

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

by Edith Wharton



THE AUTHOR

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was born into an upper-class family in New York City. Her parents were very class-conscious and were determined that their daughter marry well (her mother was from the Jones family in reference to whom the phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” is thought to have originated). Their attitude thwarted her first love, and at the age of 23 she married Edward Wharton, an older man of whom her family approved, but whom she did not love. They remained married until 1913, though their marriage was never a happy one. This bad marriage is generally thought to have stimulated her writing career, and one should not be surprised to see the theme of illicit passion running through most of her stories. In fact, her affair with a newspaperman brought about her divorce from her husband in 1913.

Wharton’s early writing career was undistinguished, but she produced her first successful novel in 1905 when she published *The House of Mirth*. Near the end of her marriage she moved to Paris, where she lived for the rest of her life, publishing many other works, including *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), for which she won a Pulitzer Prize. One of her closest associates in Paris was another American expatriate, Henry James, whose writing shares similar themes with those of Wharton’s novels. Her writings raised moral questions about the relationship of the individual to society, though her perspective did not remain constant; in her early days she was considered a dangerous radical, and later was excoriated as a crotchety conservative. No matter the viewpoint, Wharton’s writing shows great insights into human psychology and emotion.

The House of Mirth (1905), Wharton’s first successful novel, is a satire of the society of which she and her family were a part. She pictures it as a shallow world fixated on money, status, and pleasure and full of cruelty, adultery, gossip, and manipulation. The style she chooses follows the school of Realism, popular at the time, and the resulting novel of manners is very different from those written during the earlier Romantic era. She was also strongly influenced by Darwin’s evolutionary theory, seeing society as a struggle for existence in which only the fit survived.

PLOT SUMMARY

BOOK I

Chapter 1

The story begins in Grand Central Station, where Lawrence Selden sees lovely 29-year-old Lily Bart apparently waiting for someone. When he approaches her, she says she has missed her train and asks him to take her for tea. As they walk through the city, they pass his residence and he invites her up to his apartment. She longs to have a flat of her own, but single women simply did not do such a thing; she still lives with her aunt. As they talk, she tells him that she needs a real friend with whom she can be herself. He asks her why she has never married, and she admits that her problem is that she is poor and at the same time expensive in her tastes. She then changes the subject and begins talking about his books. When the time comes for her to leave, she hopes to escape the building without being seen, but encounters Simon Rosedale, an acquaintance who owns the building. He is clearly suspicious about why she has been inside, but she claims she was visiting her dressmaker and quickly hails a cab to return to Grand Central.

Chapter 2

Once safely in the cab, Lily mentally kicks herself for lying to Rosedale and then rejecting his invitation to drive her to the station. She knows he is a frightful gossip who will find a way to use this against her. She has never liked him and is annoyed that Jack Stepney, her cousin, insists on keeping company with him on a regular basis. When she finds a seat on the train, she notices at the far end of the car young Percy Gryce, who like her is on his way to a week-long party at the home of Judy Trenor. She manages to attract his attention, and he joins her for some tea as they travel. Gryce is wealthy but shy, and Lily draws him out by asking about his Americana, a collection of books thought to be the best in the country. Lily tries to take advantage of the time she has with the young man, but at the next station Bertha Dorset, boisterous and overbearing as ever, enters the train and insists that the seat next to Lily and Percy be vacated so she can occupy it.

Chapter 3

The party at the Trenors' begins with an evening of bridge that lasts far too long. She contemplates her newly-strengthened relationship with Percy Gryce; she finds him terribly boring, but because of his wealth considers him a potential husband, and therefore someone to be cultivated anyway. She had for many years avoided playing bridge because she couldn't afford it, but lately her hostesses had insisted, and she had come to enjoy the game. That night she had lost badly; the evening of bridge had cost her three hundred dollars, which she could ill afford, while her wealthy friends had walked away from the table with fistfuls of dollars of which they had no need. In bed, she remembers her mother telling her that she would recoup all the money the family had lost because of the beauty of her face, but now that face was beginning to show the slightest sign of wrinkles.

She had grown up in luxury, as her mother always managed to live beyond the means that her workaholic father was able to provide. Lily "came out" at the age of eighteen in a dazzling and expensive debut, but a year later her father confronted her and her mother with the horrifying truth

that he was ruined financially. He died soon thereafter, resented by his wife for leaving them impoverished. Lily's mother began to avoid her old friends out of shame, but held out hope for the future grounded entirely in her daughter's beauty. As a result, she schooled Lily in the art of attracting men in high society and warned her continually about the danger of love matches. She constantly badgered Lily to let herself be seen in society, but, worn out and disgusted with life, died two years later. Lily was then reluctantly taken in by her widowed aunt, Mrs. Peniston, who was all too painfully aware of the way in which the departed Mrs. Bart had looked down on her for her supposed vulgarity. The arrangement worked out surprisingly well for both of them. Mrs. Peniston was wealthy, so Lily was well provided for, but she was also disinclined to mix with society, which Lily saw as essential for her future.

