About the book...

The House of Mirth, published in 1905, marks Edith Wharton's emergence as one of America's greatest writers. Although Wharton had previously published two collections of stories, The Greater Inclination (1899) and Crucial Incidents (1901) and the novel The Valley of Decision (1902), her decision to write about fashionable New York, a world she "had been steeped in since infancy," brought her immediate success and recognition. As she wrote in her autobiography, A Backward Glance (1934), her goal in The House of Mirth was to uncover the true nature of society's power and to answer the question: "in what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the 'old woe of the world,' any deeper bearing that the people composing such a society could guess?"

By 1905, the genteel milieu of Wharton's childhood was rapidly disappearing. Fashions—and economics—had changed, and Old New York society was forced to recognize the power of "new money" and even to accept the newly rich, with their tremendous wealth earned in a suspect marketplace, into their circle. It was a concession that would not only corrode their sense of style and decorum, but allow them to sacrifice the members of the "old" society who could not keep pace. Lily Bart, the heroine of The House of Mirth, is a victim of a large, unstoppable shift in the ways of the world.

Launched into society at a glorious and very expensive debutante ball, Lily sees a world of unlimited possibility before her. But her father's announcement that he is financially ruined, followed quickly by his death, leave Lily and her mother with only one "asset"—Lily's extraordinary beauty and charm. At the age of 29, now orphaned, Lily lives with an aunt who offers minimum, often grudging, hospitality and financial support. A wealthy husband could satisfy her craving for luxury and admiration, but Lily is reluctant to consummate this kind of "deal." In a chronicle that richly details the follies of shallowness, and cruelties of society as it illuminates Lily's own ambivalence about who and what she wants, Wharton traces her heroine's decline from her elite position as a much-desired guest in exclusive social events, to her role as a liaison between rich
"outsiders" eager to be accepted in society but ignorant of its ways, to her piteous existence when the homes of both old and new society are firmly, finally, closed to her.

On one level a devastating satire of a world devoid of moral scruples, The House of Mirth is also a stringent critique of the particular restrictions and limitations such a world imposes on women. Lily is a woman not only of charm, but of intelligence; her outward beauty matched by a genuine, if undeveloped, appreciation of art and of nature's beauty. By succumbing to society's definition of her as a beautiful object and nothing more, however, Lily in many ways authors her own fate. Woven throughout the novel are threads of Wharton's own experience. Born in 1862, Wharton spent her childhood in the staid brownstones of New York and the elegant country houses to which the rich retired during the summer, and was intimately acquainted with the styles of entertaining, of dress, and of conspicuous consumption favored by the people who inhabited them. She married five years after her own debut, late enough to have contemplated the likely fate of an unmarried woman in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Though her husband, Edward, was well-enough off to avoid working in the despised business world, the two were fundamentally incompatible. Edward admired Edith's brilliance, but he was far from her intellectual equal and shared few of her interests. The critic Edmund Wilson speculated that Wharton turned to fiction to ease the tensions of her marriage; certainly the world she created through her writing must have been a welcome haven from the tedium and disappointments of life with Edward. But it is the very act of writing that separates Wharton from her fictional creation. Unlike Lily, Wharton took an active role in defining herself, becoming a masterful writer, and establishing that a woman need not depend on others to achieve dignity and a sense of worth. The world is much richer for it. (www.readinggroupguides.com)

About the author... (Encyclopedia of World Biography)

Edith Wharton (1861-1937), American author, chronicled the life of affluent Americans between the Civil War and World War I.

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones in New York City, probably on Jan. 24, 1861. Like many other biographical facts, she kept her birth date secret. Gossip held that the family's English tutor--not George Frederic Jones--was really Edith's father. The truth may never be known, but Edith evidently believed the story. After the Civil War, George Jones took his family to Europe, where they could live more cheaply.

Back in New York, by the age of 18 Edith had published poems in magazines and in a privately printed volume and had experimented with fiction. However, events deferred
her writing career. The family's second long European trip ended in her father's death. In New York again, she evidently fell in love with Walter Berry; yet she became engaged to Edward Wharton, eleven years her senior, a wealthy Bostonian. They were married in 1885.

Marriage brought Edith Wharton two things she valued most, travel and leisure for writing. In the early 1890s her stories began appearing in magazines, but her first commercial success was a book written with an architect, The Decoration of Houses (1897). She sought help on it from Walter Berry, who remained in some uncertain way part of her life until his death (1927). Soon after this book, Mrs. Wharton suffered a nervous breakdown. For therapy her physician suggested she write fiction. In 1899 a collection of stories, The Greater Inclination, appeared—the first of her 32 volumes of fiction.

In 1905, after she began her friendship with Henry James, Wharton's first masterpiece, The House of Mirth, laid bare the cruelties of New York society. Her range was apparent in Tales of Men and Ghosts (1910), a collection of chillers, and in the celebrated novella Ethan Frome (1911). In 1910 the Whartons moved to France, where Edward Wharton suffered a nervous breakdown and was placed in a sanitorium. After their divorce in 1913, Edith Wharton stayed in France, writing lovingly about it in French Ways and Their Meanings (1919) and other books.

The Age of Innocence, a splendid novel of New York, won the Pulitzer Prize (1921), and a dramatization of Mrs. Wharton's novella The Old Maid won the Pulitzer Prize for drama (1935). She died of a cardiac attack on Aug. 11, 1937, and was buried in Versailles next to Walter Berry.

