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The men in "The House of Mirth"

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THE MEN IN THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Irene C. Goldman

1980

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

The House of Mirth by Edith Wharton (1905) tells the story of Lily Bart, a young, unmarried New York society woman. It portrays her search for economic stability, her slow but relentless social decline, and her attendant moral growth.

Several very good studies of the book have been written, but none which approaches it from the viewpoint of anyone but Lily. She is frequently seen by feminists as a heroine subject to the pressures of a society in which she is helpless, and in which men victimize her. But to say that the book is only about the hardships of a single woman in society is to ignore Wharton's achievement of portraying the slow degeneration of the entire society.

The world of The House of Mirth is a complex one in which Lily is only one victim--the one who loses her life. All the characters, men no less than women, are both victims and victimizers, still subject to the narrow and exacting prejudices of the old order, while confronting the temptations and the hardships of the new. Both sexes are consumed with greed and ambition, and much of the damage that is done to Lily is done deliberately by weakened people to maintain their position or to further their own pleasure or social ambition. Among the people who contribute to Lily's destruction, the four main male characters are of particular importance. They are: Lawrence Selden, an unmarried lawyer whom Lily loves; Simon Rosedale, a wealthy Jewish financier who woos Lily throughout the book; and Gus Trenor and George Dorset, husbands of Lily's closest friends. Though different in situation and temperament, each in some way fails or betrays Lily, and each, in performing the acts which injure Lily, reveals his own plight as victim. The positions of these men illuminate the configuration of power in their society.

By 1905, Edith Wharton had published ten books including fiction, non-fiction, and poetry; but contemporary reviewers and modern critics agree that her first major work was The House of Mirth, serialized in Scribner's throughout 1905. It was her second novel and the first to deal with her most successful theme--the manners and morality of New York's high society. The subject was one she knew intimately, having been born into one of the most fashionable families in New York and raised with all its customs and traditions. She was to explore her topic many times and in different ways. Of her twenty-four novels and novelettes, the three that are generally considered the best--The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country (1913), and The Age of Innocence (1920)--are novels of manners concerned with New York. The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country are set almost concurrently, in the early 1900's. The Age of Innocence, for which Wharton won a Pulitzer Prize, is set in New York of the 1870's, an age which she sees nostalgically as having been graceful and leisurely, and only beginning to suffer corruption.

Wharton's personal proximity to the society she portrayed brought both benefits and problems to her

art. Her intimate knowledge of the language of the aristocracy allowed a penetrating view into the significance of the tiniest word or deed. Her familiarity with good food and drink, tasteful clothes and furnishings gave a charm and realism to her descriptions. And, perhaps most important, while she saw the flagrant inconsistencies in the behavior of the people around her and took pleasure in satirizing them, she also brought to her characters an understanding and charity that an outsider might not possess.

Her membership in the aristocracy does, however, at times lead her to genteel prejudices which the modern reader may find distasteful. Her social snobbery causes her to be quite harsh in satirizing the new-moned families trying to break into New York society. Even beyond snobbery is her frequent use in The House of Mirth of stereotyped generalizations to describe Simon Rosedale, indicating that she apparently shared in the polite anti-Semitism prevalent in her set.¹

The House of Mirth is worth examining because it was Wharton's first novel of manners and the only one she wrote about a New York society while she was living in it. The book is the story of the destruction by an idle, spiritually impoverished society of one of its

female members. The author chooses as the victim Lily Bart, a single woman without parents or independent means, who combines a love of luxury with a sensibility too fine for the only environment in which luxury is to be found. She is tolerated by society--including most of her closest friends and family--only until she is no longer useful; then she is discarded thoughtlessly. It is clear to Lily that her only chance of survival is to marry and thus secure funding for her habits and protection of her reputation. Her search for a husband constitutes the plot of the novel.

Several very good studies of the book have been written, but none which approaches it from the viewpoint of anyone but Lily.² She is frequently seen by feminists as a heroine subject to the pressures of a society in which she is helpless and in which men victimize her. But to say that the book is only about the hardships of a single woman in society is to be reductive. It is a study of the house of mirth--New York's aristocracy--and its moral, intellectual, and spiritual degeneration. Wharton tells us this herself in her autobiography, A Backward Glance. She asserts that her subject was fashionable New York, but that she had to determine how to keep the book from being as shallow as its subject. Her conclusion 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.³

Lily is one victim--the one who loses her life. But all the characters, men no less than women, are victims in this changing and confusing social order; they are still subject to the narrow and exacting prejudices of the old order, while confronting the temptations and the hardships of the new. They are ruled by forms of decorum no longer anchored in the secure foundations of family and tradition. The men must go out into the world in a way that their fathers did not in order to maintain their fortunes, and in doing so meet with the raw vulgarity and unscrupulousness of the new rising rich. The departure of the men "downtown" leaves the women alone to maintain a social life devoid of their greatest pleasure--the company of men. Both sexes are consumed with greed and ambition, and the spiritual or moral ideals which might have called forth nobler sentiments have slipped out of their lives unnoticed.