Chapter 4

The next morning, Lily awakens to find a note in her room from her hostess asking her to come downstairs at ten o'clock - shockingly early in good society - to assist with some work that needs to be done in the absence of Mrs. Trenor's secretary. She resents the implication of servitude that accompanies her poverty and dependence and takes the luxury of her surroundings as her natural right. While Lily works on notes and invitations, Judy keeps up a steady flow of gossip. When she suggests inviting Lawrence Selden to the party, Lily rejects the offer, hinting that she is making progress with Percy Gryce. Over the next three days, she continues to pursue the young man in ways subtle and obvious. When Lily sees her cousin Jack Stepney with the bland but rich Gwen Van Osburgh, she muses that Gwen and Percy are temperamentally suited for one another, but would not even think to look in the other's direction. In order to deliver herself from poverty forever, however, Lily knows she must marry Percy, and intends to replace his books as the only possession he cares enough about to spend money on. Her musings about joining the circle of which she so much desires to be a part are interrupted by footsteps behind her. She turns, expecting to see Percy, but instead encounters Lawrence, who is immediately swept away by the overbearing Bertha Dorset.

Chapter 5

That evening at dinner, Lily cannot take her mind off Lawrence Selden. She knows the reason for this is that he is fully able and willing to remove himself from the boring and vacuous company with which he is surrounded. Lily forces herself to snap out of her reverie and continues her pursuit of Percy Gryce. Though she rarely goes to church, she drops a hint that she would like very much to accompany him there the following morning. He arrives at the carriage stand early, but is disappointed to find that, though four women in whom he has no interest whatsoever appear, Lily is not among them. She, in the process of getting ready, rebels at the very idea of going through this charade every Sunday for the rest of her life. The lovely weather outside is simply far too tempting, and she is glad when she hears the carriage roll away without her. She then goes down to the library hoping to find Lawrence. Her guess is correct, but she is disappointed to find Bertha Dorset with him. The two women exchange barely-concealed barbs and Lily walks out the door, making as if she will walk to church but hoping that Lawrence will follow her. Eventually he does, and they banter about her efforts to attract Percy Gryce. Soon the company from the church appears on the path, having decided to walk home instead of riding in the carriage. Lawrence congratulates Lily on her stratagem and suggests they take a walk later that afternoon.

Chapter 6

The two walk through the park, and when they sit on a rock to rest, Lily wonders if she is in love with Lawrence. As they talk, Lawrence accuses her of being an artist who uses people to paint her desired pictures, and she inwardly agrees, realizing that she has broken her engagement to walk with Percy simply in order to increase his desire to be with her. Lawrence speaks to her about the freedom of the spirit and contrasts it with the bondage of high society with its illusions. He knows her ambitions and considers the society to which she seeks entrance unworthy of her. He is sure that if she does become a part of it, she will be miserable. She asks if he can offer her anything better, and he admits he cannot, but insists that if he could, it would surely be hers. They touch on the subject of marriage; he is serious in wanting to marry her, but knows she has other ambitions. The sound of a car in the distance breaks the spell, and they return to the Trenor house.

Chapter 7

The next morning, Lily discovers that Bertha Dorset has taken her revenge by telling Percy Gryce all sorts of rumors about Lily, causing him to leave much sooner than he had expected. Lily is not worried; she is sure she can get him back whenever she chooses. Later Judy asks Lily to pick up her husband from the train station. As they ride home, he talks about his business affairs and wishes his circle would be more open to Simon Rosedale, who has a great head for business. Eventually she shares her money woes with him, though he can't imagine her giving herself to a nincompoop like Percy Gryce. He offers to advise her financially, promising to make her plenty of money in a short period of time with no risk to her paltry principal. Satisfied with her success, she decides to return to her aunt's home in the morning.

Chapter 8

The first check she receives from Gus Trenor is for a thousand dollars, which she uses to provide partial payment to her creditors while at the same time making fresh orders, confident that the money will continue to flow. She vaguely understands that he is speculating in the stock market with her money, but is not worried because he promised her that she could never lose. Shortly thereafter, her cousin Jack Stepney marries Gwen Van Osburgh. Lily is asked to be a bridesmaid, but she fears appearing in such a role too frequently when her real ambition is to be the bride at the center of attention. Both Percy and Lawrence are at the wedding, and Lily soon discovers that Percy is courting Gwen's "dumpy" youngest sister Evie. Her depression at this news is dispelled by a four-thousand-dollar check from Trenor, and she regains her confidence that she can extricate Percy from such a foolish entanglement. Trenor, meanwhile, asks her to intercede with Judy about Simon Rosedale, whom he still hopes to cultivate. Later during the reception she speaks to Lawrence Selden for the first time since their afternoon in the park, but they are interrupted by Gus and Rosedale. To please Gus, she walks off with the despised Simon, though she is totally embarrassed that Lawrence should witness such a scene. Before she leaves the reception, she learns from Mrs. Van Osburgh that Evie and Percy are engaged to be married.