Reviews


Mrs. Wharton is essentially a moralist, albeit with the whole modern resolve not to declare herself. A Gift from the Grave remains her highest, most complete, and most commanding work, because, in a memorable passage she set her sail to a natural wind. Moral passion swept through the world of that book—direct grief, emotion close to the fact of life, love, indignation, remorse, dishonour, and honour; all the storms of breasts complex, civilised, but incorrupt. In The House of Mirth we have to read of the fortunes of a woman full of desires and of self-love, but void of virtue, of passion, and of intellect; and round about her are only lovers of their own ease and supremacy; claimants to the right of a social contemptuousness towards other less fortunate egotists as the salt of life; and graspers of riches as its sweetness. To observe this horde without obvious irritation is a work demanding self-control, and Mrs. Wharton watches them from the sequestered bower of her fine art, taking wide views, keeping her own counsel. It seems
strange to say of a novelist who has filled five hundred pages with chosen words that she keeps her own counsel, but it is none the less obviously true of the writer of these five hundred remarkable pages. The keeping of her own counsel is one of the feats of her work. Is it indeed worth doing so well? Or rather, is not the other feat—that of the unlocking of a noble mind—worth doing? In much of her writing we were admitted to recognise her noble mind; we are reluctant to forego an intimacy that we valued. And when Mrs. Wharton goes about to keep her own counsel she does it, as she does everything, extraordinarily well.

Thackeray intended to keep his own counsel as a sentimentalist; but he did not do it well. He assigned the sentiment to certain characters—to women, to Laura Pendennis foremost—and pretended to be a moderately cynical man looking on with a smile; he took for himself, as it were, the part of Arthur Pendennis, whereas he was Laura at heart; and thus easily persuaded the duller readers in their multitude, during two generations, that he was of a cynical turn. But the author of *The House of Mirth* does not reveal herself, even dramatically. She is the greatest thing that a writer of fiction can be—a moralist; but there is no person in this story to bear the charge of the character.

And in this extremity of reserve lurks the one fault of art in the book—that is the indefiniteness of the "better part" which Selden has to offer to the self-loving and money-loving heroine. In the character of this young New York woman, about whom the whole history is written, we recognise two likenesses. She is partly Gwendolen Harleth and partly Hedda Gabler, yet with something modern in the place of Gwendolen's thirst after righteousness, and something intelligible in the place of Hedda's vice and Hedda's despair. Both resemblances therefore are slight. Now, in her slight likeness to Gwendolen Harleth she should have a kind of external conscience in the form of a man—a man at least esteemed, at least admirable. But the man in whom the rôle is just suggested, in *The House of Mirth*, is very little estimable. He has borne a part in the "cold obstruction" of the intrigues of man and woman in the world he lives in—a squalid past, we are compelled to see, because of the manner of woman who had been his random mistress. And the better part he shows the heroine, half-heartedly, as a way out of her pursuit of luxury, is vague. If it were definite we are sure it would be inadequate, and Mrs. Wharton ably leaves it in a little cloud. We choose, however, to pause where she passes, and to ask a closer question. All the answer we get is a tender of liberty, and obviously liberty is what the unfortunate egoist, the woman of the New York "world," needs urgently, and all but desperately; but in what liberty does the apostle of this vague apostolate himself abide? We see him in the beloved luxury in which all the persons of the book roll themselves with revolting joy. We cannot imagine Lawrence Selden following liberty into a hard, or a useful, or a wild, or a sacramental life. He sets open, or rather ajar, to the woman who inclines to love him, a door into a better world too dubious for faith, a better world open to nothing but a very justifiable suspicion; and where there is no definite place to go to, or object in setting out, she does not go. She is less to blame than Mrs. Wharton.

We find her at the beginning poor, very lovely, member of the inner—the most contemptuous—social world of New York, in full pursuit of a millionaire. By the spite of her equals she misses her quarry; and the story that follows is the story of her failure to capture any other, until she dies drifting consciously into the peril of an overdose of
The orphaned Lily's beauty and *savoir faire* are her working capital, together with the possibility of an inheritance. She has only to project agreeable images and to be useful to female patrons. This entails being a decorative object, an entertaining companion, an obliging social secretary, and an ingenue in the presence of likely suitors. Thus Lily should be able to make a marriage for place and for money, on which social power and a luxurious lifestyle depend. But Lily is unable to follow the prescribed course singlemindedly, and she is vulnerable as an unmarried and impecunious woman. Hence *The House of Mirth* becomes a naturalistic tragedy documenting a painful downward trajectory through socio-economic strata culminating in Lily's ambiguous death, a presumptive suicide.

"Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight.... And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That it is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples? These last were the two antagonistic forces which fought their battle in her breast." The social Darwinism...
manifest in this passage, the detached scrutiny of Lily as an organism at the mercy of forces both hereditary and environmental, is characteristic of Wharton’s attitudes and language. And yet like George Eliot, whom she greatly admired, Wharton holds her characters responsible for their behavior even as she documents their social entrapment and vulnerability as creatures.