Much of the damage that is done to Lily is done deliberately by people who have been victimized themselves and who act to further their own pleasure or social ambition. Among the victims/victimizers who contribute

to Lily's destruction, the four main male characters are of particular importance. They are: Lawrence Selden, an unmarried lawyer whom Lily loves; Simon Rosedale, a wealthy Jewish financier who woos Lily throughout the book; and Gus Trenor and George Dorset, husbands of Lily's closest friends. Though different in situation and temperament, each in some way fails or betrays Lily; each, in performing the acts which injure Lily, reveals his own plight as victim. By understanding the motivations and personalities of these men, a subject which has not been explored deeply by critics, one can gain a fuller understanding of Wharton's real subject--the complexity of the struggle for survival and control among all the members of society, women and men, single or married.

Gus Trenor and George Dorset represent everything that is required of a male member of New York society; they are very rich, have impeccable pedigrees, and are willing to efface themselves for the advancement of their wives in society. They inhabit a narrow world of small-minded, shallow people. Neither of the men is in good health. Trenor has insatiable appetites--he drinks too much, and is red-faced and overweight,

while Dorset is a "mournful dyspeptic" subject to fits of nervous exhaustion.

There are no ideas in their world, no philanthropy, no interest in politics or art or literature; in short, no nourishment for mind or spirit. Understandably, both men have become corrupt, and this corruption shows itself in the way they treat Lily. Each behaves badly toward her, compromising her for his own gratification. Yet the narrator does not find them so much reprehensible as pitiable.

When Lily appeals to Trenor for aid in investing her small capital, he victimizes her by playing on her ignorance of financial matters. He gives her money and demands attention in return, thus forcing her into a role that is improper for a single woman, even in their morally lax circle. Lily is an obliging victim, however, whose greed encourages her to ignore her own suspicions that Trenor is compromising her. The situation worsens over time through an unspoken complicity between victim and victimizer. And just as Wharton tempers the view of Lily as a wronged innocent, so she mitigates the judgement of Trenor as a cruel villain by her sympathy with his plight. In Trenor's plea to Selden to dine with him on one of the many nights that Trenor is alone, we see the loneliness of his role as provider:

"Hang it, I believe every man in town has an engagement to-night. I shall have the club to myself. You know how I'm living this winter, rattling round in that empty house. My wife meant to come to town to-day, but she's put it off again, and how is a fellow to dine alone in a room with the looking-glasses covered and nothing but a bottle of Harvey sauce on the sideboard? I say, Lawrence, chuck your engagement and take pity on me--it gives me the blue devils to dine alone...

The scene prepares us for the one later that evening when Trenor lures Lily to his house by pretending that his wife Judy is there and wishes to see her. He has dined alone, alone with his frustration and humiliation, so that by the time Lily arrives he is drunk and sullen. Fed by Rosedale's insinuations of intimacy with Miss Bart, Trenor has allowed his imagination to go beyond the bounds of all reason and propriety, and to tell him that both Rosedale and Selden have enjoyed Lily's company in a way that he has not.

Lily arrives and is shown to the drawing room, where Trenor tries to make her comfortable. When she insists on seeing Judy, his anger is roused, and he tells her the truth: that she, Lily, is in the house alone with him. His is the position of strength, both because he is physically stronger and because it is her reputation that is vulnerable, not his own. Yet,

just at the moment when he could fulfill his desire, something stops him.

"I am here alone with you, she said. "What more have you to say?"

To her surprise, Trenor answered the look with a speechless stare. With his last gust of words the flame had died out, leaving him chill and humbled. It was as though a cold air had dispersed the fumes of his libations, and the situation loomed before him black and naked as the ruins of a fire. Old habits, old restraints, the hand of inherited order, plucked back the bewildered mind which passion had jolted from its ruts. Trenor's eye had the haggard look of the sleep-walker waked on a deathly ledge.