Chapter 9

When Lily arrives at Mrs. Peniston's home in New York in mid-October, she finds her aunt in the middle of a frenzy of cleaning in preparation for the coming season. Lily has no real desire to be cooped up with her aunt until after the holidays, but has no feasible alternative. One evening a charwoman appears at the door asking for Lily. She has with her a packet of love letters from Bertha Dorset to Lawrence Selden that she has retrieved from Selden's trash. Believing that Lily wrote them, she offers to sell them to her for a hefty sum. Lily knows the author and cares nothing for Bertha, but wishes to spare Lawrence the embarrassment of the letters being made public, so offers half the demanded sum and obtains the incriminating missives. She intends to burn them, but upon hearing from her aunt that Bertha had made unpleasant insinuations when exaggerating her role in bringing Percy and Evie together, decides to keep them after all and locks them in her bedroom drawer.

Chapter 10

As the boring days of autumn wind toward the end of the year, Lily finds her only solace in spending the money she receives on a regular basis from Gus Trenor; saving for the future simply never occurs to her. One day in a shop she meets Gerty Farish, Lawrence's cousin who is single and living on her own, and therefore of extremely limited means. Gerty is devoted to a charity that provides temporary housing for lower-class women who are out of work, and her description of their plight moves Lily to make a substantial contribution. Shortly thereafter she receives an invitation to spend time at a camp in the Adirondacks. The party is hosted by an inveterate social climber, but by this time Lily is simply seeking to cure her boredom and is willing to spend time with those beneath her as long as they are certain to stroke her failing ego. When she returns home, she receives a visit from Simon Rosedale. He invites her to the opera, noting that Gus Trenor will be there, then asks her how her finances are progressing. She is inwardly furious that Gus would have shared her financial circumstances with the onerous Rosedale. At the opera, she enjoys showing off her beauty, but is taken aback when Gus reprimands her for not seeing him more often. She invites him to visit her at her aunt's but he wants to see her alone. She is disgusted by his advances, but finally suggests that they take a walk in the park. Their conversation is interrupted by the entrance of George Dorset, who invites Lily to his and Bertha's home the next weekend. She willingly accepts, hoping to avoid Trenor's advances in the process.

Chapter 11

After Christmas the season begins, and Mrs. Peniston takes great pleasure in observing the traffic up and down Fifth Avenue from her upstairs window. Despite her total lack of participation in the festivities, she takes a keen interest in the goings-on. The events of the season are less extravagant than usual because of a downturn on Wall Street, though Simon Rosedale manages to double his fortune anyway. He still lacks the social acceptance he craves, however, and decides that the way to gaining such recognition is through Lily Bart. Mrs. Peniston hosts a party of her own only when Jack and Gwen Stepney return from their honeymoon. Lily helps arrange the guest list; among those not invited is Grace Stepney, Mrs. Peniston's cousin. Grace is mortally offended and knows that Lily is behind her exclusion. A few days after the dinner, she visits her cousin and tells her about the questionable relationship between Lily and Gus Trenor. Mrs. Peniston is shocked,

especially when Grace tells her that the flirtation is producing pecuniary advantages for Lily. She goes on to describe Lily's habit of spending beyond her means and accumulating gambling debts, insisting that Gus is paying for these things. Seeing that she has a willing ear, her gossip strays farther and farther from the truth. After Grace leaves, Mrs. Peniston, not knowing how much to believe, decides to say nothing to Lily and explore the matter no further, though her mind is troubled so greatly that she can never again look at her niece with the same innocent eyes.

Chapter 12

Lily surprisingly finds herself on better terms with Bertha Dorset, who cultivates Lily because she desires her to entertain her husband while she is engaged in a flirtation with a Ned Silverton, a local poet. Lily is not bothered by the gossip of which she is the subject, assuming that everyone in her circle is similarly victimized at one time or another, but she is finding Gus Trenor increasingly difficult to manage because he clearly wants more than he is getting from her. She also worries that her relationship with Judy Trenor might be cooling, and a weekend at the Trenor house does nothing to dispel her doubts.

Later, at a party thrown by Wellington Bry and his wife, newly rich and hoping to gain social acceptance, the main attraction is a series of tableaux portraying famous paintings. One involves Lily alone in simple dress, and Lawrence, who has not seen her in a while, is totally captivated. He feels that he is seeing her as she is for the first time, and is distressed by the contrast between her loveliness and the cheapness of the petty people with whom she is surrounded. Later the two walk in the garden, he professes his love for her, and they briefly kiss.