Moral sentiment in Lily expresses itself in aesthetic terms. She is repelled by crudity and ugliness manifested either in physical objects, in a drab lifestyle, or in conduct. But she is capable under the duress of economic necessity and social ambition of postponing scrutiny of her own behavior. She accepts "loans" from Gus Trenor, a married man, without reckoning the potential cost. She allows herself to become a social intermediary for Simon Rosedale, a Jewish *nouveau riche*. And she allows Bertha Dorset to use her to entertain her husband while Bertha has an affair with Neddy Silverton. It is Lawrence Selden, whom Lily would love if circumstances permitted, who forces her into confrontations with herself. Selden enjoins Lily to be free in spirit, to extricate herself "from all the material accidents." To others he celebrates her beauty, and claims to believe that "the real Lily" is superior to her trivial world. Yet Selden is himself a male counterpart to Lily in his spiritual dividedness. They are products of the same society. If Lily cannot discard its economic norms, Selden is bound by the fiction that unmarried women must be ideal. He cannot trust his own judgment over the tarnished image reflected in the social mirror. Selden kneels at Lily's deathbed believing that, had she lived, they would have found each other, but the reader need not think so. Selden's aloof attitude of spectatorship, be it amused, admiring, or judgmental, is representative of various male figures in Wharton's fiction who stop short of full commitment to the women they profess to love. With characteristic irony Wharton makes Lily's last unambiguously willed act the burning of letters documenting Selden's own love affair with Bertha Dorset. Lily could have used these letters to blackmail Bertha into renewed social patronage and thereby cleared the way for her own social rehabilitation.

The closing scenes reflect a social terrain less familiar to Wharton, but equally characteristic of her interest. Destitute at last and living in a slum, Lily comes upon a working-class girl whom she had once patronized. Nettie has survived ill-health and a seduction because the man she later married accepted her as she was, another ironic reflection on Selden. Nettie comforts Lily and places her infant child in Lily's arms. Such empathic depiction of the very poor and the child as a symbol of hope are recurrent motifs in Wharton's fiction, as if she were reaching out imaginatively to worlds beyond her own experience.


Twenty years ago the name of Edith Wharton was virtually unknown in Britain other than as a friend of Henry James and the author of a bleak provincial American tale, *Ethan Frome*. Today Wharton's work ranks high in the sales figures of both Penguin and Virago, an acclaimed feature film of *The Age of Innocence* has brought her a whole new audience, and, judging by the frequency with which her novels appear on student
reading lists, she has achieved almost canonical status in the University academy. A society and a scholarly journal, both bearing her name, suggest that Wharton's critical reputation is now assured - at least, until the next change in literary fashion.

Fashion shift was a subject that fascinated Edith Wharton, who remains one of the most penetrating analysts of cultural change the twentieth century has produced, and her reclamation by feminist scholars and biographers would have provided her with valuable material for an ironic appraisal of the vagaries of intellectual taste. Certainly *The House of Mirth*, probably her best-known work, takes to pieces a society which iconizes fashion adherence and which is merciless in its power to create and to destroy reputations overnight. The story of Lily Bart, the heroine for whom beauty is both an essential commodity and a fatal liability, can be read both as a feminist fable of disillusionment and as the American tragedy in its revelation of the will to self-destruct that a materialistic culture produces.

This new edition of *The House of Mirth* by Shari Benstock, whose two essays (on the contexts of the novel and its critical history) provide the sharpest insights on the text in this volume, is a reprint of the original 1905 Scribner's Sons edition corrected by Wharton from the serialized version that partially preceded it. It is unfortunate that the reprint is marred by occasional typographical errors (e.g. 'clan' for 'clang', p. 70; 'no on' for 'no one', p. 172) for the project itself constitutes a valuable student aid. Wharton's *The House of Mirth* forms the latest in the Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism series, edited by Ross C. Murfin, whose crisp, workmanlike synopses of contemporary literary theory introduce the five essays that are included in the volume. Each of these, three of which were written specially for this edition, offers a critical reading of *The House of Mirth* under the banners of, respectively, cultural studies, Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. Not all these essays have the same clarity of definition as do Murfin's introductions: it is difficult for instance to identify the nice distinction between the 'cultural critique' of Lillian S. Robinson and the 'Marxist' discussion in the essay by Wai-Chee Dimock. Both read *The House of Mirth* as a comment on bourgeois ideology in which Lily is merely expendable currency in the commercial system of exchange that the novel satirizes. If one critic relies more on the Marxist terminology of hegemony and the market-place than the other, this alone does not fully exemplify any fundamental difference in approach. Similarly, as Benstock points out, all five essays could in one sense be grouped under the heading of feminist criticism, which more than anything has been responsible for the revaluation of Wharton's work. The most interesting essay in this section of the work is that by Margot Norris whose deconstructive analysis of the novel examines how its conflicting discourses are manifested through the fictional trope of 'speculation' which the text employs and which consequently illuminate a further dimension to its critical complexity.

Shari Benstock is currently engaged in writing what will undoubtedly be an important new biography of Wharton. Her contributions to this volume indicate tantalizingly some of the directions that this might take and her essays are models of lucidity and scholarship. The whole is a useful addition to what is already becoming a key series for undergraduate use, and I shall certainly direct my own students to it.
[In the following essay, Barnett posits that in The House of Mirth society functions as a character rather than simply a setting against which the story is told.]