HofM, p. 155

The passage is in some ways weak and unconvincing. It is hard to understand just why a man as angry and aroused as Trenor would back down so suddenly. We do not see the turning point clearly, do not perceive exactly the moment or the thought that changes Trenor's mind and keeps him from actually assaulting Lily. But there is a turning point, and Trenor retreats, leaving Lily physically unharmed, but with a reputation badly damaged (both her entrance to and exit from the Trenor house have been observed by society members who know that Judy is away). Trenor's restraint is not a moral triumph. He is not the actor in the passage; rather he

is acted upon by vestigial instincts, and the words "bewildered" and "haggard" add poignancy to his state.

Trenor's attitude and actions can be better understood when he is compared to Newland Archer, the central character of Wharton's later novel, The Age of Innocence, in which she explores in depth those "old habits" and "old restraints" that stop Trenor just in time. Archer and his wife's cousin, Ellen Olenska, struggle against their love for each other so as not to hurt Newland's wife May. With much anguish they choose not to consummate their love, and Ellen leaves for Paris, thus enabling them both to lead lives that, if bereft of passion, are at least rich in dignity and self-respect. The action is seen through Archer's eyes, and we watch him develop a profound understanding of the power and meaning of tradition and the difficulty of making moral choices. Trenor is not in love with Lily, nor does he perform the agonized soul-searching that tortures Archer, but he is checked in his ardour by the last vestiges of moral sensibility which he has inherited from his forebears, presumably men of Archer's moral fiber.

Trenor's loneliness and desperation come in part from a breakdown of the traditional behavior between husband and wife. Judy Trenor, while she treats Gus with amused tolerance, is not the pure, devoted wife

that May Archer was. Judy is uninterested in Gus, and foists him off on any spare woman to keep him occupied. While there is no indication that she has lovers, neither is she attentive to her husband. May would never allow Newland to live and work in a closed up house with one servant while she partied in the country, nor would she invite another woman to her table to keep her husband out of her way.

Archer and his father-in-law exalted their women and entrusted all social responsibility to them, but it was because they knew that the trust would never be abused. The women always put the welfare of their husbands first and protected the sanctity of their marriage, even if it was devoid of true feeling. Above all, the women preserved privacy and dignity; to denigrate one's husband in public, or privately to a friend, as Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset do, was unthinkable.

If Judy Trenor is easygoing and tolerant of her husband, Bertha Dorset is fiercely manipulative. She is the greediest, most vicious character in the book, and her husband is much more pathetic than Trenor. His plight is the subject of common gossip in society, in this case by Judy Trenor, who tells Lily:

"But she [Bertha] is dangerous--and
if I ever saw her up to mischief
it's now. I can tell by poor George's

manner. That man is a perfect barometer; he always knows when Bertha is going to--"

"To fall?" Miss Bart suggested.

"Don't be shocking! You know he believes in her still. And of course I don't say there's any real harm in Bertha. Only she delights in making people miserable, and especially poor George."

HofM, p. 48

In May Archer's world this conversation would be an impossibility--sexual encounters were scarcely hinted at in front of single girls, and scandals among friends were lamented seriously. Yet here poor George Dorset's humiliation is freely discussed by his wife's "friends;" including the unmarried Lily Bart.

Bertha herself publicly dismisses her husband to his face at the breakfast table at Bellomont.

"How few of us are left! I do so enjoy the quiet--don't you, Lily? I wish the men would always stop away; it's really much nicer without them. Oh, you don't count, George; one doesn't have to talk to one's husband."

HofM, p. 83

And talking to her husband is just what Bertha wishes to avoid by inviting Lily to cruise the Mediterranean on the Dorset yacht. Bertha has a new love, Ned Silverton, and she needs Lily to keep George distracted so that he does not suspect. Lily, fully understanding

the dangerous game, accepts the invitation, and plays her part so well that she puts herself in a position where she can be accused of having an affair with George. When Bertha stays out all night with Silverton, George is undeceived, leaving Bertha desperate to keep him. Her way of salvaging her marriage and maintaining appearances is to turn Lily off the yacht, thereby declaring to all present her suspicion of George and Lily. George stands there flabbergasted (as do Selden, the Stepneys, and several others of their set), unable to defend himself or Lily. His failure to publicly vindicate Lily is the blow that destroys her reputation irreparably. The scene is the clearest example in the book of the immense power a married woman has over her husband, and almost everyone else.

George's first words in encountering Lily months after the incident are: "'I should have written to you if I'd dared.'" (HofM, p. 251) What sort of a man is so cowed that he dare not write a letter? He has been totally emasculated. He continues:

"Miss Bart, for God's sake don't turn from me! We used to be good friends--you were always kind to me--and you don't know how I need a friend now.

