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The House of Mirth

EDITH WHARTON



THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

Edith Wharton

Introduction and Notes by

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6

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton was born, Edith Newbold Jones, into a wealthy and well-connected New York family in 1862. She was educated at home by governesses and spent six years of her childhood travelling in Europe with her parents before returning to the United States in 1872, after which her family divided their time between New York in winter and Newport, Rhode Island in summer. She made her début into New York society in 1879 and married a Bostonian, Edward Robbins Wharton, in 1885. The marriage – initially based on a shared enthusiasm for travel and the kind of country life they maintained at their large, elegant house, the Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts – lasted until 1913 when the couple divorced. By this time Edith Wharton had established a permanent residence in France, where she was to spend the rest of her life.

Although writing was always an important part of Edith Wharton's life and she wrote her first novel, *Fast and Loose*, when she was fourteen years old, she did not actually publish a novel until she was forty. Her

first novel, *The Valley of Decision*, an historical romance set in eighteenth-century Italy, was published in 1902, and she went on, subsequently, to produce more than forty volumes of short stories, novels, autobiography, travel writings and criticism, amongst them *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

One of the most important and enduring influences on Wharton's writing was the work of the social and natural scientists and many of her early short-story collections have titles and themes which point the reader toward a consideration of this particular way of expressing and interpreting the world. Amongst the books in Wharton's own library were works by Darwin, Huxley, Haeckel, Kelly, Lock, Spencer, Tyndall and Westermarck, and in the short stories, as well as in novels like *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, the direct influence of the social and natural scientists is plain in her use of language, choice of themes and narrative structure. The work of these theorists provided Wharton with a compelling register in which to record what she saw as irresistible forces of social change and development, as well as a means of expression through which to chronicle the lives of both the survivors and the failures in old and new New York.

Whilst American life – its manners, mores and social changes – would always be the chief focus of Wharton's fiction, she actually spent the majority of her creative life in France, visiting America infrequently after her divorce and making her final visit in 1923 to receive an honorary doctorate from Yale University. She was honoured with entry to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1930. During her lifetime she achieved great success as a writer, with many best-sellers to her credit. She was born a wealthy woman and the popularity of her works ensured that she remained one; she led an industrious but luxurious life, dividing her time during her last twenty years between a house to the north of Paris and a château in the south of France. She died in 1937 and is buried in the Cimetière des Gonards in Versailles.

The Society of *The House of Mirth*

The House of Mirth was the first of Edith Wharton's novels to take for its subject and setting the New York leisure-class society from which Wharton herself had sprung. She would go on, as a writer, to make this territory distinctively her own. Wharton had been in print before 1905: a volume of poetry, two short-story collections, a book on interior design, co-written with the architect Ogden Codman Jnr, and the historical novel, *The Valley of Decision*; all these modestly successful

books preceded *The House of Mirth*. Very quickly after publication, however, *The House of Mirth* became a best-seller, bringing wide public recognition, critical acclaim and substantial earnings to its author.

Wharton had been working on the book for two years – when other commitments did not intrude – and it began its serialisation in *Scribner's Magazine* in January 1905 before she had actually finished writing it. It was published in novel form in October 1905. Fiction which treated the underside of life in New York – like Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), a tale which charts the miserable existence of the title character from slum-child to prostitution and death, or Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), whose heroine achieves success as an actress in New York but loses any claim to conventional respectability – was not unusual. However, novels which exposed the wrong side of 'the social tapestry' (p. 241) of leisure-class New York were more of a novelty. As an insider, Edith Wharton was uniquely qualified to describe 'fashionable New York'. As she says in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934): 'There it was before me, in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand, since I had been steeped in it since infancy, and should not have to get it up out of note-books and encyclopaedias.'¹ She analyses the society from whence she came as being at a point of crisis. The highly structured class system in which her parents and their contemporaries had felt secure was under threat from the new power exerted by those whom she portrays making their initial entry into society in *The House of Mirth*. The enormously rich 'newcomers on the social stage' (p. 107) from the burgeoning class 'of big money-makers from the West, soon to be followed by the lords of Pittsburgh',² were making their influence felt, reinforcing the already prevalent tendency to regard the acquisition and display of wealth as the most important social asset. In her book *The Social Construction of American Realism*, the critic Amy Kaplan describes the changes which were occurring in society at the turn into the twentieth century: 'Social life was thus gradually moving out of the private dining hall and exclusive ball of the Astor Four Hundred Club'³