Chapter 13

When Lily wakes the next morning, she is confused. While she is flattered by Lawrence's expression of love and intoxicated by the power she holds over him, she already told him that she could not marry him. Now he wants to see her again. How should she respond? She decides to see him and put off her rejection to another time. Before she keeps her appointment with Lawrence, she stops in to see Judy Trenor. She is met by Gus instead, clearly drunk, who tells her that Judy is not home; he has tricked her into a private meeting. She tries to escape, but Gus won't allow her to leave. She is frightened, but tries hard to keep her wits about her. He wants to be repaid for his services, and the kind of repayment he wants is not of a monetary nature. He suddenly comes to his senses and tells her to leave. He calls her a cab, but she knows she will not be able to sleep that night, so decides to stop and seek some comfort from Gerty Farish.

Chapter 14

Gerty woke up that same morning feeling better than she had in a long time. Lawrence Selden had paid attention to her at the Bry party, and she basked in the glory of it even though, unknown to her, it was motivated by their mutual affection for Lily. He, on the other hand, woke thinking of nothing but Lily. He was so certain that she returned his affection that he had to talk to someone about it. Who could be more suitable than his cousin Gerty? At dinner he compliments her cooking and tells her that she must marry to avoid keeping such marvelous gifts to herself. After the meal the talk turns to Lily. Lawrence is so enthusiastic in his assertion that Lily has always been misunderstood by those around her that Gerty soon realizes that his visit wasn't about her at all; he

simply wanted to wax effusive about his newfound love. When he leaves to drop in on Carry Fisher's party, Gerty feels more lonely than ever. Her budding hopes of marriage with Lawrence are now wilted, and she begins to hate Lily with the bitter pangs of jealousy.

At the home of the Fishers, Lawrence is surrounded by gossip about Lily. Some make snide remarks about her relationship with Gus Trenor, while others imply that she is soon to marry Simon Rosedale. He leaves as quickly as possible to get some fresh air. As he walks late at night, he sees Lily emerging from the Trenor house. Lawrence walks on, unnoticed by Lily, who goes straight to Gerty's house and falls into the arms of her friend, unaware of the emotions with which Gerty is struggling. Gerty, in the face of Lily's obvious misery, forgets her anger and reflexively reaches out to help someone in need. Lily is clearly deeply troubled, though she refuses to tell Gerty the reason for her distress. Gerty invites her to spend the night. Finally Lily opens her heart and confesses to being the lowest of the low - one who has "taken what they take and not paid as they pay." She longs to tell Lawrence everything, but fears she will be rejected. Gerty, of course, is suffering the agony of knowing that any help she offers to Lily will place beyond reach any of her hopes of happiness.

Chapter 15

Lily arises the next morning stiff from sleeping in Gerty's small bed and burdened with the horrors of her plight. When she gets back to her aunt's home, Mrs. Peniston is worried, but Lily soothes her as best as she can under the circumstances, telling her nothing of the real events of the previous evening. In the solitude of her room, she calculates that she has received something on the order of nine thousand dollars from Gus Trenor. She knows she must repay him in order to sustain any appearance of virtue, yet has no idea how this might be accomplished. That afternoon she sits down with her aunt and tells her in vague terms that she has accumulated large debts. Mrs. Peniston has no sympathy for her and offers to pay off her dressmaker, but no one else. Lily dare not tell her about Gus Trenor, and leaves the sitting room in despair. When she goes to her bedroom, she remembers that Lawrence is coming in a few minutes. Since her aunt has failed her, can he be her means of escape from scandal and disgrace? Lily waits in the drawing room at the appointed hour, but Selden does not arrive. An hour later, Rosedale rings the doorbell. He abruptly begins to speak of his wealth and how he wants a woman who can spend it for him with class; clearly he believes Lily is that woman, and he intends to pursue her until he gets what he wants. He knows that she is not in love with him, but he promises that she will have everything she wants in life if she accepts his proposal. She asks for time to think about his offer and goes to bed without ever having heard from Lawrence. The next day she reads in the paper that he has sailed for Havana that morning. Later she receives an invitation from Bertha Dorset to join them on a Mediterranean cruise.

BOOK II

Chapter 1

Lawrence Selden did not in fact go to Havana, but to Paris on a business trip. Once his work is concluded, he travels to Monte Carlo, where he meets some of the New York crowd vacationing on the Riviera. Among them he is surprised to find Lily. He thought he had gotten over her after the shock of seeing her with Gus Trenor, but soon realizes that the pain remains. He discusses Lily with Carry Fisher, who has considerable insight into the girl's contradictions. She knows that Bertha brought Lily along to occupy her husband while she flirts with Ned Silverton, but doubts that Lily

will be able to take advantage of the situation. At this point Lawrence hurriedly leaves for Nice in order to avoid meeting Lily. Much to his surprise, Lily herself enters the train car where he is sitting, accompanied by her traveling companions. He observes her without speaking to her.