"My God! What could I do; wasn't I powerless? You were singled out as a sacrifice; any word I might have said would have been turned against you--

"...I want to be free, and you can free me. I know you can. You don't want to keep me bound fast in hell, do you?...You understand, of course--there wouldn't be a hint of publicity--not a sound or a syllable to connect you with the thing. It would never come to that, you know. All I need is to be able to say definitely: 'I know this--and this--and this'--and the fight would drop, and the way be cleared, and the whole abominable business swept out of sight in a second."

HofM, pp. 252-4

He is pleading with Lily to support his accusations against Bertha and in return offers himself as husband to Lily. In his self-centered way, Dorset refuses to take responsibility for his plight or any initiative in saving himself. He cannot see that he could be free of Bertha any time he chose, if he were not too weak to do it alone. Blind to the moral degeneracy of the whole situation, weakened by his denial of personal responsibility, he tells himself and Lily that once the scandal is out of sight it will be as if it had never occurred. He is so self-involved that he can ingenuously accuse Lily of heartlessness in causing his destruction, a cruel and ironic reversal of the truth.

Lily, of course, cannot accept his offer, even though she sees in it a haven of peace and freedom from financial worries. She knows it is a false haven;

she is far too fastidious to involve herself with such a weak, pitiful man, nor could she allow herself to be the instrument with which a marriage is destroyed, even though she would not in fact be the underlying cause of its destruction.

Dorset believes that he needs a wife in order to succeed in society, just as much as Lily needs a husband. A wife performs the rituals of calling, writing notes, and organizing entertainments. She determines which invitations are to be accepted and which rejected, and which newcomers should be allowed into the sacred fold. It is the married women who must be wooed by a Wellington Bry or a Simon Rosedale if these outsiders are to succeed.

If Trenor and Dorset have all the credentials that society requires of a man, Simon Rosedale has nearly nothing. He has no family name, no wife, no fineness of manners or decorum, and he is Jewish. The only commodity that Rosedale possesses that is valued by society is his seemingly limitless millions. But, unlike some of the weak, overbred society men, he is aggressive and assertive, and unafraid to take whatever action is necessary to further his goal.

Rosedale is in some ways the most complex of the men, perhaps because he is so totally an outsider to the accepted community. Moreover, one is never quite sure just what the narrator thinks of him. He is portrayed as being gross and vulgar, and having specific unattractive qualities that are "characteristic of his race." Yet, these judgements are made through the eyes of Lily and the other members of society, who are snobbish and prejudiced, and whose judgement is not to be considered reliable. Some of Wharton's ambivalence can be explained by her own anti-Semitism and social snobbery, and it is clear that she is both admiring of and disgusted by her character. This vacillation between unflattering and favorable views of Rosedale makes him into a fascinating figure.

When he speaks for himself, his diction is peppered with grammatical errors; he frequently uses "don't" for "doesn't," and "ain't" for "am not." We know that the proper use of the English language was of great importance to Wharton, and was to be taken as a sign of good breeding and of intelligence.⁵ We also know that for Wharton, the first rule of conversation was: "Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible."⁶ Rosedale defies this rule several times; in fact, it is his frequent reference to the economic

realities of her predicament that seems to Lily the most vulgar of his habits. Ultimately, one might conclude that the very fact of his success in society as compared to Lily's failure is to be seen as a definitive statement on how low the society has fallen.

Still, in human terms, Rosedale is shown as the kindest and most compassionate of the men. He alone enjoys children. He alone cares for Lily herself, and, while he will not sacrifice his social ambition for her, he alone of the men offers to help her in a purely impersonal, disinterested way. He sees the real Lily, sees deeply into her, and loves her for all that she is.

From the first, Lily and Rosedale are shown to have an affinity of perception and purpose.

On his first appearance at one of the vast, impersonal Van Osburgh "crushes"--Rosedale, with that mixture of artistic sensibility and business astuteness which characterizes his race, had instantly gravitated toward Miss Bart. She understood his motives, for her own course was guided by as nice calculations.

HofM, p. 19

The passage shows Rosedale's immediate recognition of Lily's superiority, and it also shows that his social instincts rival her own. The description is not a flattering one, with its casual stereotyping. We see

here the deep prejudices which Rosedale must overcome to maneuver his way into society.

