

Charlene Williams

Dr. Jane E. Rose

The American Novel 596

3 November 2008

Williams 1

* Real example
of type of
paper you
are writing *

New York City, Society, and *The House of Mirth*

In his musical *Rent*, Jonathon Larson penned the line "New York City, center of the universe," and so some believe. New York City is truly the center of many things: finances, theater, so-called culture. It has become the idea of what city life is. It has become the whole world for some people who live there and a dream and a goal for others. New Yorkers often set the trends for the rest of the country, and it is the place that the rest of the population looks toward for certain kinds of cultural and social guidance. This is not a new phenomenon. New York has long been a social mecca. Edith Wharton recognized this and thus wrote novels based on, reflecting, and taking place in New York society. *[The House of Mirth is one such novel. For the heroine of the novel, Lily Bart, New York City and its society, with all of the social demands and false niceties, is a necessary to her life, and so when that society rejects her because of her inability to fully function in the way that is demanded of her, Lily's life falls apart.]*

Thesis
Statement

The architect Paul Goldberger has said of New York City, "New York is an arrogant city; it has always wanted to be all things to all people, and a surprising amount of the time it has succeeded. It has always been a city of commerce, and the values of commerce have tended to supersede other values" ("New York City Quotations"). This is, at least partially, the New York that Edith Wharton creates for her readers in *The House of Mirth*. The world in which Lily Bart lives is full of money, from the people who host the parties to which Lily goes to the

businessmen trying to gain a foothold into the upper echelons of respectable society. Judy Trenor, one who Lily believes to be a true friend, takes great pride in her parties.

It was difficult to define her beyond saying that she seemed to exist only as a hostess, not so much from any exaggerated instinct of hospitality as because she could not sustain life except in a crowd. The collective nature of her interests exempted her from the ordinary rivalries of her sex, and she knew no more personal emotion than that of hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house-parties than herself. As her social talents, backed by Mr. Trenor's bank-account, almost always assured her ultimate triumph in such competitions, success had developed in her an unscrupulous good nature toward the rest of her sex, and in Miss Bart's utilitarian classification of her friends, Mrs. Trenor ranked as the woman who was least likely to "go back" on her. (34)

Judy Trenor's whole purpose in life is to give the biggest and most amusing parties. She is only able to excel at her purpose because of her husband's money. Because Judy Trenor is secure in her place in the society, she can afford to be truly kind to Lily, and Lily recognizes this in believing that Judy is "least likely to 'go back' on her." However, when things begin to go badly for Lily, Judy is nowhere to be found.

Society is also where the newly rich want to be. Simon Rosedale, on the outside of society at the beginning of the novel, must work his way up through connections. In an attempt to do this, he proposes to Lily, thinking that her beauty and her standing in society at that time would help him in his endeavor, but Rosedale is not someone with whom Lily can see herself. While pursuing Percy Gryce, Lily notes that if she does not marry Gryce, "the day might come

good point

when she would have to be civil to such men as Rosedale" (46). Rosedale has the money to make it in society, but not the background and history that makes him truly worthy. It occurs to Lily that if she is not able to find someone well-entrenched in society, she might have to stoop to consider someone who is just on the outskirts.

The power in New York society comes from money, but the truly powerful in Lily's circle are not the men who make the money, but rather the women who have more say over how the money is employed. Bertha Dorset is perhaps the most powerful woman in Lily's group of "friends." Bertha has had several affairs, including with Laurence Seldon; all of society knows, but no one dares discuss it in public because of Bertha's power and ability to change the social standing of others less powerful than she. Bertha invites Lily to travel to Europe and stay on the Dorset yacht, not because she enjoys Lily's company but because she needs Lily to distract her husband, George, while she has an affair with Ned Silverton. Carrie Fisher explains Lily's situation to Seldon.

We all know that's what Bertha brought her abroad for. When Bertha wants to have a good time she has to provide occupation for George. At first I thought Lily was going to play her cards well *this* time, but there are rumours that Bertha is jealous of her success here and at Cannes, and I shouldn't be surprised if there were a break any day. (148)

Carrie recognizes that Lily does not understand the role she is supposed to play, and therefore Lily is unable to continue to be a respected member of that society. Lily seems to trust people and what they say their intentions are. However, according to Linda Wagner-Martin, author of the book *The House of Mirth A Novel of Admonition*, "words are intended not to convey meaning but only to serve as counters in the necessary rituals of the various social games" (22). Lily

believes that her duty is to be a confidant and help to Bertha Dorset when the details of her affair are discovered by her husband, but she soon learns that the friendly words that had seemingly passed between herself and Bertha were simply a way of getting Bertha what she wanted and needed, a scapegoat. Lily becomes Bertha's way out of the divorce that George wants because Bertha so cleverly set up her hand and played it so well. Lily should have been more aware of the danger she was in. This is the ultimate ruin of Lily. yes

Lily had been making some bad choices, such as not truly pursuing a suitable husband and accepting money from Gus Trenor, but the episode with the Dorsets was the final strike against her. Author Stephen Birmingham ^{says} said, "A great many people go after success simply for the shiny prizes it brings....And nowhere is it pursued more ardently than in the city of New York" (New York in Quotes). Lily wants those "shiny prizes." She wants the money and the nice clothing, but she cannot fulfill the demands. When she gets close to what she wants, such as setting her sights on Percy Gryce, she chooses another path. Lily is on the verge of really getting Percy's attention by going to church, but she becomes distracted by Laurence Seldon, missing church and even cancelling an afternoon walk with Percy to spend time with Seldon. She knows that nothing can come of her attraction to Seldon, and yet she makes that choice.