Chapter 2

The cruise with the Dorsets had been a time of joy and relaxation for Lily, not least because it put the Atlantic Ocean between her and her troubles in New York. One morning Carry Fisher approaches her and tells her that she will be leaving the party and that Lily should take charge of Wellington Bry and his wife Louisa. Lily is not on the best of terms with them, but Carry is sure she can carry it off, and she immediately begins to ingratiate herself with Louisa. Shortly thereafter she is approached by George Dorset. Bertha had not come back to the yacht with Ned Silverton until seven o'clock in the morning, and the two of them had a dreadful row. George, needing to consult a lawyer, decides to send for Lawrence Selden. When Lily returns to the yacht, she expects to find Bertha in an awful state, but instead is surprised to discover her perfectly calm. When they are alone, Bertha coolly blames the whole thing on Lily, saying that she and Ned missed the last train because they were waiting for Lily, not realizing that she had taken an earlier one, and blaming Lily for spending the evening alone with her husband George. Bertha clearly has found a way to cover her tracks by destroying Lily's character.

Chapter 3

When Selden receives the telegram about the Dorset situation, he is determined to guide them safely through it, especially because he wants to avoid Lily being tainted with any hint of scandal. He manages to calm George Dorset down, but knows such a state cannot last long. At dinner that night, Bertha acts as if she has done nothing wrong and is instead the aggrieved party, while Lily's attempts to comfort her are rudely shunned. By morning, both George and Bertha are ignoring her. When she meets Lawrence outside the casino, he tells her that he thinks nothing will come of the Dorset imbroglio, but he remains puzzled by George's unexplained change in attitude. Later he warns Lily to leave the Dorset yacht, but she refuses to desert Bertha in her time of trouble, not realizing that her erstwhile friend is targeting her as a scapegoat. After a big dinner that night hosted by Louisa Bry, Bertha announces, loudly enough for others to hear, that Lily will not be returning to the yacht with them. Lily manages to think quickly enough to deflect the insult, but it has its effect nonetheless. She now has no place to stay, so Lawrence convinces her to go to the hotel where her cousin Jack Stepney and his wife are staying. Lawrence intercedes for her, and Jack reluctantly agrees to let her stay as long as she leaves first thing in the morning so his wife is not aware of her presence.

Chapter 4

When Lily returns from her time on Europe, the first thing she hears is that Mrs. Peniston has died suddenly. As inappropriate as such feelings may be, she can think of little else than that now she will be able to pay off her debts. Everyone is shocked when the lawyer reads the will and reveals that Grace Stepney, who had spent years cultivating her cousin's favor, is to receive the bulk of the estate. Her aunt left Lily ten thousand dollars, a not inconsiderable sum, but nothing near that for which she had hoped. She later discovers that the will was altered after the incident involving the

Dorsets. Soon she finds herself shunned by those who earlier had fawned over her when they expected her to inherit a fortune; they are quite willing to believe Bertha Dorset's version of events rather than even listen to Lily. At this point Lily has no friends on whom she can count other than Gerty Farish. One day she meets the Trenors and their friends in a restaurant, and they bypass her with the barest of comments. She knows she has to repay her debt to Gus to have any hope of restoration, so she visits the lawyer to see how soon she will be able to get her legacy. He tells her that it may take a year. She then in desperation tries to borrow the money from Grace Stepney, but she refuses on the grounds that her aunt would not have approved.

Chapter 5

Just as Lily is feeling like she is alone in the world, she bumps into Carry Fisher, who apologizes for snubbing her the day before. Carry then invites her to go with her to the home of Sam and Mattie Gormer, who are tired of the social set and are trying to cultivate their own circle of more interesting friends. Lily gladly accepts the invitation. Despite the fact that she had in the past avoided such company, she finds herself readily accepted, even though the people spending the weekend at the party clearly know her story. The result is an invitation to accompany the Gormers to Alaska that summer. Carry urges her to accept, arguing that by removing her from the company of her erstwhile friends, they will have the opportunity to discover how much they miss her. The trip to Alaska only succeeds, however, in helping Lily to realize how much she misses the society from which she has been excluded and accomplishes nothing along the lines of softening her reception among her former friends. Carry then decides that the only solution is for Lily to marry, and suggests either George Dorset, who is on the verge of divorcing Bertha, or Simon Rosedale. Lily dismisses the idea of Dorset at once, but secretly muses on the possibility of marrying Rosedale, who clearly would love to have such a lovely creature on his arm as he tries to force his way into New York society. She still dislikes him, but is certain of her ability to make him love her if she chooses.