Rosedale appreciates Lily's uniqueness and their similar aims. At first he wishes to marry her, knowing that with his money and her talents they would be an irrepressible pair. He needs a woman with contacts and the ability to move among the upper crust to assure his position. Rosedale knows that the married women wield the social power, and that Lily would do so with more taste and finesse than any of the other women. He also knows that he has the personal dynamism to rule Lily in a way that her other suitors never could. But as Lily acquires spots on her reputation, she becomes less valuable to him as a wife. It is ironic that Rosedale contributes to Lily's downfall by pursuing her, and by using his inside knowledge to insinuate an intimacy between them that cheapens her in the eyes of the people he wishes to impress. In the end, he offers her marriage only if she will blackmail Bertha Dorset and thus regain her social standing--an act which Lily's scruples forbid her to perform.

However, Rosedale genuinely cares for Lily, and when she confides in him her true dealings with Trenor and her resulting poverty, his reaction is at first confused and pained, and he clumsily offers her financial

assistance. Lily sends him away, but later he comes to see her to try to help her. He is the only man in the book to do so.

"Look here, Miss Lily, I'm going to Europe next week; going over to Paris and London for a couple of months--and I can't leave you like this. I can't do it. I know it's none of my business--you've let me understand that often enough; but things are worse with you now than they have been before, and you must see that you've got to accept help from somebody. You spoke to me the other day about some debt to Trenor. I know what you mean, and I respect you for feeling as you do about it."

A blush of surprise rose to Lily's pale face, but before she could interrupt him, he had continued eagerly: "Well, I'll lend you the money to pay Trenor; and I won't--I--see here, don't take me up till I've finished. What I mean is, it'll be a plain business arrangement, such as one man would make with another. Now, what have you got to say against that?"

HofM, pp. 309-10

The offer is a genuine one, with no ulterior motive. Moreover, it makes us realize that Rosedale is not as dense as some of his drawing room behavior might lead us to think--he has been aware of Lily's subtle rebuffs, but has chosen to ignore them.

Lily cannot accept his offer because she is fearful of incurring yet another debt that she cannot pay. But it brings on a deeper contemplation of Rosedale than

than she had cared to make before.

In the silence, Lily had a clear perception of what was passing through his mind. Whatever perplexity he felt as to the inexorableness of her course--however little he penetrated its motive--she saw that it unmistakably tended to strengthen her hold over him. It was as though the sense in her of unexplained scruples and resistances had the same attraction as the delicacy of feature, the fastidiousness of manner, which gave her an external rarity, an air of being impossible to match. As he advanced in social experience, this uniqueness had acquired a greater value for him, as though he were a collector who had learned to distinguish minor differences of design and quality in some long-coveted object.

HofM, p. 310

A careful examination of the passage show us that the narrator has not let us into Rosedale's mind, nor are the judgements expressed hers. Rather, we see through the filter of Lily's perception. Thus it is Lily's prejudice at work in the supposition of Rosedale's lack of penetration into her motives, and what she thinks is his indiscriminating admiration for her. Because we are given Lily's view, we receive the full force of the irony of the last sentence--Lily, trodden down as she is by a worthless society, still believes that it is Rosedale's acceptance of that society's values that allows him finally to appreciate her true merits. And

it is the very fastidiousness that Rosedale admires so highly which forbids Lily to accept the conditions on which he offers marriage.

Rosedale is used as a mirror to Lily in the book, that is, his rise into society is juxtaposed against her decline. But for all his success at being invited to the "right" places, he suffers deeply at the hands of New York's elite.

Even Mrs. Trenor, whose taste for variety had led her into some hazardous experiments, resisted Jack's [Lily's cousin's] attempts to disguise Mr. Rosedale as a novelty and declared that he was the same little Jew who had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times within her memory...

HofM, p. 19

Rosedale is aware of these attitudes, and works at making himself useful on Wall Street to the men, and in the drawing room to the women. But at what cost to his self-respect? It is painful to imagine the self-concept of a man who will expend his prodigious resources of money, intellect, and vitality on trying to enter and perpetuate a society that so brutally scorns him. The irony of his ambition lies at the center of this interesting man, and makes him the most complex and human of the four.

The most elusive of the men is Lawrence Selden, set up by the author as the expected hero, yet absent from much of Lily's life in the book. We know immediately that he is intellectually and aesthetically judgemental, aloof, and somewhat emotionless.

...what was Miss Bart doing in town at that season? If she had appeared to be catching a train, he might have inferred that he had come on her in the act of transition between one and another of the country-houses which disputed her presence after the close of the Newport season; but her desultory air perplexed him....

An impulse of curiosity made him turn out of his direct line to the door and stroll past her. He knew that if she did not wish to be seen she would contrive to elude him; and it amused him to think of putting her skill to the test.