Edith Wharton's novels, like those of her friend and predecessor Henry James, are always speech act dramas which turn upon what can and cannot be said according to the dictates of society: the code of verbal restraint that governs utterance is everywhere present. For both James and Wharton society is the coercive arbiter of individual behavior, but whereas in James's fiction society is a generally diffused presence that never takes on the reality of a particular social milieu, in Wharton's work it assumes the specific historical shape of turn-of-the-century upper class New York. In The House of Mirth it is a fully realized character whose views at any given moment are as palpably presented as the furnishings of Mrs. Peniston's drawing room.

Reflecting a speech community that defines living well and dressing expensively as "inherited obligations," the language of upper class New York society elevates the superficial and the frivolous to the level of seriousness. Elderly dowagers like Mrs. Peniston talk about matters of housekeeping, younger women discuss guest lists for house parties, and travelers abroad inquire after the best restaurant for peas in Monte Carlo. There is no vocabulary for genuinely serious matters like Lily's financial difficulties. To her aunt Lily's gambling debts are unimaginably shocking while to Gus Trenor they are simply unimaginable, and hence the subject of a joking banter: "'Why on earth should you ever be out of spirits? ... Did Judy rook you out of everything at bridge last night?'"(82)

Measurements of value and status, which dominate the social discourse of this world, insist upon the assimilation of all other values to one standard, that of commodification. Commodification, as Georg Lukács writes, "stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of'
like the various objects of the external world. And there is no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic 'qualities' into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process" (100). Society is frankly and matter-of-factly permeated with an institutionalized commodification that requires no cloak of genteel expression to disguise its concerns.¹ Instead, the novel foregrounds the quid pro quos of social life, the principle of exchange that defines all relationships in some material way. In return for being best man at Jack Stepney's wedding Rosedale will deliver a "thumping present," Lily's mother expects her to get back the lost family fortune with her face, and parvenus are constantly buying their way into exclusive social circles. Commodification converts all personal relationships into quasi-commercial exchanges: where Mrs. Peniston rewards Lily's brilliant company with a clothing allowance, she compensates Grace Stepney's unexciting companionship with her cast-off clothing. Every encounter can be translated into material terms, however trivial. Giving her cousins the unwelcome news of Lily's debts, Grace has a "vision of forfeited dinners and a reduced wardrobe" (124-25).

The very name Lily Bart embodies the conflict between self and society, person and commodity, subject and object. Unlike the lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin, Lily cannot flourish effortlessly; she must barter her desirability for security. To do so, however, is to sacrifice that fineness of spirit that sets her apart from the habituees of her world as surely as her physical beauty does. Indeed, whenever Lily commits herself to the goals of her society she is inscribed in the text as an object. At the beginning of the novel when she is intent upon finding a rich husband, Selden constantly thinks of her in the language of things, precisely evaluated.² Lily is a more valuable object than other women because it seems "as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay" (5). Later, succumbing once more to the lure of society, Lily undergoes a further stage in the process of reification: "Now its [her beauty's] impenetrable surface suggested a process of crystallization which had fused her whole being into one hard, brilliant substance" (191-92). As Robin Lakoff observes, in "language descriptive of women alone," a women is treated "as an object--sexual or otherwise--but never [as] a serious person with individual views" (7). Objects, of course, do not speak, and Lily is never more successful as an ornament than when she is utterly silent in the tableau of a Reynolds' painting. Her own (changing) value is the subject of the novel and of everyone's appraisal. Selden tells her that she can "do better than Dilworth," a former matrimonial prospect, and Rosedale calculates her worth as two kinds of object: wife and painting.

Paradigmatically, Lily stakes an acceptable claim and then fails to pursue it to fruition: enticing Selden away from Bertha and consequently neglecting the serious business of acquiring a husband appears impulsive, but this violation of the code is more deeply motivated by Lily's developing desire to escape social
definition and to express instead her own being. To a large extent this desire must be realized by freeing herself from "public language," which discourages both individual self-expression and truthful communication, and by further freeing herself from a gendered discourse that denies her status as subject. In Luce Irigaray's words, "Indisputably this [denial] provides the financial backing for every irreducible constitution as an object: of representation, of discourse, of desire" (133).

2

Within the dominant discourse of society gender-specific sub-categories exist that reflect the role and status differences between men and women. The empirical power of men is expressed linguistically in their more forceful and direct speech as well as by a content of what Lakoff calls "real world information" (70). In general, as Philip M. Smith writes about real speakers of English, "masculinity tends to be expressed in terms of control-related skills and femininity in terms of affiliation" (160). Men are likely to sacrifice conversational harmony to dominance while the subordinate position of women manifests itself, above all, in polite speech at the expense of other considerations. In mixed conversation, then, men typically speak openly and directly of the matters that interest them whereas women pursue their own concerns obliquely. These differences can be observed on the surface of discourse in The House of Mirth, which conforms to the sociolinguistic stereotype of male domination, but underlying this overt behavior is a pattern of feminine manipulation. With Percy Gryce, for example, Lily manages every aspect of conversation according to her hidden agenda of impressing him as a suitable marriage partner. Through the ritual of making tea she reassures and attracts the timid Gryce by presenting herself as both domestic and graceful. She then offers him the opportunity to assume conversational dominance in his one area of expertise: "She questioned him intelligently, she heard him submissively ... he grew eloquent under her receptive gaze" (20). Wharton's description is ironic, yet she leaves no doubt that this is a successful formula for conventional male-female conversation, in which an enabling feminine discourse creates the space for the male to dominate the talk exchange and proffers the illusion that he has achieved this control for himself.