1 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (1934), Constable & Co., London 1972, pp. 206–7

2 *A Backward Glance*, p. 6

3 In his biography of Edith Wharton, R. W. B. Lewis gives an account of the origins of the social group called the 'Four Hundred' as 'the number of people who could be fitted comfortably into Mrs Astor's ballroom at Fifth Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street . . . Ward McAllister, Mrs Astor's social entrepreneur, declared that number to represent the maximum size of the whole of genuine New York society' (R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton*, Constable, London 1975, p. 36).

to the public stage of the hotel and restaurant where anyone ~~with~~ ^{with wealth} could come to see and be seen⁷⁴ and it is to these changing circumstances that Wharton exposes her heroine, Lily Bart.

Two of the titles which Wharton considered for the novel before settling on *The House of Mirth* – which itself comes from Ecclesiastes 7:4: 'The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth' – were 'The Year of the Rose' and 'A Moment's Ornament', both of which push Lily into the foreground but also highlight her ephemerality. The final title obviously directs our attention to the essential worthlessness and frivolity of the society from which she originates. Whilst Wharton is specifically charting the course of Lily's downfall the text provides a much wider picture of a society in transition, a rapidly changing leisure class is Wharton's chief subject and Lily a representative of that which is trampled in the competitive dash towards the twentieth century. In the novel Wharton gives us examples of women who are much better equipped than Lily to deal with life in the modern world because they either adapt to the new opportunities offered by a professional life or they realise that marriage can also be conducted like a profession or trade. Gerty Farish is a representative of the new breed of middle-class women who, like Wharton's contemporaries, the social reformers Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, abjures the dependency of the middle-class wife and throws herself into various forms of social work. The other means to control one's own destiny as a woman in this society is rather less worthy and admirable, however. Bertha Dorset is representative of the kind of woman who is willing to abuse the security which her marriage affords her, taking lovers and exploiting to the limit the social power she wields, ultimately causing the exclusion of Lily from the charmed circle of high society.

In her Introduction to the 1936 reprint of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton answers those of her early critics who complained that the novel dealt with insignificant and unworthy characters:

The fact is that Nature, always wasteful, and apparently compelled to create dozens of stupid people in order to produce a single genius, seems to reverse the process in manufacturing the shallow and the idle. Such groups always rest on an underpinning of wasted human possibilities; and it seemed to me that the fate of the persons embodying these possibilities ought to redeem my subject from

4 Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, p. 93

insignificance. This is the key to *The House of Mirth*, and its meaning; and I believe the book has owed its success, from the first, as much to my picture of the slow disintegration of Lily Bart as to the details of the 'conversation piece' of which she forms the central figure.⁵

Clearly Wharton conceived of the novel as offering a picture of 'the shallow and the idle' whose existence, she contends, is assured by their capacity to lay waste to positive 'human possibilities'. In the text she describes the likes of Miss Van Osburgh and Percy Gryce as possessing 'a force of negation which eliminated everything beyond their own range of perception' (p. 43), and it is this negative energy which is seen to direct the action throughout. Those who control and manage the events which govern Lily's passage down and out of society act from malign intent; she is almost powerless to control her own destiny from the moment of her first scene of public humiliation and exposure.

In the first encounter between Lily and Lawrence Selden – the man Lily would apparently marry if either of them had sufficient money – Wharton makes much of Lily's distinctness, the glory of her beauty but also Selden's own sense of the 'highly specialised' (p. 5) nature of her person. Selden's point of view dominates our first – and many subsequent – impressions of Lily Bart. He has a relentlessly appraising air and a 'confused sense that she must have cost a good deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her' (p. 5). As has already been mentioned, the language of the natural and social scientists – and in particular Darwin – dominates *The House of Mirth*, and it is given to Selden, as it is later given to Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, to act as the classificatory intelligence of the novel. One of the ways in which Selden is able to control his romantic feelings for Lily is through his self-conscious use of pseudo-scientific language; he maintains his distance from the realities of her existence by perpetually offering her up as a specimen, as 'the victim of the civilization which had produced her' (p. 7). He denotes her as a creature designed for a single purpose – that of leisure-class marriage. However, when she fails in this single purpose she falls into disuse as well as disrepute and Selden cannot, until it is too late, rise above the deterministic view he has taken of her progress.

