



The House of Mirth

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A bestseller when it was originally published nearly a century ago, Wharton's first literary success was set amid the previously unexplored territory of fashionable, turn-of-the-century New York society, an area with which she was intimately familiar.

The tragic love story reveals the destructive effects of wealth and social hypocrisy on Lily Bart, a ravishing beauty. Impoverished but well-born, Lily realizes a secure future depends on her acquiring a wealthy husband. Her downfall begins with a romantic indiscretion, intensifies with an accumulation of gambling debts, and climaxes in a maelstrom of social disasters.

More a tale of social exclusion than of failed love, *The House of Mirth* reveals Wharton's compelling gifts as a storyteller and her clear-eyed observations of the savagery beneath the well-bred surface of high society. As with *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*, this novel was also made into a successful motion picture.

The House of Mirth Details

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From Reader Review The House of Mirth for online ebook

Jason says

Lily Bart, the protagonist of Edith Wharton's stunning first novel, is introduced to the reader as a young woman traveling within high society. While her blood and wealth may place her on the fringe of that society, her "pale" beauty (as it is continuously characterized throughout the novel) elevates her within its ranks. Lily is marriage material. And within Manhattan's high society at the turn of the century, women are meant to marry; and in order to marry women are meant to maintain a reputation of "pale" innocence (indeed, they must).

Lily hesitates to question these two fundamental rules that bind her, save on rare occasion in conversation with Lawrence Selden, the man it seems she would marry if the choice were hers, and who stands far enough outside Lily's circle to critique that circle from an apparent distance. Selden, however, presents Lily with several problems. First, Selden himself is hardly able to separate himself from the rules of Manhattan society, even if he so desired to or so imagined the independence of his perspective. Second, Selden serves as preacher, counselor, and sounding post to Lily with respect to the pitfalls of high society, but while Selden's efforts to take high society off its pedestal strike a chord with Lily, and indeed echo many of her own thoughts, Selden never presents Lily with a viable alternative to the only circle (and the only set of rules) she knows.

The final problem that first emerges from the relationship between Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden is the crux of the novel and the launching point for several shrewd insights Wharton compellingly places within the American cultural dialog, as extant within the novel. Lily couldn't marry Selden if the choice were hers. (And, perhaps ironically, she likely would not, in any case, as Selden lacks the most essential thing men in high society bring to a marriage -- money.)

Like any fully painted character in a great work of fiction, Lily Bart is a woman of substantial intellectual and emotional force. Indeed, given the degree the reader is aware of the goings on inside Lily Bart's head, it can be surprising to step back and remember the novel's narrated in the third person.

Lily, viewed in isolation, is more than situated to grab control of her life if that control were hers to grab. But because she does not live in isolation, control is not hers. Her will is usurped at almost every turn by the societal forces around her; which among other things make her will all but moot. While an argument could be made that Lily has a knack for making choices that reflect upon her poorly, she is defined nonetheless, and far more, by the perceptions of those around her than by any sense of self she seeks to, or by happenstance does, affirmatively present to the world. And in light of the rules that constrain her, her reputation -- never in her hands -- spirals downward as the novel progresses, most often, again, via external rather than internal forces. Absent her reputation intact, that Lily is meant to marry becomes meaningless. Her purpose and place within Manhattan's high society slip from her hands as, trying at least to retain her dignity, she chooses not to act on her own behalf when the opportunities are before her and otherwise, and perhaps always, lacks the choice to act on her own behalf as a byproduct of her social milieu.

The House of Mirth is remarkably tragic. At times, it feels as though too much is going wrong for Lily Bart a little too often. But the totality of the narrative, and Wharton's prose, combat what may be the novel's single shortcoming. Wharton's novel surfaces from many contexts. Two are telling, or at least were to me upon reading The House of Mirth. First, Lily Bart retains her outer beauty throughout the greater part of the novel, despite her internal struggle to maintain a grip in the face of near free fall. Her inner world, as she feels it,

and as others perceive it, becomes dark as her "pale" beauty persists. Sadly, her inner life is all but wholly divorced from her outer reality. Thus, in Lily Bart's unfortunate transformation within the novel the saliency of maintaining superficial appearances is brought to the thematic forefront. A theme present in both The House of Mirth and Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray -- cast differently, but not without similarities. Second, The House of Mirth shines a bright light of reality upon Transcendentalism. At minimum, Wharton illustrates that self-determination and self-reliance are one thing when you're living in a cabin in the woods, growing beans, and contemplating existence during solitary sojourns around Walden Pond, but quite another in the company of others -- particularly a circle of others fixated upon a set of mores or, more strictly, rules. Reaching further, perhaps, Wharton exposes a stark line between the wherewithal of men and women in American society to "go Thoreau". In other words, The House of Mirth may temper Transcendentalism by portraying the profound influence of the company one keeps on reaching into oneself and, beneath that, the harsh reality of being a woman within that company.