HofM, p. 5

We see in the first paragraph that Selden is in the habit of thinking his observations through, intellectualizing every nuance of behavior in order to perceive its underlying purpose, and judging what he sees. While everyone in that society watches everyone else, Selden's intellect is keener and his judgement less personal, more distanced. The second paragraph underlines his intellectual curiosity, warning the reader that it is cold, and that Selden exercises it without any real human feeling or any awareness of the difference

between a person and an object. He regards Lily in exactly the same way as he would a painting and tests her much as a scientist would test a laboratory rat. The use of the word "amused" is Wharton's clue to the reader that not only is Selden aloof, but his aloofness trivializes other people, an attitude of which the narrator cannot approve.

Later, Wharton's disapproval is manifested through the irony of the inconsistency in Selden's thoughts.

Selden was still looking at her, but with a changed eye. Hitherto he had found, in her presence and her talk, the aesthetic amusement which a reflective man is apt to seek in desultory intercourse with pretty women. His attitude had been one of admiring spectatorship, and he would have been almost sorry to detect in her any emotional weakness which should interfere with the fulfilment [sic] of her aims. But now the hint of this weakness had become the most interesting thing about her....It was the danger-point of their intercourse that he could not doubt the spontaneity of her liking. From whatever angle he viewed their dawning intimacy, he could not see it as part of her scheme of life; and to be the unforeseen element in a career so accurately planned was stimulating even to a man who had renounced sentimental experiments.

HofM, p. 73

Selden thinks that he has progressed beyond mere "admiring spectatorship," but what has happened is that

his vanity has been flattered by her liking. The terminology in which he thinks is scientific and judgmental, alerting the reader to his self-delusion. We are to understand that while Selden may be more thoughtful than society and less greedy, his moral and personal fastidiousness does not have the narrator's approval.

At Bellomont, he expresses his philosophy of life in conversation with Lily.

"My idea of success," he said, "is personal freedom."
 "Freedom? Freedom from worries?"
 "From everything--from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit--that's what I call success."
HofM, pp. 72-3

It is very easy for a man who can vacation in both the West Indies and the Riviera in one year, and who keeps a manservant and belongs to a club, to speak of a life free from petty thoughts of money. He does not know what poverty is. This "republic of the spirit" is not a viable way of life; it is a desire to avoid all obligations and responsibilities, and rest in an aloof detachment from any real human contact or experience.⁷ One of Lily's most serious difficulties, and a central irony of the book, is that she believes in Selden as the prophet of the right way to live, and thus judges herself

by his imperfect and impossible standards.

In order to reinforce her judgement of Selden, Wharton places him in two relationships which disclose how harmful his behavior can be. The first is with his cousin, Gerty Farish, who one evening lovingly and unselfishly prepares dinner for him, giving every thought to his comfort, and dreaming of romance. Selden talks all evening of Lily, never thinking that Gerty may care for him, in fact, not thinking of Gerty at all. We see her drowning in despair, while Selden, oblivious, leaves early to look for Lily. It is a foreshadowing of his blindness to Lily's slow annihilation and his own unwitting part in that process.

The second relationship in which Wharton places Selden is that of the former lover of Bertha Dorset. The affair is Selden's undeniable link with society and its twisted values, and it undercuts his high moral judgement of Lily's conduct; in truth, her behavior is less reproachable than his own. When the Dorsets' marriage is about to rip apart, Lily, like a trusting child, sends George Dorset to Selden, knowing that the lawyer's personal stake will cause him to try to mend the marriage. She assumes that Selden would not want a public washing of the Dorset linen because of his own involvement. She also seals her own fate--for the

marriage to be mended, Lily must be sacrificed.

Selden is a very important character to Wharton because he is an example, not of the virtues of aristocracy corrupted, but rather of those virtues bred to excess. As she says, he, too, is a victim of his environment.

...in a different way, he was as much as Lily the victim of his environment....Now, it had been Selden's fate to have a charming mother: her graceful portrait, all smiles and cashmere, still emitted a faded scent of the undefinable quality....

Though many of Selden's friends would have called his parents poor, he had grown up in an atmosphere where restricted means were felt only as a check on aimless profusion, where the few possessions were so good that their rarity gave them a merited relief, and abstinence was combined with elegance in a way exemplified by Mrs. Selden's knack of wearing her old velvet as if it were new.... It was from her that he inherited his detachment from the sumptuary side of life: the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the epicurean's pleasure in them. Life shorn of either feeling appeared to him a diminished thing, and nowhere was the blending of the two ingredients so essential as in the character of a pretty woman.