Wharton also extends her use of the language and the laws of natural selection in the text beyond Selden's view of Lily into the wider picture of society offered here. Lily's father, once he has outlived his usefulness

5 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, Oxford University Press, London 1936, p.vii

to Lily and her mother as the provider of the wealth which they go forth into society to display, has nothing left to do but to fade away and die – ‘To his wife he no longer counted: he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfil his purpose’ (p. 29). Wharton also describes the wealthy but obtuse Percy Gryce as one of ‘the lower organisms’ (p. 18) upon whose existence Lily might shine a little glamour and excitement but who will, inevitably, revert to type and ‘run straight home to his mother’ (p. 67) for safety. The language of anthropology is used to characterise the rituals of courtship in society so that participants like Lily ‘have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if . . . going through an intricate dance, where one misstep would throw [her] hopelessly out of time’ (p. 42) in order to secure a specimen like Gryce for a mate.

One difficulty which contemporary readers and critics often have with *The House of Mirth* is in its portrayal of the Jewish character, Simon Rosedale. References to ‘his race’s accuracy in the appraisal of values’ or his categorisation as ‘the same little Jew who had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times’ (pp. 14–15) are difficult to read as anything other than expressions of simple anti-Semitism. However, in a society where everyone is absorbed by material gain and monetary worth, Wharton actually gives Rosedale a chance to demonstrate that he has other values. He is one of the few sympathetic characters in the novel. He makes time to be kind to people, he watches and waits and does not force himself upon anyone and he does not refuse, unlike those who should be more socially secure than he is, to acknowledge those outside the charmed circle. The old New Yorkers are not characterised as distinct in their ambitions from incomers like Rosedale; for instance, as Lily contemplates Percy Gryce’s and Miss Van Osburgh’s attitude to the marriage market she notes: ‘Each of them wants a creature of a different race, of Jack’s race and mine, with all kinds of intuitions, sensations and perceptions that they don’t even guess the existence of’ (p. 43). Like these long-established New Yorkers, Rosedale wants his marriage to give him access to difference not likeness and this is expressed in terms of ‘race’. Men like Jack Stepney – ‘Oh, confound it, you know, we don’t *marry* Rosedale in our family’ (p. 139) – are actually shown at a disadvantage in comparison with Rosedale and his larger sympathies. Whilst he is generous as a friend, however, his real difference lies in the fact that he is entirely specific and open as to value, rates of exchange and the fact that marriage is as cut-throat a business as any conducted on Wall Street.

Wharton is writing within the confines of the prejudices of her age but she is also using these prejudices to make a point about the covert and overt race and class divisions in New York. It is only Rosedale whom we

are permitted to see in private as Wharton gives her readers glimpses of the private man, 'kneeling domestically on the drawing-room hearth' (p. 218) with Carrie Fisher's daughter, as well as pitying and spending time with an exhausted, powerless Lily, buying her tea and begging her to 'sit quiet and rest a little longer' (p. 255). Neither of these recipients of his benign attentions can do him any service in the business of social climbing. Her portrait of Rosedale may be subject to the intolerance of her age and society as well as to the imperatives of stereotype, but then there are other stereotypes in the novel: Gus Trenor, the overblown, self-absorbed money-maker, eager to be paid in kind for services rendered; Selden, the fastidious aesthete, who always fails when a larger understanding or commitment is required; and Gerty Farish, the plain, undemanding do-gooder. Rosedale is also the only man to whom Lily says yes, although of course she refuses to take the steps he requires before he will marry her; Lily does not simply fail to 'marry Rosedale', she fails to marry anyone. Rosedale is what Lily becomes, an outsider; but as she falls he rises because he will take any action which is likely to help him achieve his goal; he survives and flourishes as Lily fails and perishes.