Two critical conversations with Gus Trenor indicate that a more assertive and mature man requires more complicated versions of the same linguistic strategy. Picking Gus up at the station, Lily begins as she had with Gryce by giving him a chance to talk and be listened to attentively, an opportunity that men like Gryce and Trenor, economically powerful but boring and inarticulate, rarely encounter. Her suggestion of prolonging their drive initiates the second stage of this manipulative process. Having implicitly flattered Trenor by desiring to remain in his company, she explicitly does so by characterizing him as an intimate, "someone who won't mind if I'm a little dull" (82). This request serves as an
unobtrusive transition from Trenor's self-involved monologue to Lily's presentation of her case, a move made more effective by her introduction of a sham topic to disarm his suspicions of being made use of. Once again Lily maneuvers Trenor into conversational dominance, although this time on a subject of her own choosing, and Wharton, with characteristic authorial tidyness, sums up the effectiveness of Lily’s method: "With [Lily] ... turning to him for sympathy, making him feel that he understood her better than her dearest friends, and confirming the assurance by the appeal of her exquisite nearness, he was ready to swear that as a man of honour he was bound to do all he could to protect her from the results of her disinterestedness" (84). Decorously presented sexuality combined with reassurance that this appeal is not dangerous works formulaically here as it did earlier with Gryce. Trenor accordingly "persuades" Lily to trust him to make money for her. He has dominated throughout this conversation in terms of assertiveness and length of speeches, characteristics typical of masculine conversation with women, but behind an artful facade of subordination Lily has orchestrated their talk exchange according to her own needs.

In the second dialogue on this subject positions are partially reversed because Trenor has a hidden agenda and Lily is taken unawares. Attempting to discard the decorum of polite speech, he reproaches Lily in the language of a forthright male discourse, yet even when he gives her an order he adds an automatic "please." Another habitual male role infuses his verbal behavior in this scene--that of the teacher instructing a female pupil. Trenor sits Lily down and lectures her on "the rules of the game." For her to understand this message would mean that she must "pay up," whereas her attempt to ignore the communication only inflames Trenor's anger. Words become a euphemism for sexual intimacy in his speech since the only attention he can socially claim from Lily is that of polite conversation. Hence his reiterated complaint: "'When I tried to come up and say a word, you never took any notice.'" Or: "'I'm only asking for a word of thanks from you'" (146). Lily's prompt "I have thanked you" shows the impossibility of social discourse accomplishing Trenor's purpose, yet he is unable to move beyond it. When she invokes the decorum of polite conversation that he is seeking to abandon, he replies peremptorily: "'Don't talk stage-rot'" (145), yet in a sense Trenor himself is the victim of the "stage-rot" he admonishes Lily against, the polite treatment of women in his world that masks their economic dependence upon men.

In spite of his advantages in the scene, Trenor cannot win a verbal contest with Lily, not only because he lacks her adept command of public language, but because that discourse embodies standards that he respects:

"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. (147)
Trenor has already said all that he is capable of saying; receiving no agreement from Lily, his options are to move to physical struggle with her or to retreat. It is finally his acculturation as a man of honor customarily guided by social imperatives that thwarts the realization of his intentions, for he cannot bring himself to speak more plainly in the face of Lily's refusal to recognize a different kind of speech. He is all too aware that he is "not talking the way a man is supposed to talk to a girl" (146).

The social climber Rosedale is another male speaker whose lack of conversational polish causes him to speak more frankly than ordinary social discourse allows, and it is a measure of Lily's moral growth that she moves from a social view of his blunt speech as offensive to an appreciation of its honesty that can overlook the violation of decorum. But although Rosedale's openness in expressing his real concerns comes to appeal to Lily as a contrast to social hypocrisy, the themes of his speech are the familiar ones of public language that her better self rejects: the open embrace of acquisition, status, and wealth, combined with a sub-text of connivance at underhanded practices that insidiously clothes itself in the language of "business give-and-take."

To express the self that is stifled by the "tissue of social falsehoods" she must subscribe to in order to survive in society, Lily must find a language that reflects other values and a dialogue partner who shares it. Lawrence Selden proposes such a discourse, one whose definitions oppose those of public language:

Why do we call all our generous ideas illusions, and the mean ones truths? Isn't it a sufficient condemnation of society to find one's self accepting such phraseology? I very nearly acquired the jargon at Silverton's age, and I know how names can alter the colour of beliefs.(70-71)

The "Republic of the Spirit," whose values are personal autonomy and taste, is an ideal fleetingly glimpsed but unacknowledged by society and unrealizable within it; hence, its language is literally unspeakable, even--as it turns out--by Selden, although his and Lily's mutual recognition of such a republic remains a bond between them.

In their talk exchange at Bellomont each accuses the other of cowardice, and each is right: for different reasons, neither Lily nor Selden can make a full commitment to the other; her directive--"love me, but don't tell me so"--cancelling her complaint "you never speak to me" (138, 137). Articulating the "indwelling voice" they share always remains a teasing possibility in their speech, but one that convention and misunderstanding keep from realization. In their last conversation Lily's "passionate desire to be understood," i.e., to be treated as a subject rather than as a commodity/object, cannot overcome Selden's passivity. She comes as close as she can to direct masculine speech by referring to "the Lily
Bart you knew" in the third person and asking Selden, "'Will you let her stay with you?'" (309) As well as an overt articulation of Lily's divided self, this is surely an unconscious proposal of marriage, and one with an awareness of Selden's impossible requirements: "'She'll be no trouble, she'll take up no room'" (309). Selden consistently responds to such overtures in the conventional terms of public language that preclude truthful intercourse. Formed by "all the conditions of life" to be aloof and fastidious, he is unsuited to save Lily with the kind of commitment that enables Nettie Struthers and her husband to oppose the hardships of life together.