Chapter 6

The Gormers are building a new country house, and Lily is invited out to see it. While she is there, she walks the grounds and unexpectedly meets George Dorset. He is disgusted with his wife's abominable behavior and offers to divorce her if Lily will marry him. She refuses, though she is tempted to get revenge on Bertha. When she returns to the Gormer house, she finds that Bertha has visited Mattie Gormer, who is pleased beyond measure by such condescension. A few weeks later, Lily visits Carry Fisher and is surprised to find Simon Rosedale already there. After he leaves, Carry tells Lily that Bertha is drawing Mattie into her circle for the sole purpose of separating her from Lily, and that the only way to escape Bertha's cruelty is to get married to someone.

Chapter 7

The next day she takes a walk with Simon Rosedale. She still finds him repulsive, but is determined to marry him, gain control over him, and make him the instrument of her revenge against Bertha Dorset. She expresses her willingness to marry him, but, in his surprise, he blurts out that he thought her previous rejection so firm that he had no intention of renewing his appeal. He wants them to remain friends, but she says that is impossible without a promise of marriage. He admits that he is still madly in love with her, but candidly tells her that he has no hope of achieving his

desired position in society in the company of one who has been cast off by that same society. He doesn't believe Bertha's lies for a minute and can't understand why Lily is reluctant to use the love letters that would destroy Bertha. His suggestion is that she use them to blackmail Bertha into accepting her again, in which case he would gladly marry her. She is strongly tempted, but finally refuses, largely because the letters in question are addressed to Lawrence Selden.

Chapter 8

Under the influence of Bertha Dorset, Mattie Gormer gradually distances herself from Lily, who finds herself increasingly alone in New York as the season unfolds. Her only real friend is Gerty Farish, whom she usually avoids because her presence reminds her of what her future must hold if she is unable to marry well. Once, when visiting Gerty, she learns that Bertha has dismissed Ned Silverton, who is now sinking further into debt and dragging his sisters down with him. Lily opens up to Gerty, telling her that she can't sleep at night and fears she is losing her beauty. She despises the society that she seeks to join, but knows no other way to live and has no notion of what she might ever do to support herself. Gerty knows that her only hope lies in giving up her ambition to be part of society, but Lily is not prepared to hear such a thing. Instead, she applies for help to Carry Fisher, who is so closely connected to the rich that she can usually create demand where supply exists among her friends and who succeeds in finding her a job as a private secretary. Gerty, meanwhile, confides in Lawrence Selden, who has returned from Europe by this time. She tells him of Lily's plight and asks him to step in and renew their friendship, showing her a better life than the one after which she longs. Lawrence agrees to do so, but when he finds that Lily is living with a certain Mrs. Norma Hatch, he turns away in disgust.

Chapter 9

Lily, guided by Carry Fisher, takes up residence in an upscale New York hotel as secretary to Mrs. Norma Hatch, a woman younger than Lily herself, recently divorced, and eager to be schooled in the ways of New York society. Lily finds that Norma is indolent and disorganized, following no fixed schedule and admitting no responsibilities. More surprising is the fact that some of Lily's prior acquaintances, including Ned Silverton and Freddy Van Osburgh, the heir to his family's enormous fortune, are part of Mrs. Hatch's circle. She considers what fun could be had by launching the beautiful but inevitably disruptive Norma into the circle of New York society, but has no desire to be identified with such a venture. One day Lawrence Selden pays a call. Lily has not seen him for a long time, has missed him terribly, and wonders why he has come now. He urges her to distance herself from the society that has treated her so cruelly and return to Gerty, where she can eventually become independent after paying off her debts, but she refuses to listen.

Chapter 10

Soon she realizes that the orbit surrounding Mrs. Hatch is less than healthy and she decides to take Lawrence's advice after all. Gerty and Carry put her in touch with a milliner who is willing to employ her. Lily, who really is good at trimming bonnets, imagines herself in the front room of a fashionable ladies' emporium, but finds herself instead in the dark workroom of what appears to her to be little better than a sweatshop, forced to perform menial tasks that have little to do with her creative abilities. The problem is that, because of her lack of training, she isn't very good at the

basic jobs involved in making hats. Worse yet, the girls in the shop gossip about the society women for whom the hats are being made, many of whom are her former friends. One day she leaves work with a headache, and on the way home to the shabby boardinghouse where she is staying, she stops at the chemist's to get a prescription for a sleeping draught filled. There she runs into Simon Rosedale, who offers to take her for a cup of tea. She fills him in on her story, and he offers to help her out financially, but she refuses. He walks her home, is shocked by her place of residence, but nonetheless asks if he may pay her a visit someday. Lily, physically and mentally exhausted and becoming increasingly dependent on the drug that was not prescribed by any doctor, is miserable, and she begins to weigh options that previously would have been intolerable. Should she use her legacy, when it finally arrived, to set up her own shop while remaining in debt to Gus Trenor? Should she charm Simon Rosedale into marrying her? Should she use the letters she had hidden away to remove the menace of Bertha Dorset once and for all?