HofM, pp. 160-1

While the passage rings with Wharton's usual irony, it also conveys a sympathetic understanding of how Selden could have become so cool and detached. He has absorbed

his parents' prideful, self-deceiving definition of "poverty," and has learned from them to look for the rarest and best of everything. His serious flaw is that he extends his carefully honed judgement to people as well as things. He judges Lily by his mother, who was also graceful and charming, but whom he necessarily views through lenses tinted with filial devotion. Without understanding that Lily is truly poor, he finds her preoccupation with money distasteful. His ideal vision does not admit the harsh facts of a real woman's life. The language of the passage, though in the voice of the narrator, echoes Selden's own in its coldness and detachment. Wharton can explain Selden's personality, but she will not wholly condone it.

Selden's failure to help Lily is devastating for her because he has invited her to see him as a true friend. Even if they could never connect as lovers--and the blame lies on both of them for that--he need not have failed her as a friend. Knowing Bertha Dorset's ruthlessness and promiscuity and hearing George Dorset's side of the story, still Selden doubts Lily's innocence in the incident at Nice, and gives her only minimal gentlemanly assistance when she is turned off the Dorset yacht (and even that she must ask for). Later, knowing that Lily has been disinherited, he takes no interest in

her predicament. Knowing how society has shunned her, still he censures her for consorting with the Brys and the Gormers. He goes to her assistance at the Empire Hotel only after Gerty Farish insists, and then feebly. And when Lily comes to him in desperation the night before her death, though she cries and is nearly incoherent, he fails to see her crushing need.

Of the four men, Selden is the least excusable in his behavior because he acts under the least duress. Society makes few demands of him--as a single man with a profession he may come and go as he pleases, and is not subject to censure for his amorous entanglements. He is also presented as more refined in taste and intellect than the others, and thus better equipped to judge Lily fairly and compassionately. Yet he proves himself to be a cold, effete snob. This is Wharton's most scathing indictment of New York; the best of the aristocracy, the most enlightened, has evolved into a bloodless dilettante.

The view into Selden's mind on discovering that Lily is dead shows the reader that he is essentially unchanged from when, as the book opened, he first saw her on the railway platform.

Yes, he could now read into that
farewell all that his heart craved
to find there; he could even draw

from it courage not to accuse himself for having failed to reach the height of his opportunity.

He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart, since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically. But at least he had loved her, had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her, and if the moment had been fated to pass from them before they could seize it, he saw now that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives.

It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction...

HofM, p. 342

Selden's whole view is selfish. Never once does he express anguish or even sympathy for Lily's plight, nor does he mourn for her. Dead or alive, she remains an object to him.

The sentimental determinism of the ending is Selden's, not the narrator's. Selden says he has gained from Lily's death the courage not to accuse himself. Who then should he accuse for their failure to realize their love? It does not take courage to blame circumstances instead of taking personal responsibility. His attitude is a reaffirmation of his earlier dream of success, that is, freedom from all obligations. And, when he avows that at least he had loved Lily, even

if it was too late, he is again lying to himself, rationalizing and idealizing his passion as he has many times before. When he first sees the letter to Trenor on her desk he immediately assumes the worst-- that she must have had an illicit relationship with him. If indeed Selden had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her, he could never have made that cruel and unjust pre-judgement.

He continues to tell himself that it was this moment of love that kept them from atrophy and extinction-- but has it? Isn't that exactly what they suffer? Selden will remain forever cold, forever aloof from the world with his idealized dreams of Lily Bart, while Lily lies in the grave, the last member of society with finer sensibilities, extinct.

The world that Lily Bart inhabited is crushingly ruthless. But Wharton does not present society as a vast, impersonal machine that grinds people into pulp; rather she shows us that it is made up of people who are at once victims and victimizers, who, in an effort to succeed, or merely to survive, sacrifice friends and family maliciously or thoughtlessly. Selden, because of his upbringing, fails Lily by his aloofness and

passivity. Rosedale, victim of the prejudices of society, victimizes Lily in an attempt to climb the ladder of social success. And both Trenor and Dorset allow Lily to be cut from society at their wives' insistence. The positions of these men illuminate the configuration of power in their world.

In the house of mirth, the married woman wields the most power. She determines social engagements, and who is or is not to be admitted to the ranks of the privileged. Ignoring husband and children, she will trample anyone foolish enough to intrude between her and her goal. Next in influence is the unmarried man, both because he is often the desired object of a married woman (either as lover or as suitor for a daughter), and because he has not yet surrendered his power to a wife. Yet, without a wife, he is hindered in social progress, as there is no one to entertain for him, or make the appropriate calls and contacts. The single woman, particularly if she, like Lily, is without a protecting mother, has the least influence, and is thus the most vulnerable. Even Ned Silverton, poor though he may be from his gambling debts, could not have suffered Lily's fate; it is notable that when he is down and out, it is his sister who seeks work to pay his debts, not Ned himself.