The House of Mirth is one of the greatest American novels of the 20th century.

Henry Avila says

Lily Bart, born poor but from a blue blood family, grew up privileged, well her mother pretended they had wealth, always telling her hard working husband, she will not live like a pig! He succumbs to an early grave, broke, at the turn of the century (20th), that is, the mother spends money, they haven't got, going to Europe, buying expensive clothes, jewelry, furniture, all for the sake of appearances, their friends, in High Society are very well - to- do. Since childhood, Lily is told one thing, never trained for anything else, her object in life, marry a rich man, restore the family honor, love doesn't matter, the only important concern, Gold... When her mother dies too, in poverty, discouraged, Lily is alone at the age of 19. Aunt Peniston, affluent, widowed sister, of Lily's father, surprisingly takes her in, she keeps mostly to herself, aloof, will not help Miss Bart, pay bills, (Lily has a meager income), and her niece continues in New York society, with her friends, buying extravagant dresses, gambling at cards, bridge, a maid employed, visiting the houses of people, who live lavishly, in their own little world. Mrs.Trenor, her best friend is always inviting her to stay and enjoy the good life, with the snobs, at her mansion. Lily is glad to get out of her Aunt Julia's, boring, dowdy home. Her bills go unpaid, Lily must marry soon, but is too fastidious, for her own good, meeting the very shy millionaire Percy Gryce, dull, tongue tied, his only interest in life , collecting old books! That is when his pulse beats faster... But Lily loves Lawrence Selden, a fascinating man, they have interesting conversations together, she feels good being able to speak honestly, but he is just another struggling lawyer, a working man, who travels in high places and lives in a modest apartment. His cousin Gerty Farish, is one of the few real friends, Lily has, and she also loves Lawrence, helping the poor, becomes her life's work. And Gerty even takes, Miss Bart to see them and she gives some precious money, to their welfare, Lily feels happy, doing so. The skittish, straight- laced Mr. Gryce, gets cold feet, hearing about Miss Bart's gambling debts, what would mother think? Selden is also uncomfortable with Lily's reputation, undeserved, the crowd likes to gossip. She has another even less desirable candidate, Simon Rosedale, on the way to becoming the richest man in town, trying to enter the exclusive group, rather uncouth but is improving. He wants to marry the gorgeous woman, what a prize to show off to his new friends...Lily Bart, doesn't like him and needs to find someone quickly, at 29, her days of floating around the honeycomb are rapidly ending, she has to taste the honey and become the Queen... But Lily is asked to go on a Mediterranean yacht cruise, by Mrs.Dorset, months of pleasure, no worries, everything free, forget all her troubles, what will she do ?

Joe Valdez says

Reading Edith Wharton's second novel *The House of Mirth* was like being kidnapped by Barbary pirates and held for ransom for ten fortnights; not a comfort, but an adventure. Published in 1905, this tale of Miss Lily Bart -- a young woman held prisoner by New York high society for her grace and beauty until her dependence on wealthy patrons makes her vulnerable to their whims -- carried me off against my will and held me with jeweled prose, breathless detail to character and droll wit. Wharton's milieu was alien to me and her writing often so intricate that I wanted to run home to John Steinbeck, but now that the experience is over, find myself changed by it.

Book I begins in a nation with places to go and people to see, or Grand Central Station to be exact. Bachelor attorney Lawrence Selden returns to New York from the country and spots twenty-nine year old socialite Lily Bart at the station, waiting alone. Thrilled to find herself unattended no more, Lily makes the impulsive decision to join Selden for tea in his apartment on Madison Avenue. Lily is orphaned and lives with her wealthy aunt Mrs. Peniston. Though she is expected to inherit a great deal of money from her aunt, Lily is not paid an allowance, which places her at the service of whichever patron of high society offers to sponsor her.

While marriage would present her with financial security, Lily bonds with Selden over a shared antipathy toward a life of routine. She finds ways to sabotage her social encounters with eligible bachelors. Unlike Selden, Lily has no vocation which to support her independent whims. Exiting Selden's building, Lily has a chance encounter with Simon Rosedale, a social climber who makes it his business to know everything about everyone. Lily is repulsed by the man and thinks up a quick lie to explain her presence in the neighborhood alone, but immediately regrets her decision to rebuff Rosedale's offer to accompany her to her train.

Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice? She had yielded to a passing impulse in going to Lawrence Selden's rooms, and it was so seldom that she could allow herself the luxury of an impulse! This one, at any rate, was going to cost her rather more than she could afford. She was vexed to see that, in spite of so many years of vigilance, she had blundered twice within five minutes. That stupid story about her dressmaker was bad enough--it would have been so simple to tell Rosedale that she had been taking tea with Selden! The mere statement of the fact would have rendered it innocuous.

Lily arrives at Bellomont, where Mrs. Judy Trenor has invited Lily to spend a weekend among high society over bridge games that drag into the night. Mrs. Trenor offers to help the girl secure an engagement to Percy Bryce, a bachelor whom Lily is bored by the moment she catches him in her web. She finds herself elated by the arrival of Selden and incurs the wrath of Bertha Dorset, a married woman who has designs on the bachelor. Over a long Sunday walk and respite in a meadow, Selden expresses his willingness to marry Lily, while offering his distaste for her crass materialism. Bertha Dorset sinks Lily's chances with her backup Percy Bryce by spreading rumors of a gambling problem.

Dispatched to pick up Mrs. Trenor's husband from the train station, Lily finds herself obsessed upon by Gus Trenor, who offers to invest money for Lily in the stock market at no risk. Trenor earns Lily ten thousand dollars, which she discovers was actually a gift from the married man. Lily spends Trenor's money and ignores his overtures for greater intimacy. Lily's carefree ways make enemies with her own sex as well. Her cousin Grace Stepney retaliates against Lily for being excluded from their aunt's dinner party list by whispering to Mrs. Peniston that the heir to her fortune has been gambling, living extravagantly and carrying on as the kept woman of Gus Trenor.

Lily finds new benefactors in Mr. and Mrs. Wellington Bry, *nouveau riche* socialites who sponsor an exhibit of fashionable young women modeling historic dress. Lily's costume wags tongues, including Selden's. He reveals his feelings for Lily but is rebuffed for his unwillingness to offer anything but love. Lily is lured to the Trenors' apartment, where Gus Trenor corners Lily and demands that she reciprocate his financial generosity with affection. Seeking to settle her debts and recapture her independence, Lily struggles with opaque feelings for Selden against cash on the table: a marriage proposal from Simon Rosedale.

Even through the dark tumult of her thoughts, the clink of Mr. Rosedale's millions had a faintly seductive note. Oh, for enough of them to cancel her one miserable debt! But the man behind them grew increasingly repugnant in the light of Selden's expected coming. The contrast was too grotesque; she could scarcely suppress the smile it provoked. She decided that directness would be best.

Lily's plans to snare a husband hit a snag with she learns through the society pages that Selden has sailed overseas on business. Book II picks up in Monte Carlo three months later, where Lily has joined the Dorsets for a cruise of the Mediterranean. Invited by Judy Dorset to distract her husband George while Mrs. Dorset dallies with a would-be poet named Ned Silverton, Lily again crosses Judy Dorset by refusing to cover for Judy's hanky panky with Ned. George Dorset has reached the end of his tether with his wife and summons an American attorney in Nice to explore options for a divorce. This reunites Lily with Selden just as Judy Dorset sets out to destroy Lily once and for all.

Though unexpressed in her novel, Wikipedia told me that Wharton's title is taken from the Old Testament and the Book of Ecclesiastes. "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Wharton's ability to craft jeweled sentences and draw scenes like a cartographer designing a treasure map is peerless. In particular, her chapters are adorned with gorgeous first sentences.

Book I--Chapter I: *Selden paused in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart.*

Book I--Chapter III: *Bridge at Bellomont usually lasted till the small hours; and when Lily went to bed that night she had played too long for her own good.*

Book I--Chapter XV: *When Lily woke she had the bed to herself, and the winter light was in the room.*

At other times, the turn of the century prose was so beautiful that it lured me into maze and the longer it went on, lost me.

A chill of fear passed over Miss Bart: a sense of remembered treachery that was like the gleam of a knife in the dusk, But compassion, in a moment, got the better of her instinctive recoil. What was this outpouring of senseless bitterness but the tracked creature's attempt to cloud the medium through which it was fleeing? It was on Lily's lips to exclaim: "You poor soul, don't double and turn--come straight back to me, and we'll find a way out!" But the words died under the impenetrable insolence of Bertha's smile. Lily sat silent, taking the brunt of it quietly, letting it spend itself on her to the last drop of its accumulated falseness; then, without a word, she rose and went down to her cabin.