Chapter 11

As the season comes to a close, the denizens of high society depart for Europe or other favored locales, while Lily is dismissed from her job because no one is presently in town to buy fancy hats. When she arrives at the boardinghouse, she finds Rosedale waiting for her. He expresses disgust, both at where she lives and at the very fact that she has to work for a living. He offers to pay off her debt to Trenor and again proposes marriage, but she cannot bring herself to accept. That night she refrains from the sleeping draught and gets no sleep at all. The next day she wanders the city aimlessly, but by the time she arrives at home, she has made up her mind what to do. She takes the incriminating letters from her trunk and walks toward the home of Bertha Dorset. On the way she passes Selden's home and, filled with shame at what she was planning to do, knocks on his door instead.

Chapter 12

She begins by apologizing for the way she treated him earlier, then admits that she left Mrs. Hatch's employ based on his advice. She thanks him for all his past advice and tells him how much it meant to her, no matter how much she had outwardly rejected it. She is in despair because she is only suited for one kind of life, but it is a life she despises. She tells him that she wants to leave the old Lily Bart behind with him and venture out into an unknown future. She wants to leave, but cannot. She is sure she has destroyed whatever love he once felt for her, but suddenly she is filled with a love for him that is completely new to her. While his back is turned, she drops Bertha's letters into the fire, then kisses Lawrence gently on the forehead and leaves the apartment.

Chapter 13

After she leaves Lawrence's apartment, she sits on a park bench, dreading to go home because nothing awaits her there but the sleeping draught, which is gradually losing its effectiveness. While she sits in her lonely despair, a young woman named Nettie Struther comes up to her, one of the women from Gerty Farish's charity outreach whom Lily had helped earlier. She sees that Lily is in a bad way and invites her home to sit in her kitchen while she feeds her baby. Unknown to Lily, the help she had provided for Nettie had been the turning point in her life. She not only got well, but soon after met and married her husband, established a home, and gave birth to a baby. She idolized

Lily as the source of all her happiness. After briefly holding the baby, Lily leaves the shabby tenement and returns to her boardinghouse, feeling somehow much better. She goes to her room and begins to look through her beautiful dresses, each one associated with memories of her past life. The maid knocks at her door and hands her an envelope containing the check for ten thousand dollars from her aunt's estate. What had seemed to her a pittance such a short time ago now appeared as a fortune, though she knows that, after paying off her debts, she will have little on which to live. Greater than her fear of poverty, however, is her fear of a lonely life of insignificance. She tries to sleep, but cannot, and finally takes a dangerously large dose of her sleeping potion, which allows her to fall into a somnolent state at last.

Chapter 14

The next morning dawns bright and sunny, and Lawrence hurries to Lily's boardinghouse to tell her what he could not find words to say the night before. He is surprised to find the door answered by Gerty Farish and to see a crowd of people behind her. She gently leads him upstairs, where he finds the body of Lily Bart, dead of an overdose of sleep medicine. He goes through her things, and at last realizes that she loved him as much as he loved her - a message that he intended to deliver that morning, but, alas, too late.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Lily Bart - The central character in the story is a beautiful but impoverished young woman who yearns for a place in New York society.
- Lawrence Selden - A lawyer who is a casual acquaintance of Lily and her only real friend.
- Simon Rosedale - A wealthy Jewish man who owns the building in which Selden lives. He makes a habit of looking into everyone else's business and is determined to marry Lily.
- Percy Gryce - A wealthy but shy young man whom Lily makes a point of cultivating; she winds up losing him to homely but wealthy Evie Van Osburgh.
- Jack Stepney - Lily's cousin, who likes to live on the wild side and who pursues the rich Gwen Van Osburgh, whom he eventually marries, as Lily pursues Percy Gryce.
- Julia Peniston - Lily's wealthy aunt with whom she lives. When she dies, she leaves Lily with a mere pittance.
- Judy Trenor - A society matron who likes nothing better than to host grand and elegant parties.
- Gus Trenor - Judy's husband, he speculates in the stock market with what Lily thinks is her money and gives her "profits" that are really gifts, then expects something in return.

- Bertha Dorset - A wealthy middle-aged woman who carries on a flirtation with Lawrence Selden, then with poet Ned Silverton, and seeks to destroy Lily's reputation in order to save her own.
- Carry Fisher - A woman who ingratiates herself with those in high society and has become adept at introducing social climbers into their circle. She befriends Lily after she is rejected by those she seeks to join.
- Gerty Farish - Lawrence's unmarried cousin, she devotes her life to aiding the poor. She has little desire to be part of the social circle to which her friend Lily yearns to belong.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Her discretions interested him almost as much as her imprudences; he was so sure that both were part of the same carefully elaborated plan. In judging Miss Bart he had always made use of the ‘argument from design.’” (Book I, ch.1)

