dark corner, and now they were awake and the iron dang of their wings was in her brain." Even the visitation of the Furies and her loss of Selden, however, do not significantly change her life: she soon invites disaster by slipping all too easily into an arrangement to distract George Dorset's attention from one of his wife's infidelities. Lily's major weakness, then, is the weakness of Denis Peyton in *Sanctuary*, of Glennard in *The Touchstone*, and of so many other characters in Mrs. Wharton's novels□a lack of faith in the "reality" and fundamental necessity of the spiritual life.

Faith, as Edith Wharton defines it, is no generalized and temperamental optimism; it is, instead, an almost mystical assurance that only moral action can save the ever-threatened continuity of human existence. Beset by dangers inherent in social arrangements, man clings to survival by the thread of his moral instincts; he is, at his best motivated by what Mrs. Wharton calls, in *Sanctuary*, "this passion of charity for the race." In other words, goodness is useful, and men and women must, under pain of extinction, bequeath it to their children. At one of her "grandest" moments, for example,

Kate Orme in *Sanctury* is overwhelmed by "mysterious primal influences" and by a "passion of spiritual motherhood that made her long to fling herself between the unborn child and its fate." Although Lily never worries about future generations, her casual generosity to Nettie Struther saves the "poor working girl" and enables her to marry and have a child which□almost as an unmerited reward or rather a visitation of grace□teaches Lily "the central truth of existence." After holding the baby in her arms, Lily sees the courage and primal trust in Nettie's precarious new life: "It was a meagre enough life, on the grim edge of poverty, with scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance, but it had the frail audacious permanence of a bird's nest built on the edge of a cliff□a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss."

For Edith Wharton, the abyss is an everlasting peril, and the "frail audacious permanence" at times seems merely frail and futile. The "noble" act, in Lily's case a renunciation of personal advantage, does not conspicuously alter the way of the world: the Trenors, Dorsets, and Brys□with the addition of Rosedale, the Gormers, and "Mrs. Norma Hatch, Emporium Hotel"□will continue their anarchic existence in an atmosphere of gold dust. Yet, Nettie Struther's and Lily's affirmations make a difference because they spring from depths of "faith," the first and most important of all words. After everything else has been said, Mrs. Wharton declares, it is necessary to believe in the meaning and utility of spiritual action. In *Sanctuary*, Kate Orme attains the vision of the continuity of life in a "mystic climax of effacement"; engulfed by an anguish which is also joy, she experiences a "surge of liberating faith in life, the old *credo quia absurdum* which is the secret cry of all supreme endeavour." Lily, too, stares into the absurdity and the abyss, and she is forced to acknowledge that she had not risen to the occasions when "Selden had twice been ready to stake his faith on Lily Bart." She has not attained the faith of Nettie's husband, who knowing of the girl's premarital freedoms, had nevertheless believed in her essential goodness. As Lily recalls Nettie's happiness, she struggles toward her own credo: "Her husband's faith in her had made her renewal possible."

The "word" that reverberates through the last two chapters of *The House of Mirth* cannot be anything but faith. It is the word that keeps Lily from the abyss; it is the word Selden must discover and treasure. In spite of her comparatively favorable portrait of Selden, Mrs. Wharton does not minimize his lack of faith, his timidity and subjection to appearances. All too ready to accuse Lily of selfinterest, he suffers from a sort of moral snobbishness and aloofness that turn his republic of the spirit into an exclusive island for dilettantes. Even after he prides himself on having found out the "essential" Lily, he mistakenly assumes that she has made a clandestine visit to Gus Trenor's house. During her last conversation with him she tells him, "I needed the help of your belief in me"; yet, he cannot act because his "faculties seemed tranced, and he was still groping for the word to break the spell." For all his intelligence and discrimination, Selden cannot be simple enough to surrender to faith; he cannot rely on naive trust (which, for Mrs. Wharton, may be the highest perception) to clear the debris of suspicion and fear from his mind. The word itself evaporates as, in Lily's death chamber, he finds her compromising check made out to Gus Trenor. Only with an effort, perhaps like that of Kate Orme, can he reject the ambiguous appearances that induce cynicism. When faith

returns to him, however, he sees that "though all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart," he can rejoice that he had come to her "willing to stake his future on his faith in her."