Wait, what? Throughout *The House of Mirth* I found my eyes glancing over paragraphs like this and having to circle back to them again, like Craftsman homes on a dark, unfamiliar lane without the benefit of well lit street numbers. I was often as lost. Wharton also tells the reader what her characters are thinking and why they're thinking what they're thinking. Social mechanization doesn't reveal itself very well in action or dialogue, only inner monologue. That's why it's a mechanization! Without careful attention though, the

progression of the story is often obscured in a fog of politics and social manners.

In spite of its obtuseness, *The House of Mirth* builds in power by illustrating the corner a single woman like Miss Lily Bart paints herself into, ill-equipped to earn her keep as anything more than an ornament to high society. The straits that the main character finds herself in during a market readjustment to her worth is as harrowing as that encountered by the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In addition to Wharton's opulent wordcraft, which at its best is like death by chocolate, her climax is quietly powerful and has haunted me since I reached the finish line of this magnum opus.

Madeline says

The House of Mirth is the third Wharton novel I've finished so far, and while reading it, I was able to figure out why I love her books so much. Edith Wharton is witty, and her writing is beautiful, but more importantly, she is honest and realistic. She portrays rich, spoiled society exactly as it is - full of people who hide their own misery behind lavish homes and strict manners - and condemns it, but even as her characters realize how toxic this environment is, they are still driven by an insatiable need to belong to and be accepted by society. Basically what I'm saying is that Edith Wharton understood human nature better than almost any author I've ever read, and if she were alive today *Mean Girls* would totally be her favorite movie.

The House of Mirth follows Lily Bart, a young woman who grew up wealthy but lost everything when she was a teenager, and has been clawing and fighting to keep her place in society ever since. Lily Bart is clever and charming, but after spending years living independently, she finds herself approaching spinsterhood with dwindling prospects. The book follows her increasingly-desperate attempts to secure her future while retaining her independence and her place in society. If you've read even one other Wharton novel, you know that these desires are not compatible for women in this world.

As always, Wharton's depiction of the tiny battles that occur every day in polite society is fascinating - it's amazing to watch Lily navigate her life with careful planning and strategy, so simple conversations become as complicated and dangerous as naval battles. She has to be constantly on the alert, hyper-aware that she's always one mistake away from total failure and ruin. Only two things frustrated me about this book - one wasn't Wharton's fault, but the second one totally was.

It's not Wharton's fault, I realize, that Lily Bart can't get a Hollywood happy ending and marry Lawrence Selden, who is so obviously perfect for her that it was all I could do not to scream at the pages "kiss her kiss her KISS HER" every time they had a scene together. The couple is headed for a typically Wharton-style ending, but at least that means we get lots of great scenes where the characters are just *drowning* in sexual tension, and it's like crack to me. Edith Wharton could write a straight-up sex scene, and it still wouldn't be as hot as two characters taking a walk together while resisting the urge to make out.

Like I said, the ending is very, very Wharton, and unfortunately it's also very clearly telegraphed. (view spoiler) But somehow the fact that I could see the ending a mile away made the book even more tragic and dramatic. But seriously, Seldon - nut up and marry her, for Christ's sake.

Lily Bart is the quintessential Wharton heroine. She is independent, headstrong, whip-smart, and charismatic. Another author would have allowed her heroine to strike out on her own, say to hell with these rich snobs and let Lily go off on adventures to Africa or something, but Wharton knows better. The world of the wealthy, spoiled New Yorker is the only one Lily has ever known, and like Newland Archer and Annabel

St. George before her, she will sacrifice her own happiness in exchange for social acceptance and security. This is what drives Wharton's protagonists: a deep need to belong, and a fear of the unknown. They can never win, but it's fascinating to watch them try.

Robin says

Mrs. Lloyd by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1775)

In our imperfectly organized society there is no provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations.

Oh, how I delighted in this book. How I bathed in the world Edith Wharton created, this world belonging to beautiful Lily Bart, as she navigates through the temptations and perils of society of the early twentieth century. I was charmed, transported and moved as she tries desperately to cling to the luxurious life she desires. The fascinating part is that she is never quite willing to do what it takes to get it - settle in a marriage of convenience.