Both Selden and Lily find too late the word that will dissolve the distance between them: her last coherent thought before death is that "there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them" (323). He, in turn, goes to her house the following morning with "the word he meant to say to her" (324). The novel ends with this word "which made all clear" passing in silence between Selden and the dead Lily, a pointed inscription of the discourse restraints that have prevented their communication throughout the novel.

Within the social world that the text has constructed there is in fact no solution to Lily's dilemma, no saving language. Lily cannot integrate her social and individual selves, nor can she, until the end of the novel, choose the individual over the social, the problematic status of subject over the prescribed role of object. Her thought--"if only life could end now"--reflects the reality of her external circumstances and, more compellingly, her inability to transcend them. As she realizes and accepts, Lily is irrevocably a social commodity, unfit in all respects to live other possible lives and equally unfit to live the life required by her world. She can emulate neither Bertha Dorset nor Nettie Struthers, the two women juxtaposed to her on her final evening. These women represent negative and positive models, not only of survival but of language. Significantly, throughout the novel Bertha preserves herself and destroys others with socially acceptable lies while Nettie runs the risk of self-destruction by insisting upon the truth. Both women have husbands named George, one the recipient of a discourse that conceals infidelity and undermines relationship, the other of a truthful speech which strengthens union.

3

Where Wharton herself was able to create a "language of feminine growth and mastery," Elaine Showalter observes, "we are repeatedly reminded of the absence of this language in the world of The House of Mirth by Lily's ladylike self-silencing, her inability to rise above the 'word-play and evasion' that restrict her conversations with Selden and to tell her own story ..." (136). Lily does rise above this curtailing language by the end of the novel, and she does become
capable of telling her own story honestly, both to herself and to others. The insurmountable difficulty is finding an appropriate listener.

Although Lily's first reaction to misfortune is to preserve appearances, protecting the deceptive social self, she later admits candidly to Rosedale that she must work for a living, that she lives in a miserable boarding house, and that she owes all of the little money that she has inherited. Moreover, her confession is not part of the discourse of calculated feminine pathos that created an appealingly vulnerable image in order to manipulate Gus Trenor, for Lily wants no such favors from Rosedale. What she wants is to acknowledge her circumstances in truthful language to herself as much as to Rosedale, who is ultimately unsatisfactory as a dialogue partner: "She felt the real difficulties of her situation to be incommunicable to any one whose theory of values was so different from her own ..." (261).

During her final meeting with Selden, whose "theory of values" is similar to her own, Lily is equally clear, if not as specific, about her situation:

I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap. ...(308)

Selden can imagine nothing more in this speech than an oblique reference to marriage, the customary salvation for distress such as Lily's. Lily thus becomes able to "tell her own story"--that is, to express it--but without a receptive dialogue partner she cannot effectively communicate it, nor can she, in keeping with the recurring speech paradigms of the American novel, find another language, one that will free her from her story.

What Lily becomes unable to speak and live by is the public language of her social world and her sex, that discourse that has the power to save her up to the very end. Its words are known to her--at the beginning of the novel they are automatically generated when she wants to manipulate a man--and at the end they are urged upon her by Rosedale and George Dorset. By speaking what she knows to Dorset she can openly save herself and ruin Bertha. By speaking to Bertha she can save herself clandestinely and marry Rosedale. Either alternative would preserve the social self/object in its traditional form, that of the married woman, at the expense of the individual self/subject that Lily has come to value so much that she cannot relinquish it in order to survive. Nor can she empower Selden to perform the speech act that would rescue this better self, Lily as subject, to speak "the word which made all clear." Her misfortune is to evoke only male discourse which is unworthy of her, like the "eloquence" she inspires in
Percy Gryce, the crude admiration of Trenor, Rosedale, and other men, the uncommitted speech of Selden. Such discourse, Showalter writes, defines women:

In one sense Lily's search for a suitable husband is an effort to be "spoken for," to be suitably articulated and defined in the social arena. Instead, she has the opposite fate: she is "spoken of" by men, and as Lily herself observes, "The truth about any girl is that once she's talked about, she's done for, and the more she explains her case the worse it looks." To become the object of male discourse is almost as bad as to become the victim of male lust. (136)

As a description of events in *The House of Mirth* this is persuasive but not entirely accurate, for although economic power is concentrated in the masculine territory of Wall Street, a feminine discourse controls the realm of social exclusivity represented by Fifth Avenue, albeit one that enunciates and upholds patriarchal values as a matter of self-interest.

The "talking about" that Showalter refers to is actually the province of women in the novel: Lily becomes the object of a censorious feminine discourse which adversely affects her at every critical moment. Bertha Dorset begins the process by telling Percy Gryce "horrors" about Lily; later, her dramatic utterance that Lily will not return to the yacht severely undermines Lily's reputation; on subsequent occasions she continues to speak against Lily. In the major instance of the novel's inexorable process of marginalizing Lily, Mrs. Peniston revises her will to reduce her niece from chief beneficiary to mere legatee.