Lily Bart

Lily Bart, at the beginning of the novel, is unmarried and perilously close to the age of thirty; she has been available for marriage since the age of eighteen but has either thrown away the chance or backed away from the commitment, even where the man has seemed wealthy and attractive enough to be a suitable husband. From the outset Wharton emphasises Lily's glamour, wit and charm, but she also takes care to position Lily as quite precariously balanced – both intellectually and emotionally – between her cynical awareness of her status as a *'jeune fille à marier'* (p. 61) and her acting out of the role. Lily's problem is that not only is she, as her cousin, Jack Stepney, expresses it, 'up at auction' (p. 139) but she knows she is. In this society, the economic worth of everything is known; for Simon Rosedale, for instance, Lily is a valuable asset as long as she retains the superficial endorsement of the movers and shapers of social taste, like Bertha Dorset. Although he pities her, once her reputation has been sullied and her value falls, she has no social worth unless she regains her previous position by using the Dorset-Selden letters to effect her re-entry into society. Appearance is what counts in this world; the appearance of propriety or of impropriety is more important than the actuality, as can easily be illustrated by considering the continuing acceptance in society of the adulterous

Bertha Dorset alongside the ostracism of the guiltless Lily Bart. The slavish adherence to custom and practice is expressed in the social rituals of such as Mrs Peniston, whose return 'to town in October' and the drawing up of 'the blinds of her Fifth Avenue residence' (p. 87) can be seen as an act which is as emptily conventional as her narrow and niggardly interpretation of her duties as Lily's guardian. She has no real interest in Lily's fate beyond the maintenance of the appearance of respectability just as she has no interest in her dwelling-place beyond its capacity to mark out her adherence to convention.

The only man who comes to Mrs Peniston's house to visit Lily in the right way is the outsider, Simon Rosedale, whose familiarity with the rules of the game does not, at that point, stretch to a knowledge of the ways in which to bend them. No one else enters her aunt's drawing-room in order to court or even to flirt with Lily. Lawrence Selden fails to keep his engagement to come and thus be in a position to woo her properly, having acceded to the easy social view that she has compromised her reputation in a relationship with Gus Trenor. Even Trenor refuses to come to see her there, making it plain that the kind of contact he wants from her cannot be contemplated under Mrs Peniston's eye. Everyone except Grace Stepney, who reaps the financial benefit of taking Mrs Peniston seriously, treats Lily's aunt as if she were a fiction, as if her guardianship did not exist. This illustrates one of the central hypocrisies of the society which Wharton depicts: Lily is supposed to retain an unblemished and innocent reputation as well as the character of propriety, but social success actually requires her to demonstrate sophisticated and often cynical skills. She must try to manoeuvre and manipulate the people and possibilities thrown in her way in order to secure financial and social advantage. Lily's fatal half-heartedness, however, her failure to commit herself to the capture as well as the chase of the rich man is amply illustrated in her wilful neglect of the opportunities she has to impress Percy Gryce with her piety as well as her beauty.

All the significant scenes in the novel are enacted in social settings where Lily's behaviour is transgressive, for instance in her taking of tea unchaperoned with Lawrence Selden; and it is in scenes between Lily and Selden that Wharton most daringly stretches the limits of conduct for the respectable young woman of the turn of the nineteenth century. So absorbed does the reader of the novel become with the scenes where Lily is falsely accused of impropriety, it is easy to neglect how highly charged the encounters between the two nearly lovers become. From the lighting of the first cigarette we see her smoke, 'She leaned forward, holding the

tip of her cigarette to his' (p. 9), the activities she engages in with Selden are all, if not illicit, then somehow bound up with the kind of pleasures that she, as a single girl, should not be seen to enjoy. As they walk away from the limits of prudent, conventional behaviour at the Trenor country house, so their conversation as well as their physical interactions become more reckless. This physical intimacy is repeated after the *tableaux vivants* when they walk in the grounds of the Wellington Bry house and, in a mock sylvan setting, like that in the portrait Lily imitates, they have their first kiss. These scenes may seem to be conducted in private moments but they are all actually enacted within the circumscribed boundaries of society and intimacy is destroyed by the immediate pressure to conform with the appearance of propriety. Although Lily's indiscretions with Selden clearly do her no favours – for instance, Bertha takes revenge on Lily for stealing Selden's attentions away by turning Percy Gryce against her – they are distinct from the events which mark the stages of her downfall. This is because her intimacy with Selden never involves the really serious matter of money – except in their jokes about its absence from both their lives. Where real economic considerations are in dispute – as in the debts she incurs to Trenor or her unwillingness to prosecute the advantage she has over Bertha by becoming intimate with George Dorset – then someone else has a compelling interest in the outcome of events and this interest causes Lily to be condemned.