Lily Bart is a beauty with ambitions to live in luxury and care. She abhors "dinginess" and knows exactly the game to play in order to succeed in the cutthroat world of high New York society. She is charming, elegant and poised. She wants a wealthy life more than anything, appearing quite shallow at times. But when it comes to it, this woman at thirty continually throws away opportunities to land in a life of ease, unable to sell herself short just for money. She has moments of clarity when she sees the wealthy people around her for what they are:

How different (her friends) had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining, now they stood for what she was giving up. That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way. Under the glitter of their opportunities she saw the poverty of their achievement.

How I reveled, telling myself "Wharton is like the American Jane Austen! She is the champion of women and matchmaking!"

I was so wrong.

It has been far too long since I read *The Age of Innocence*, so I forgot that the brilliant Edith Wharton's works are written with the heavier hand of reality. And this is what separates her from Jane Austen. Wharton's stories do not tie up nicely with a bow, with everyone getting their just deserts.

What Wharton does show us is the true plight of her flawed heroine: the tragedy of the trappings of wealth. She also depicts a woman's (limited) choices at this time in history, still heavily reliant on men and oh-so-delicate social footing amongst the who's who.

She also calls forth immense beauty, in particular the unforgettable scene of Lily as *tableau vivant*, a living version of the Reynolds painting (featured above), inspiring a moment of passion so delicious, stirring her reader's hunger for more of the same with every page. But can life truly imitate art? I think it is the other way around.

In the long moment before the curtain fell, he had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life. It was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out suppliant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overpowering longing to be with her again.

I was wrong about Wharton, but I'm so glad to be wrong in this case. This book is stunning, a true masterpiece.

Shannon says

This book has inspired my next tattoo. That is some fine literature. (And I am sure that if Edith Wharton were alive today, she would appreciate the tribute.)

I have this theory that the mark of great literature is that no matter how many times you read it, you can always plausibly hope, as a reader, that things might turn out differently in the end. Not that the actual ending is wrong; it's just that the character of Lily Bart is so alive for me, I seriously believe she might make a different choice and pull things out in the end.

Also, it has a really good moral, which is: make your own damn money. Um, not that I am judging Lily Bart or anything. Different times and all!

Note to self: Should not review great works of literature after so much beer.

Samadrita says

On occasions like this, I rue the absence of a '*tragedy*' shelf or some variation of the same because mere '*melancholia*' seems too modest, too equivocal a word to convey the kind of heartbreak Lily Bart's story inflicted on me.

It is, perhaps, apposite that I came to this with my mind still fresh from Anita Desai's stirring homage to a resolutely single, unsung fictional heroine who holds together a disintegrating family, unacknowledged, misunderstood, left behind and forgotten (*Clear Light of Day*). Because Desai's Bim and Wharton's Lily are both flawed figures who manage to stand erect, weathering storms of hostile circumstances that whittle down their will to live and sense of self worth. Even when the vicissitudes of fate leave them psychologically battered and dying inside, they manage to maintain their slippery grip on ideals that cost them dearly. And how many tragedies can we think of, in which the female protagonist's tragic status is not a mere matter of simple victimization at the hands of patriarchal figures of authority but is, instead, locked in a complex configuration of missed chances, reluctance to surrender self-esteem in exchange for societal approval and an unsympathetic social milieu?

She was realizing for the first time that a woman's dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage; and that the maintenance of a moral attribute should be dependent on dollars and cents, made the world appear a more sordid place than she had conceived it.

Lily Barton's ill-fated fall from grace is not just the tragedy of a woman of insufficient means restricted to

using her beauty as currency. It is representative of a greater human predicament. Unlike Desai's ornately crafted family drama taking place amidst the squalor of an Old Delhi neighborhood, Lily's tale comes swathed in layers of exquisite riches. The shimmer of expensive china, the buzz of vacuous conversations conducted in affected accents, the ring of self-assured laughter spilling forth from the made up faces of social butterflies and the dispassionate flirtations between social aspirants and calculating husband-hunters provide a glittering backdrop to her spiralling descent into the realms of penury and obscurity. But this outward show of grandeur and exuberance stands in stark contrast to the bleakness of Lily's inner world - the site of a perennial conflict between necessity and moral rectitude - which Wharton limns with stunning precision and empathy. Lily's bitter ending hits home not because she is a woman forced to choose between a marriage of convenience and complete annihilation but because that tragedy is one of her own making, a fatal repercussion of her last defiant refusal to play by the rules of society.

If she slipped she recovered her footing, and it was only afterward that she was aware of having recovered it each time on a slightly lower level.