The House of Mirth, it should be added, does not conclude with sentimental *éclat* , Lily's search for the knowledge contained in the word is built into the structure of the novel. All of her disappointments lead, however painfully, to a clarification of her baffling inconsistencies, her aversions, and her tortured waverings. It takes her a whole ambivalent life to evolve and possess a belief that dissolves the omnipresent and clamorous absurdity of her own, and the human, condition. But she does finally arrive at the *credo quia absurdum* that, for Mrs. Wharton, inspires all supreme endeavor.

Source: James W. Gargano, "*The House of Mirth*: Social Futility and Faith," in *American Literature*, Vol. 44, No. 1, March 1972, pp. 137-43.

Adaptations

The House of Mirth was adapted as a film in 2000. It stars Gillian Anderson, Eric Stoltz, Dan Ackroyd, and Laura Linney, and was directed by Terence Davies. It is available from Sony Pictures Classics on VHS and DVD.

The House of Mirth has been made available as an audiotape by several publishers in an unabridged edition.

Topics for Further Study

Read another work by Wharton that takes place within old New York society, such as *The Custom of the Country* or *The Age of Innocence*, and write an essay comparing and contrasting it to *The House of Mirth*.

Research which professional opportunities were available to married and unmarried women at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. How do these opportunities compare to the opportunities women have today?

Do you think Lily should have used her knowledge of Bertha's affairs to regain her place in New York society? Write an alternative ending to the book assuming Lily did use the letters in this manner.

People like the Trenors and the Dorsets spent exorbitant amounts of money on luxuries. Conduct research to find out about the disparity of wealth at the turn of the century. How did the lives of the upper class compare to those of the middle and lower classes?

Write an opening speech for a debate entitled "RESOLVED□Lily Bart's death was a suicide." Use details from the text to support or oppose this statement.

Wharton writes of Selden in the final chapter, "He only knew that he must see Lily Bart at once□he had found the word he meant to say to her, and it could not wait another moment to be said," and later, "He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear." What do you think this word is and why?

Compare and Contrast

1900: Forty-five percent of Americans live in urban centers. New York City's population rises above 1 million. Department stores, skyscrapers, public parks, and museums are all part of the new landscape of the city.

Today: In 1990, 187 million Americans, representing about 75 percent of the population, live in urban areas. Conveniences and entertainment of all sorts can be found in modern cities, from shopping malls to IMAX movie theaters to countless museums.

1900: Members of America's upper-class make up less than one-tenth of the country's population, yet they control over two-thirds of the country's wealth. The upper-class is essentially divided into two groups: old money and the nouveau riche. Members of the nouveau riche are known for their extravagance. For example, in 1897 one New York family spent close to $400,000 on a dance party. Some wealthy people, however, use their money to support social causes, giving money to art galleries, libraries, museums, universities, and cultural groups.

Today: In 1998, just over 145,000 American families comprise the top 5 percent of wealthiest families in terms of income. This 5 percent earns 20.7 percent of the country's overall income. As at the beginning of the century, some families are from old money and some are selfmade. For example, the 1990s saw a rise in the number of people who became extremely wealthy through Internet companies. Some of these people practice philanthropy, but in 1998 households with an income of $100,000 and greater only gave 2.2 percent of their income to charities, averaging $2,550 per family.

1900: By 1900 more than 90 percent of all American women are married. By the mid-1900s, about one in ten marriages end in divorce. Women initiate the great majority of divorces.

Today: In 1990 there were 1,182,000 divorces among the American population□4.7 per 1,000. If this trend continues, younger Americans marrying for the first time have a 40 to 50 percent chance of divorcing in their lifetime. Still, Americans continue to wholeheartedly support the idea of marriage. Ninety-six percent of Americans express a personal desire to marry, and only 8 percent of American women would prefer to remain single rather than marry.

What Do I Read Next?