The female community of *The House of Mirth* makes the same demands that Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker have observed in real verbal behavior: "Girls must become increasingly sophisticated in reading the motives of others, in determining when closeness is real, when conventional, and when false, and to respond appropriately" (207). For all of her success with men, Lily is not skillful in deciphering the cues offered by her own sex. In the critical conversation with Bertha Dorset after the latter has stayed out all night with Ned Silverton and returned to the yacht the next morning, it is essential for Lily to decode Bertha's remarks and adapt herself to them--however fictional Bertha's account might be. Instead, she pursues her own reading, founded on the facts of the situation, and thus fails to comprehend Bertha's position. The talk on both sides is often interrogatory, but Bertha's accusatory assertions and rhetorical questions constitute an aggression that Lily meets with genuine bafflement. Bertha's utterances have a theme and a strategy while Lily's are merely reactive, often no more than a weak echo of Bertha's words:

B:
Whenever anything upsetting happens ...

L:

Anything upsetting?

B:

I'm expected to take hints, not to give them: I've positively lived on them all these last months.

L:

Hints--from me to you?(207, 208)

Lily moves from lame responses confined to the circle of Bertha's own words, and consequently imprisoned by her controlling fiction, to the more passive role of silent witness, and then to a departure "without a word." Whereas Bertha has no need of verbal reinforcement, Lily literally cannot speak: "The words died under the impenetrable insolence of Bertha's smile" (208). The power of Bertha's status overwhelms Lily's truthful version of events, yet her silence is not the silence of injured innocence alone: just as she was complicit in the relationship with Gus Trenor, here, too, Lily is culpable in having pursued the pleasures of society and forgotten her own vulnerability. She can neither uphold her innocence in speech nor acknowledge her guilt.

This same inability to speak effectively informs all of Lily's conversations with other women: those who have power--like Bertha, Mrs. Peniston, and even Grace Stepney--use it against Lily. Elizabeth Ammons comments that in The House of Mirth "women prey on each other--stealing reputations, opportunities, male admirers--all to parlay or retain status and financial security in a world arranged by men to keep women supplicant and therefore subordinate" (39). Since female power is indirect and fragile, based upon the manipulation of appearance and language rather than upon the manipulation of money and property that characterizes male power, possibly women cannot risk generosity to a potential rival who may threaten their own security.

Expediency predicated upon the power of status and wealth shapes the official version of events retailed by public language speakers. When Lily suggests an alternate approach to Rosedale, namely, that the falsity of stories about her should "alter the situation," he replies: "'I believe it does in novels, but I'm certain it don't in real life'" (256). The false version of Lily's story becomes the authorized one because it is agreeable to powerful people and because it valorizes group mores by illustrating the essential wrongness of her pursuit of
freedom, her seeming to claim "the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations" (157).

For women, the prospect of marriage sanctions an unmarried "girl's" claim to a man, but Lily loses this legitimacy when she pursues Selden without such an aim and thereby places herself in conflict with a married woman. Because married women have more status, power, and freedom than unmarried "girls," Lily should have acquired the less vulnerable status before incurring an enmity she cannot afford. Lily is acutely aware that the designation of "marriageable girl" is a temporary label which she has already worn far too long, one that she has assumed unwillingly because neither society nor her own imagination offers any other. Her lack of enthusiasm for this role is an unconscious rejection of the responsibilities of adulthood/wifehood that will reify her as an object once and for all. Such an attitude places her in the tradition of male social outsiders in the American novel, characters such as Natty Bumppo, Ishmael, and Huck Finn, who show a similar reluctance to be adults according to the terms of their respective societies and are thereby feminized in their refusal to assume masculine authority.

Although Wharton chooses a female protagonist and sympathetically focuses upon the special vulnerabilities of women, in the totality of the text social determinants are just as insistent as those of sex. "So-called 'women's language' is in large part a language of powerlessness," Barr and Atkins write, "a condition that can apply to men as well as women" (94). It is always within Lily's power to make a rich marriage as her cousin Jack Stepney does, and the peripheral figure of Ned Silverton will probably end up on the same rubbish heap that Lily envisions. Lily is not excluded from society because she is a woman per se, but because she is a non-conformist who shrinks from her role as object and demands a latitude available only to women who have submitted themselves to men within the socially prescribed form of marriage. While society can make a place for the exceptional when it is conjoined with conformity, Lily's experience demonstrates that even the highly valuable and valued cannot be accepted when conventions are flouted. Selden escapes Lily's fate not only because as a man he can support himself and refuse to marry, but because he, unlike Lily, is content to live within the confines of society. He, too, is wasted, if not destroyed as dramatically as Lily. As a reminder that "growth and mastery" in the sense that Showalter applies to Wharton's own language are not tolerated in either sex in the world of The House of Mirth, the novel ends with the absence of the word that would save both Lily and Selden. Representing a bond that would lack the societal requirement of wealth, it remains unuttered and unutterable.

Discussion questions (www.readinggroupguides.com)
1. Wharton took the title for her novel from a verse in Ecclesiastics—"The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in The House of Mirth." Does Lily Bart's allegiance to the follies and superficialities of society mean that she has the "heart of a fool" or is she trapped by the dictates of her upbringing and the expectations of the times?