Why Edith Wharton does not share the same pedestal of authorial eminence with figures like Fitzgerald, I don't understand. Both *The Great Gatsby* and *'The House of Mirth'* indict the soulless heart of a blindly hedonistic social order and yet Wharton seems to be often viewed simply as a woman's writer. As if to write from the female perspective and use female bondings and rivalry as tools of social critique automatically qualify as criteria for exclusion of a work from greater recognition.

She had fallen, she had "gone under," and true to the ideal of their race, they were awed only by success-by the gross tangible image of material achievement.

To hell with the canon then. Gatsby's tragedy transpires as a result of his naivete and callow optimism. Lily's ultimate end is an act of conscious self abnegation and implicit resistance to the value judgment systems which govern the world she inhabits. It should be obvious which story's razor-sharpness cut me to the bone.

Sidharth Vardhan says

"Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury. It was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in."

Veblen in his 'Theory of Leisure Class' (written six years before this book) argues that one of the way leisure class show their wealth is by maintaining people who will *sit idly* for them. The chief example is of wives, where richest men do not want their wives to be doing paid jobs - do and own charities - yes, art exhibitions -yes, partying - yes, just not doing any sort of job. The tendency becomes less visible as we go down the ladder of social class, In India, one can still observe the trend. If they are rich enough, many men would rather have housewives and many women would prefer to be housewives. And if they are wealthier still, they would have servants so that their wives won't have to work. Among such people, a woman earning her living is scorned at and is liable to be cast away by society. Besides wives, the super rich might also maintain a class of 'friends' to keep company.

Lily Bart is such a 'friend' and has been raised to be such a wife of a rich man. The only thing she knows well

and is good at is 'manners' of leisure class - and these manners won't earn her any money. Higher standards of living are addictive and she is addicted, but she doesn't have any wealth of her own. And since she can't earn, marrying a rich man is her only option - which seems difficult as she is aging (it is a society where an unmarried women nearing thirties is likely to attract suspicions and prejudice attached to the phrase 'old maiden', another thing still visible in India) and, moreover, she also wants to marry for love. To her misfortune, she happened to be a character in Wharton's realistic novel, instead of being a character in one of Austen's happily-ever-after tales.

"She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate."

One must bow low in respect to Wharton's craft. I mean there *are* lots of writers who have better stories or things to tell and writers who have awesome literary techniques at their disposal but, very few can beat her, IMO, when it comes to perfection of telling a realistic story in traditional manner (you know no stream-of-consciousness, no magical realism, no Gothic castles etc) And her cynicism (cynics are always sexy), and the way she brings out the helplessness of her character whether it is Lily Bart, Newland Archer or Ethan Frome. She also kept a dog in her lap when she wrote, if her new Goodreads avatar is to be believed.

kohey says

I know many authors who can write beautiful scenes beautifully, but there are few who can also write sad scenes as beautifully as Wharton. Yes, she is a real pro at love tragedies. When reading, sometimes I cynically wonder if each description and character gangs together to dig nasty holes here and there, even though the heroine tries every possible effort to get herself out of them. The story line is simple and easily predictable, which leaves it to your imagination why each character thinks and acts in this way or that. This is the beauty of this gem and her outstanding writing makes it possible.

Duane says

I have read almost all of Edith Wharton's writing. I have the highest regard for her work. She was overshadowed by Fitzgerald and Hemingway in her day but even so she won the Pulitzer prize in 1921 for her novel *The Age of Innocence*. *The House of Mirth* was one of her early novels and my favorite, although I like all of her novels.

Lily Bart, the protagonist in *The House of Mirth*, is such a captivating and tragic figure that she has stayed in my mind for years. Of course, creating great characters was one of Wharton's wonderful gifts.

For those readers that have not discovered Edith Wharton, give her a try. *The House of Mirth* would be perfect to start with.

Glenn Sumi says

Poor, lovely Lily Bart

Her tragic story
will break your heart

She runs in the best circles
Wears the right clothes
And flirts with rich men

But everyone knows
That she needs to marry
Someone – and fast!

At 29 her looks won't last
She's ringing up debts
Borrowing from men

And displeasing their wives
Not to mention her friend
Lawrence Selden, a lawyer
(but not very rich)

It's Gilded Age New York
And life's a bitch
If you're not "old money"

Like the Trenors, Dorsets
And that odd Percy Gryce
The most you can do is play very nice

(Like Sam Rosedale, the Brys
The Gormers and such)
Try to buy your way in
(i.e., never go dutch)

Just remember: this clique
Who summer in Newport and vacate in France
Can shut you out
Of the social dance

Which brings me back to Lily Bart
Who's clearly not as smart
As she seems
Stepping right into a terrible scheme

And refusing to clear her name
Or go along with the game
Even though, in the end, it causes her shame

Does she have a choice? A tragic flaw?
Or is her inaction the point of it all?