Wharton's novel *The Custom of the Country* (1913) can be considered a companion piece to *The House of Mirth*. The novel chronicles the rise of Undine Spragg, a ruthless Midwesterner, up New York's social ladder. Unlike Lily Bart, Undine cares nothing about the people she harms as she attempts to achieve wealth and social standing.

Wharton's autobiography *A Backward Glance* was published in 1934, three years before the author's death.

According to scholar Linda Wagner-Martin, Wharton took as a literary model the titular heroine of Henry James's novella *Daisy Miller* (1878). Daisy, an American ingenue traveling in Europe with her mother, becomes compromised by her friendship with an Italian man. Her behavior alienates the American man who is courting her and alienates the other Americans living abroad.

Lost New York (1971), by Nathan Silver, describes old New York society and environs.

Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899) tells the story of a woman, Edna Pontellier, determined to choose the terms and conditions of her own marriage. Despite the morals of her Louisiana society, Edna escapes a dreary marriage through an adulterous affair.

In 1898 feminist author Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her nonfiction work *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*. In this influential book Gilman states that women's dependence on men is neither natural nor beneficial. She claims that wives, like prostitutes, trade sex for economic stability.

Key Questions

In the final analysis, The House of Mirth is a tragic tale about how an innocent girl can be driven to desperation by a cold and hypocritical society. Lily has better taste than anyone in her set; she is nobler and truer to herself than any of her friends.

Nevertheless, with neither money nor a husband, she is helpless, powerless to resist the whims of a society focused on its own pursuit of pleasure. Much of the appeal to readers of The House of Mirth lies in its revelations about how the rich live; it does the same cultural work as Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. But unlike Robin Leech's show, Wharton's novel is bitterly critical, portraying Wharton's own class (or at least the newest members of it) in a very negative light.

1. Ultimately, what do you feel prevents Lily from marrying?

2. In her autobiographical writings, Wharton describes the writing process as akin to architecture. The structure of a novel, she asserts, must come from a plan as methodical and exact as a house's blueprint. How is The House of Mirth structured? How do the opening and closing scenes echo each other? Is there significance to the scene at the novel's exact center, the one in which Lily performs a tableau vivant?

3. One of the disparities between Wharton's novel and Davies' film version comes at the end when Lily drinks a fatal dose of chloral. In the film, it seems to be a willful, premeditated act. Wharton, however, makes the motive behind this final act somewhat ambiguous. Do you think Lily attempted to kill herself, or did she simply make a mistake?

4. Pick a scene in which Wharton describes a house or room in detail. How does this description add to your understanding of the character who lives in the space described?

5. What is the significance of the scene in which Lily visits Nettie Crane's apartment?

6. Is Mrs. Penniston an unattractive character? Did she treat Lily unfairly in her will, or was the sum she provided still generous? Is she more or less likeable than characters like Simon Rosedale or Wellington Brys?

7. Read a novel or short story by Henry James. How is the style of these friends similar or different?

Literary Precedents

The House of Mirth belongs to the school of naturalism. In discussing the significance of the title, R. W. B. Lewis notes that the novel was "Edith Wharton's first full scale survey of the comedie humaine, American style." Honore de Balzac is a particularly important antecedent for this novel. Like Balzac, Wharton presents a spectrum of society from the poor to the rich. Like Balzac, she sees many of her characters controlled by greedy, acquisitive passions which belie the elegant veneer of their surroundings. Gary H. Lindberg sees Balzacian elements in Lily Bart's characterization: "Like Balzac, [Wharton] gives moral weight to her heroine by analyzing her under extraordinary pressures — financial need, vanity, ambition, impulse, social expectation — and she illuminates each stage of moral compromise."

Closer to home, Blake Nevius finds a trace of Theodore Dreiser's determinism in The House of Mirth, pointing to "the spectacle of a lonely struggle with the hostile forces of environment."

Although most of Dreiser's work would appear later, Sister Carrie had caused considerable stir in 1900, five years before the publication of Wharton's novel.