Forced by her shrinking income to live more and more by her wits, Lily does attempt to adapt and change, specifically in ways which reflect the movement of the social élite into a more public, less exclusive and showier mode of operation. The majority of the most crucial incidents in the novel, in terms of the narrative progression of Lily's slide into obscurity and poverty, are occasions upon which she is exposed – in public – as having misjudged the extent to which she is qualified or permitted to be a participant in the changing social order. As ever, Selden is the observer of Lily's public performance and his perspective informs the description of her part in the *tableaux vivants* organised by the Wellington Brys, a wealthy couple new to the city and eager to make an entry into high society. Selden's appraising eye represents the Wellington Bry house as 'so recent, so rapidly evoked . . . that one had to touch the marble columns to learn they were not of cardboard, to set oneself in one of the damask-and-gold armchairs to be sure it was not painted against the wall' (p. 116). The portrait which Lily imitates is 'Mrs Lloyd' by Joshua Reynolds, which, whilst displaying her beauty to glorious effect, is rather too revealing of her figure and also, crucially, her availability. As already noted, Jack Stepney's comment – " 'Really,

you know, I'm no prude, but when it comes to a girl standing there as if she was up at auction" ' (p. 139) – demonstrates that there is no doubt in anyone's mind that Lily is now for sale and her appearance in this picture leads directly to her representation in another set piece, the Trenors' doorway, 'silhouetted against the hall-light' (p. 142). Selden's brief flirtation with the notion that Lily as 'Mrs Lloyd' was 'the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part' (p. 119), is soon displaced by his unquestioning acceptance of Lily's guilt and he walks by on the other side of the street. Having been lured by the sexually frustrated and angry Gus Trenor to the empty Trenor town house, Lily is apparently caught *in flagrante*, lit from behind and framed as the mistress of a married man. In fleeing from the consequence of this disgrace, Lily then becomes embroiled in another sordid scenario – the cruise aboard the yacht *Sabrina* with the Dorsets. As Bertha Dorset fights to save her own skin, Lily is scapegoated, turned off the yacht, for supposedly improper conduct. Bertha, having invited Lily aboard to distract her husband, George, whilst she pursues an affair with Ned Silverton, becomes aware that Lily knows too much and so manufactures a charge of impropriety against her. The truth is, however, immaterial to the sequence of events because Bertha has all the economic and therefore social power; Lily has nothing except her increasingly compromised appearance. Bertha Dorset is also responsible for Lily's next public failure as she sabotages her position with the Gormers by exercising those superior social powers, 'insinuating horrors' (p. 220) about Lily so that the only position she can obtain, the post of secretary to Mrs Norma Hatch, whose home is the 'Emporium Hotel', takes her beyond the pale to a world where 'Mrs Hatch and her friends seemed to float together outside the bounds of time and space. No definite hours were kept; no fixed obligations existed: night and day flowed into one another in a blur of confused and retarded engagements' (p. 241). Wharton sets up the scene at the Emporium as a copy of the old social world but curiously inverted: 'Lily had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung' (p. 241). However, as Lily discovers after having left Mrs Hatch, it hardly matters whether she is there or not, she had no duties to perform and, long after she had left, those who wished to believe ill of her still thought she was working with Mrs Hatch in order to prosecute a plan to debauch young Bertie Van Osburgh.

To become a working girl, in the straightforward sense of the term, is finally the only alternative left to Lily but, outstanding as she is at

wearing hats, she cannot manage to assemble them. She is, by her own account, 'a very useless person' (p. 270), simply unfit for survival in the competitive modern world. The events which lead up to Lily's death are, from beginning to end, fuelled by that 'force of negation' (p. 43) which ultimately destroys all and everything in its path. To return to the language of natural selection, Lily is in the vanguard of extinction. In anthropological terms the inhabitants of old New York are all representatives of an endangered species but it is moral inertia rather than physical weakness that will cause them to self-destruct. Lily Bart dies with her morals and her principles intact; she refuses to use the Dorset-Selden letters as a means to re-enter society, she will not bear witness against Bertha nor will she stay with Norma Hatch once she realises the object of her marital ambitions. Her final act is to write the cheque that will repay her debt to Gus Trenor and, as Selden kneels beside the dead Lily, he is conscious of the endurance of something of value in the 'moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction' (p. 288).

Wharton is very clear in *A Backward Glance* in defence of her choice of subject in *The House of Mirth* and it seems apt here to leave the last words on the enduring value of Lily Bart to her creator:

The problem was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another. In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the "old woe of the world", any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess. The answer 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.⁶

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