Is her refusal to play her hand
A critique of women's roles

In a world ruled by Man?
And what of that ending that seems out of place
I won't give a spoiler
That'd be a disgrace

But melodrama and tears crop up near the end
When Lily appears
To want for a friend

Her author, Ms. Wharton, knew this world well
It looked like heaven
But was nasty as hell

She's fashioned a fine portrait
Of Old New York
But please don't forget another great work
An even better one, written

Some 16 years hence
Full of wisdom, passion, sensibility and sense
The title? You guessed it:
The Age Of Innocence

Alasse says

This book reminded me of when I used to tutor a particular 15-year-old boy. I'd arrive and he'd be snacking and watching this dreadful MTV reality show called "My Super Sweet Sixteen". I used to spend a lot of time over there, so I caught enough bits and pieces of it to feel thoroughly revolted.

Those of you in the USA have probably seen it – it follows over-privileged kids as they organize and throw their lavish 16th birthday parties. But what I find scary about it aren't the 6-figure cars these kids get, but the sense of entitlement floating in the air. These children think that if they want something they will automatically get it – what's more, they think if they want something bad enough, that means they deserve it.

I remember standing there one day, waiting for my pupil to rinse his glass, and being overcome by a crushing feeling of pity. Because I really wanted to slap the kid on the TV, but at the same time I knew, with an overwhelming certainty, that this girl was never going to be truly happy, ever. Even if their parents could keep this up, this sort of entitled, shallow upbringing can only lead to frustration, one way or the other. What a waste of a perfectly good life.

I thought a lot about this moment while reading *The House of Mirth*. I felt sorry for Lily Bart, while hating her at the same time. I wanted to slap her, while knowing it wasn't her fault that she was the way she was. I wanted her to make up her mind, and at the same time dreaded every one of the options she had.

For make no mistakes – she does have options. A few of us at Bookish were discussing whether this was feminist literature or not. If feminist literature aims to portray women's lack of possibilities as constraining the female character, then this is not your average feminist book (I know, I know, but bear with me for a minute). Lily Bart does in fact have a few options to choose from, even though they would all entail some measure of dependence from other people. But none of these ever crystallize into anything tangible, because she won't make up her mind.

Wharton tries to imply that she's secretly an idealist, and she may be subconsciously sabotaging her own attempts at marrying money. But in fact, for most of the book she doesn't openly defy the system – mostly, she's just angry that she can't find a rich man to support her (she wants one, so she should have one, right?). Her moral scruples only show up when she's already put herself in a compromising position and she needs to save what little self-respect she has left. She is not an idealist, not in practice – she wants to work within the system.

Yet the very system of which she is a result has no place for her. She's a highly specialized product, an ornamental object, the Gilded Age in its most extreme expression - and as such, she's so profoundly dysfunctional she can't bring herself to make a choice for her future, because none of her options are even remotely acceptable. This world is so messed up, its own product can't function within it.

Watching Lily (view spoiler) can get annoying after a while ("will you make up your mind already? I have stuff to do, you know?!"). But it also brings me back to my thoughts that day, watching "My Super Sweet Sixteen". I vaguely thought that this world was f'd up if it was capable of creating such a monstrous thing as that over-entitled 16-year-old. This kid was the product of an environment that was condemning her, by effect of her upbringing, to be chronically dissatisfied for the rest of her life.

The world that Ms. Wharton portrays in her book is just as monstrous. And if it did this to people, and those people were mostly women, then by the FSM, this book serves its purpose, and it definitely is a feminist book.

Dolors says

Edith Wharton sets the New York social stage of the early twentieth century for a succession of short scenes that glitter with glossy superficiality. Lightning, backdrops and lush costumes are put on display to create a natural effect in this *tableaux vivant* of a novel, where *Lily Bart* stands out as the most stunning living painting ever. She is the leading actress of this theatrical narrative, a delicate flower bred for exhibition and ornament whose beauty shines with the precise effortless grace and charm that will enable her to achieve her goals.

Being an orphaned, single woman of twenty-nine with frugal tastes Lily knows that in the gilded cage in which she blossoms and withers the only path to success is to become a saleable commodity that some wealthy gentleman will buy into marriage.

It's easy to find fault in Lily's dignified composure.