Though writing in a different vein and from a much more intimate position, Wharton's novels are similar in their subject to those of early nineteenth-century British author Jane Austen. Austen may not have invented the novel of manners, but her novels are certainly the most popular and enduring examples of the genre in the English-speaking world. In works such as Emma (1816) and Persuasion (1818), Austen creates a stable world in which marriages based on love triumph over the concerns over money and position that threaten to prevent them. One of the great appeals of Austen's novels is their rich description of the lives of the very rich. Wharton's novels, with their detailed accounts of fine New York homes and precise description of ladies' dresses, has a similar appeal. The House of Mirth, however, is explicitly critical in ways that Austen's novels are not. Austen gently underscores the barriers social distinctions construct between people, but she never rails against the patriarchal structure of a society that makes marriage a woman's only vocation. Wharton, on the other hand, allows the elite society she depicts to destroy her beautiful heroine, making The House of Mirth a darker and more political novel than even the most subversive of Austen's.

A more contemporary writer of novels of manners was a friend of Wharton's. Like Wharton, Henry James rarely wrote about poor people. James, often referred to as The Master by literary critics, produced a substantial body of writing that considered the plight of the individual in a rigid society.

Perhaps the novel most closely related to The House of Mirth is his early masterpiece, The Portrait of a Lady (1881). The novel tells the story of Isabel Archer, an American who comes to Europe to broaden herself and find a husband. She is determined to remain independent, to sacrifice nothing of her self for any man. Unfortunately, her

rebellion dooms her, driving her to a man who eventually breaks her will and traps her in the very cage she sought to escape.

Her story, then, has many parallels to Lily's.

Both are women determined to live free of constraints who are eventually destroyed by the very norms they seek to overturn.

The novella "Daisy Miller: A Study" (1879) also explores themes and social concerns considered by Wharton. The title character is, like Isabel, an American girl in Europe. Like Lily, she is an innocent, but her behavior gives the appearance of impropriety. Though she commits no real transgression, Daisy, like Lily, ends up dead.

Much of the drama of the tale lies in the narrator's effort to make sense of the inscrutable girl. He is no more able to comprehend her desire for freedom than Selden is capable of understanding Lily's needs.

Neither can accept that someone so innocent can so flagrantly disregard the rules of feminine conduct. This widely popular fable about how appearance alone can ruin a girl's reputation undoubtedly influenced Wharton.

Further Study

Dwight, Eleanor, *Edith Wharton, An Extraordinary Life*, Harry N. Abrams, 1994.

This work is an overview of the life and times of Wharton. It includes personal correspondence and photographs.

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Edith Wharton*, Chelsea House, 1986.

Bloom offers a collection of critical essays on the works of Wharton.

Lewis, R. W. B., *Edith Wharton, A Biography*, Harper & Row, 1975.

Lewis provides a comprehensive work about the life and literature of Wharton.

Lewis, R. W. B., and Nancy Lewis, eds., *Collected Letters of Edith Wharton*, Scribner's, 1989.

This important collection of annotated letters provides four hundred of Wharton's letters.

McDowell, Margaret B., *Edith Wharton*, Twayne Publishers, 1991.

McDowell's text is a critical overview of Wharton's writing.

Nevius, Blake, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*, University of California Press, 1953.

Nevius discounts prevailing critical thought and presents insightful criticism of Wharton's work.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, Oxford University Press, 1977.

Wolff's book presents a psychological biography of Wharton, as well as criticism.

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James, Henry, "Letters," in *"The House of Mirth": A Novel of Admonition*, by Linda Martin-Wagner, Twayne Publishers, 1990, p. 9.

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Review of Reviews, in *Edith Wharton*, by Katherine Joslin, St. Martin's Press, 1991, pp. 130-31.

Saturday Review, in *Edith Wharton*, by Katherine Joslin, St. Martin's Press, 1991, p. 131.

Times Literary Supplement (London), in *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*, edited by James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 117.

Wagner-Martin, Linda, *"The House of Mirth": A Novel of Admonition*, Twayne Publishers, 1990.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin, "Edith Wharton," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 9: *American Novelists, 1910-1945*, edited by James J. Martine, Gale Research, 1981, pp. 126-42.

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Project Editor
David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535