Lily also makes the unfortunate choice of asking Gus Trenor for money. She naively believes that Gus is simply investing her own money and that she owes him nothing more than thanks for the effort he puts into investing it. When it becomes clear to her that Gus Trenor has just been giving her money and wants more for his kindness, she cannot oblige, and she cannot continue to be indebted to him. She has the "shiny prizes" for a brief period of time, but the ultimate cost of her morality is too much for her. She cannot accept such prizes with such strings

attached, and that is really one of the tenants of society that Wharton shows in the novel, ^{tenets} do what you have to do to get what you want. Lily cannot be so morally corrupt and, therefore, can never ^{good point} truly be a member of high society. Maureen E. Montgomery, author of Displaying Women: spectacles of leisure in Edith Wharton's New York, writes, "Lily performs for all men, resisting the possession of any particular man. But in doing so, she risks being classified as promiscuous, forfeiting her respectability. Unknown to her, the gossip in male circles is that she is sexually available" (132). It is Lily's choices in not continuing to pursue Percy and in accepting money ^{yes} and help from Gus Trenor that show this statement to be true. Wharton shows a New York society that is self-deluded about the important things in life (Montgomery 81). Seldon, who sees himself as an outsider, comments on society.

The queer thing about society is that the people who regard it as an end are those who are in it, and not the critics on the fence. It's just the other way with most shows - the audience may be under the illusion, but the actors know that real life is on the other side of the footlights. The people who take society as an escape from work are putting it to its proper use; but when it becomes the thing worked for it distorts all the relations of life, (56) ✓

This is exactly what happens to Lily. This is the way all of her friends see society and this, as Wharton shows through Seldon's comments, is why there are no relationships between husbands and wives in the novel that are not distorted. In each couple, the husband provides money, the wife spends the money. There are no loving relationships. These are the false niceties of New York upper-class society. ^{good observed}

When Lily is ostracized from society, she must find a new place in the world eventually ending up working in millinery shop making hats for the women who used to be her friends.

According to critic Elaine Showalter, "With each step downward, each removal to a smaller room, Lily's life becomes more enmeshed with this community [a community of working women] and she sees it in more positive terms" (150). "When she 'joins the working classes,' Lily also sees 'the fragmentary and distorted image of the world she had lived in, reflected in the mirror of the working-girls' minds.' They idealize the society women whose hats they trim" (Showalter 151). But Lily has been a part of that high society, and she knows that under all the pretty wrapping lies great danger and a lot of ugliness. It is in this world of the poor and working, that Lily once feared, where she finds true friendship and caring. Gerty Farish is Lily's truest friend. Gerty does not have money and standing in society, but she fervently helps Lily and truly cares about her, offering Lily a place to stay though Lily does not accept. Through Gerty, Lily also meets the other kind heart that reaches out to her, Nettie Struther. For Nettie Struther, Lily is a kind of romantic figure (Showalter 151). Nettie sees only Lily's kindness from Lily's brief foray into charity with the influence of Gerty Farish. Nettie idolizes Lily as a grand lady with a generous heart, and perhaps that's what Lily could have been in different circumstances. } yes

New Yorkers in high-class society see themselves as superior and sometimes appear to have not the need to deal with those who are lesser. Lily is lesser. She does not have the family support to buy her way into society, and she does not have the ability to put her morals aside. This is what makes Lily a tragic character. Lily's inability to actually be a part of the society she craves is ultimately not the fault of the society itself, but rather Lily's fault. She simply did not or, perhaps more likely, she could not fully take part in the immorality, pettiness, and blatant cruelty that is demanded within the circles of the upper-class. Lily only yearned for the shininess that kind of life could provide her; she was unwillingly to give up who she truly was to attain it.

Works Cited

Montgomery, Maureen E. Displaying Women : spectacles of leisure in Edith Wharton's New York. New York: Routledge, 1998.

"New York City Quotations." Newrotic New York City Tours. 1 November 2008

<<http://www.newroticnewyorkcitytours.com/New-York-City-Quotations.html>>.

New York in Quotes - Famous Sayings, Celebrity Quotes. 1 November 2008

<<http://www.midmanhattan.com/articles/new-york-quotes.htm>>.

Showalter, Elaine. "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's *House of Mirth*."

Modern Critical Views Edith Wharton. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

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