Wharton treats her tragic heroine harshly. She is vain, snobbish, selfish and as shallow as the stage of artificiality where she acts. She covets money and social position above gentleness and compassion, her ruthless anti-sentimentalism is reflected in the hard glaze of her chiselled, porcelain mask of complacency that in turn conceals her contempt for the parasitic life in which she has imprisoned herself.

But how much does the financial imperatives of this society in which wealth and not morality determines status influence in the making of stereotyped females grown up for mere decoration?

“She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.” (p.8) ”

I keep asking myself. Is Lily a helpless victim or a hypocrite culprit? Guilty of presumptuousness or driven by desperation? The boundaries dividing the discrepant selves that coexist in Lily are as blurry as the thin line that separates fact from magic illusion.

I keep asking myself. Who am I to judge Lily when I feel my life to be an ongoing sequence of scenarios where I play the roles my varied audience expects from me?

She is as trapped as I am. Lily’s broken wings don’t allow her to escape from the social jungle that made her what she is, yet she craves for “freedom” and “happiness” while she keeps missing golden opportunities that present themselves in the form of eligible bachelors and running under obligations of generous cheques that are spent mindlessly on the card table. And below the glittering surface of Lily’s existence, a terrible sense of waste festers into growing despair.

She loves, but denies herself.

She smiles, but bleeds inwardly.

She wants to be saved, but sticks stubbornly to her idea of success.

Mr. Selden offers Lily a place in his “republic” where “freedom and success” are both possible:

“ ‘Freedom? Freedom from worries?’

‘From everything – from money, from poverty, from easy and anxiety, from all material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of spirit – that’s what I call success.’ ” (p.78)

But Lily has no spiritual or actual home of her own, like *Woolf* urged women to some years later, and she clings feebly to the surface of her existence where she is swirled around by the turbulences of the social corset that asphyxiates her.

Loneliness, poverty and isolation are the true protagonists of Lily’s desired *House* where there is no *Mirth*. Lily’s frivolity is in fact a result of a deluded childishness that splits her troubled being in two halves, the false one in perpetual display on the perfidious stage of society and the real one that radiates with emotional expressiveness in the last chapters of the novel when the mask of appearances is finally dropped and the bright, tragic realism filters through the cracks of Wharton’s cardboard language.

I don’t judge. I sympathize. I grieve.

But I can’t help but wonder how much of Lily’s story reflects Wharton’s professional career and the inherent conflict between her eagerness for popularity and the necessity to exorcize her own frustrations as a female writer in a sparkling scenario as facetious as her characters. Hence my four stars saving the lacking one to pay homage to the fallen star in this *House*, which is ironically full of *Mourning*.

l a i n e y says

“She had no tolerance for scenes which were not of her own making.”

Edith Wharton had a particular way of writing which was a bit difficult to tune into at first but once I got the hang of it, it was real beautiful.

Which was why I am saddened to give this such low rating. *Just saddened.*

From the very start I **really liked** Lily Bart... until the second half of the book, then, I couldn't stop myself getting annoyed with her everytime: her indecision, her actions and mostly just.... *HER*.

Rating: ★★½

Fabian says

“The House of Mirth” just might be to “The Age of Innocence” what “Tom Sawyer” is to “Huck Finn”: that is, only but a stepping-stone towards a more profound greatness (although why I used that Twain analogy is a mystery even to me—I find that brand of American Lit a wee bit overrated). “Age of Innocence” is stupendous—utterly amazing. On the other hand, “The House of Mirth” describes the downward spiral of one, Miss Lily Bart, misunderstood by her social “set,” her particular New York niche. Her story is a tragedy as deep as Jude (the Obscure)’s—her plight is both melancholic & devastating—New York has always been a perfect place in which to achieve some sort of victimhood. Another attribute: the story is severely overwritten. I say attribute because that is precisely Mrs. Wharton’s style: you read beautiful sentences, many, to realize that all she really wanted to portray was a character sitting down on his ass, or she tries to show particular psyches without the more-modern, less-roundabout, most efficient manner of, say, Virginia Woolf (alas, if Mrs. Wharton had continued to write well into the 30’s we may have seen a different, more radical literary style).

The novel is trapped between novelty (modernity) & antiquity (a European America). Sure, this is an amazing study of turn-of-the-century American society, invaluable, one which seems as foreign as it seems familiar; I was not as impressed with this one as her Pulitzer darling (man, I LOVE “Age of Innocence”!!), where the mood is less frigid & less tragic, but the theme pretty much stays the same: mainly, that society is very unforgiving, that “half the trouble in life is caused by pretending there isn’t any.”