2. What does Wharton mean when she describes Lawrence Selden as a man with "the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean's delight in them" [p.152]? Are his scorn and aloofness attitudes only a man could assume in the society Wharton depicts? How genuine are they? Does his readiness to attend certain social events and to indulge in gossip and flirtations with Lily belie his chosen role as a "spectator"?

3. The people in Lily's circle disdain the "new" millionaires who acquired their money in business rather than through inheritance, yet in many ways their social world is predicated on a business ethic. How does the language of the novel reflect this? In what ways do the social "exchanges" among the characters mimic business dealings, even when they don't involve the actual exchange of money?

4. Lily rejects both Sim Rosedale, a fabulously rich man of "unacceptable" lineage, and Selden, a man she clearly admires who cannot support her in style. Do these rejections represent an unrealistic, perhaps inflated, view of her own worth and potential? Are they purely selfish or do they reflect an underlying sense of morality on Lily's part?

5. Even early in the novel, Wharton offers hints that foreshadow Lily's public humiliation by the Trenors and the Dorsets, her abandonment by Carry Fisher, and her aunt's decision to disinherit her. What events alert you to the true nature of the other character's feelings and attitudes toward her? Is Lily too naive to grasp the significance of these events? Does she genuinely misunderstand her financial arrangement with Gus Trenor or simply choose to ignore its "obvious" implications? When she agrees to accompany the Dorsets on the cruise, is she unaware of her role as a mask for Bertha's affair with Ned Silverton?

6. What does Lily's great success in the tableaux vivants symbolize within the context of the novel? Does it reveal, as Selden believes, "the real Lily Bart"? [p.134] Why does Lily respond to his enthusiasm and his confession of love afterwards by saying, "Ah, love me, love me—but don't tell me so"? [p. 138] What other examples are there of Lily's consciously adopting a pose, either literally or figuratively, to please an audience?

7. Both Lily's cousin, Grace Stepney, and Selden's cousin, Gerty Farish, live in genteel poverty on margins of society. How are their attitudes about their positions reflected in the way they treat Lily?

8. Lily and Selden have five intimate conversations: at his apartment in the opening chapter; at Trenors' country home, Bellomont; at the Brys after Lily's stunning performance in the tableaux vivants; in Mrs. Hatch's hotel room; and
once again at Selden's apartment, on the day before Lily dies. How do the tone and contents of their conversations change as Lily's circumstances change, and what does this reveal about their feelings for one another? Are either of them really capable of loving and being loved?

9. Are all the women in the novel passive "victims," dependent on the power and money of men? Who really creates the rules in Lily's circle and how do they wield their powers? Why does Rosedale ultimately turn Lily away, despite his previous persistence in courting her and his aggressiveness in making his way into society? Is he right in believing that his money alone is not enough to rescue her reputation?

10. Is Lily's descent inevitable? What opportunities does she have to turn things around and why does she reject them? Does her decision not to use Bertha Dorset's letters to regain her social standing make sense in society that unquestioningly accepts the manipulations of Gus Trenor, Carry Fisher, and Bertha herself?

11. Edith Wharton wrote "A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implications lie in its power of debasing people and ideas." Do you think *The House of Mirth* is primarily a portrait of the frivolous and corrupt social world of New York or is it the story of Lily Bart's personal tragedy?

**Multimedia**

NPR Interview “Finding Balance and Pleasure in the ‘House of Mirth’”

Stage adaptation created in 1906

Silent film released in 1918

TV movie version released in 1981

“The House of Mirth” Film Release 2000 available at the AADL:
http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1241431

2011 "Rosedale in Love," a novel by Lev Raphael telling the story from the perspective of Lily's Jewish suitor.

**Readalikes (NovelList)**

**Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady** (1881)
This is the story of Isabel Archer, a young American woman who does not know what to do with the wealth the inherits. James and Wharton were friends, and their use of language has some similarities. Isabel's demise has some of the same elements as does
Lily Bart's: it is brought on by her own bad choices, is engineered by a hostile rival woman, and is due to her inability to handle her romantic life.

**Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie** (1900)
This novel is largely set in the same New York as *The House of Mirth*. Yet, while Wharton writes of the demise of an elite woman, Dreiser writes of the rest of the classes. Carrie goes from an unemployed factory worker to a famous, if gaudy, actress, while Hurstwood falls from his position as a manager of a restaurant to the condition of a homeless beggar.

**Margaret Mitchell, Gone With the Wind** (1936)
Although set in the mid-nineteenth-century South, this book shows some of the restricted choices for wealthy women. Scarlett's inability to recognize her love with Rhett reflects Lily's relationship with Selden.

**F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby** (1925)
*The Great Gatsby* shows that the elite New Yorkers a generation after Lily Bart still look down on the vulgarly rich. Since they must actually associate with the newly wealthy, the upper-crust Buchanans torment people like Gatsby, rather than ignoring all those below them, as the Trenors and the Stepneys try to ignore Rosedale.

**Louis Auchincloss, The Lady of Situations** (1990)
Set in the 1930's, but written by a contemporary author, this story contains many of the themes introduced in earlier novels such as Wharton's. To regain her family's lost social status, Natica Chauncey marries three times to help her attain her goal in New York during the late 1930s. The reader benefits from the story's being told from the points of view of Natica and of her Aunt Ruth, whose opinion of Natica's character varies significantly from Natica's own.

**Extras**

Play a game of bridge as a group to experience Lily’s favorite card game.