In part, the society in the book is a replica of what Wharton saw around her. The historical veracity of such a world is apparent from the observations of New York society of 1896-1946 made by Lloyd Morris:

"Society," whether in Newport or New York, was a picture poor in the male presence. The gentleman of leisure was not yet extinct, but in 1896 he represented a small and diminishing species. The old aristocracy had begun to yield to the importunate big money-makers from the West, soon to be followed by the lords of Pittsburgh....The new men were of a tougher breed; their goal was not money, but power....The pursuit of power absorbed them completely. The game exacted unremitting vigilance. They had little or no time for leisure....

In these circumstances, the conduct of social life had become--to a degree unknown in any other country--the responsibility and obligation of women. "Society" was ruled by women, though supported, more and more invisibly, by men.

We know that Lawrence Selden, who is not wealthy, must work for a living, and Gus Trenor is shown as frequently having a hard day downtown, and having to live alone in the city while Judy is up at Bellomont. On a Monday morning, only George Dorset has leisure to remain in the country. There is an irony inherent in this lifestyle, where the women have more money and time to make themselves attractive than ever, but lack the

central reason for them; namely men: men to dress for and compete for, to flirt with and please.

Compared to this, the world of "old" New York, during the 1870's, as depicted in The Age of Innocence, is a much more sedate, genteel place to live. It is tempting to look there for an explanation of the radical changes in high society life in just thirty years. Yet, one must be careful of digging there for the roots of the corruption that blossoms in The House of Mirth. For one thing, The Age of Innocence was written fifteen years later, and by Wharton's own admission, as an escape from the weariness and despondency of life in war-torn France.⁹ And, perhaps more importantly, one must remember that the social milieu as shown in a novel is just as much a creation by the author to forward her purpose in the book as is any other part of the novel.¹⁰ Thus, the two books need have no consistency in the social worlds they portray.

Still there are insights to be drawn from The Age of Innocence. Certain crucial stabilizing elements present in Newland Archer's world are notably absent from Lily Bart's. The most important of these is Family, that all-embracing, restrictive yet comforting force which supports one no matter how eccentric or risqué his conduct. There, even a Regina Beaufort, wife of a

known swindler, is not completely cut off, owing to the vestige of Manson blood that runs through her veins. Lily would never have been abandoned in a world such as Archer's, but it is not at all clear that she came from a background like his. Although she was born at about the same time Newland and May were married, and thus her parents would have been their contemporaries, the description of them bears no resemblance to that of the young Archers. Mrs. Bart is more like Bertha Dorset in her aggression and greed; and poor Hudson Bart, more crumpled and pathetic than George Dorset, was far from the thoughtful, well-respected man that Newland was.

Wharton achieved admirably her aim of portraying a frivolous society capable of debasing and destroying people and ideals. Lily is annihilated by it. Trenor and Dorset are debased, with little if any recognition of their plight. Rosedale chooses to be humiliated in return for social prominence in a world he knows to be worthless, and Selden remains aloof on a sterile plateau from which he views life but cannot participate. There is no right way in this society, no way to live a good life amidst the senseless greed and unfeeling hedonism. With the death of Lily we see that there is no hope for the house of mirth, it can only continue to degrade and corrupt its inhabitants.

NOTES

¹ Anti-Semitic remarks are to be found in several of Wharton's novels. In Hudson River Bracketed, someone sits down next to a "Jew girl in rimless glasses," and in Twilight Sleep a society man calls a minor character a "dirty Jew."

² By far the best study of The House of Mirth (as well as of The Custom of the Country and The Age of Innocence) that I have found is: Gary Lindberg, Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1975). Other good studies have been written by Irving Howe, D.E.S. Maxwell, Nellie Monroe, Richard Poirier, Diana Trilling, and Cynthia Wolff. See bibliography.

³ Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (New York: D. Appleton Co., 1934), p. 207.

⁴ Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 162. All further quotations from the novel are from this edition.

⁵ Wharton, A Backward Glance, pp. 48-53.

⁶ Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 57.

[Notes to pages 23-32]

⁷ Nellie Monroe, The Novel and Society (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1941), p. 130.

⁸ Lloyd Morris, Postscript to Yesterday (New York: Random House, 1947), pp. 8-9.

⁹ Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 369.

¹⁰ Lindberg, p. 67.

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