“[Lily] was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.” (Book I, ch.1)

“And the other women - my best friends - well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me.” (Lily, Book I, ch.1)

“She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce . . . but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life.” (Book I, ch.3)

“[Lily] liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste.” (Book I, ch.3)

“[Lily] hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch.” (Book I, ch.3)

“This attribute was common to most of Lily's set: they had a force of negation which eliminated everything beyond their own range of perception.” (Book I, ch.4)

“Already she felt within her a stealing allegiance to their standards, an acceptance of their limitations, a disbelief in the things they did not believe in, a contemptuous pity for the people who were not able to live as they lived.” (Book I, ch.4)

“Lily smiled at her classification of her friends. How different they had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining, now they stood for what she was giving

up. That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way.” (Book I, ch.5)

“Success? Why, to get as much as one can out of life, I suppose.” (Lily, Book I, ch.6)

“My idea of success is personal freedom.” (Lawrence, Book I, ch.6)

“She was realizing for the first time that a woman’s dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage; and that the maintenance of a moral attribute should be dependent on dollars and cents made the world appear a more sordid place than she had conceived it.” (Book I, ch.15)

“Sometimes I think it’s just flightiness, and sometimes I think it’s because, at heart, she despises the things she’s trying for.” (Carry Fisher, Book II, ch.1)

“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.” (Lily, Book II, ch.4)

“Lily was not of those to whom privation teaches the unimportance of what they have lost.” (Book II, ch.8)

“When she had visited the Girls’ Club with Gerty Farish, she had felt an enlightened interest in the working-classes, but that was because she looked down on them from above, from the happy altitude of her grace and her beneficence. Now that she was on a level with them, the point of view was less interesting.” (Book II, ch.10)

“He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear.” (Book II, ch.14)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* is a novel of manners, and thus is deeply concerned with the behavioral minutiae of its characters. It is also a satire, holding up to ridicule the manners of the New York upper-class society. Describe the fundamental values of the society that the author satirizes. How does she show that these values are of little worth?
2. Lily Bart, the central character in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, is a beautiful but impoverished woman who desires nothing more than to be accepted in New York society. In order to do this, she believes that she must marry into the right kind of wealth. At the same time that she longs to be part of society, she also recognizes the shallowness of the people who inhabit it. To what extent does she share the values of the society she seeks to join and to what extent does her own character separate her from it?

3. In I Timothy 6:10, the Apostle Paul warns his protégé that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” How do the plot and characters of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* illustrate the truth of Paul’s maxim? In your answer, consider both evil behavior and evil consequences that come from the love of money.
4. In Hebrews 13:5, the author tells his readers to “keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have.” In Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart never finds contentment; she always longs for something she doesn’t have and is convinced that she cannot be happy unless she gets it. Neither the protagonist nor the author ever even considers the writer of Hebrews’ reason for his exhortation - the presence of God with those who trust Him. On this basis, would Lily have been content had she achieved her ambition? Why or why not?
5. In Philippians 4:11, Paul says, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content,” including wealth and poverty. Edith Wharton, in her first popular novel *The House of Mirth*, pictures a group of people in New York’s high society who are fundamentally unhappy and discontented with their lives despite the veneer that they put on for the surrounding world. Why are they incapable of contentment despite their wealth and social position?
6. At various times in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, Gerty Farish and Lawrence Selden try to convince Lily Bart to give up her ambition to become part of New York society for her own good. What arguments do they use? Why does Lily refuse to listen to them?
7. Very early in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, the reader becomes aware that Lawrence Selden and Lily Bart love each other. At the same time, they are both convinced that they cannot possibly marry. What factors keep the two apart throughout the novel, right down to the tragic conclusion? Had Lily lived, would they have been able to have a happy marriage? Why or why not?
8. At various times in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart feels enslaved by circumstances around her - her poverty, her family upbringing, her debts, and her subservience to and dependence upon the members of the society she wishes to join. What does she think she needs in order to find freedom? Would her proposed solution bring her real freedom, or simply another form of slavery?
9. Much of the focus of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* is on the subject of money, but is the acquisition of money seen as an end in itself, or is power the thing that people really desire? Be sure to cite specific quotations from the novel to support your arguments.
10. In Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, the central character, Lily Bart, is a beautiful woman who attracts men the way honey attracts flies. Despite her large number of suitors, however, she never manages to marry. Why not? What about her aspirations, her character, and her circumstances prevent her from finding a husband? Would those same factors prevent her from finding happiness in marriage?

11. Critics have sometimes pointed out that the ultimate failures at the heart of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* are caused by the fundamental weakness of the two central characters. In what ways would the story have turned out very differently had Lily and Lawrence been strong rather than weak in their personalities?
12. "Fake news" is much discussed today, with people in the media seeking to pass off falsehoods as truth in order to promote their own agendas. In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, fake news tends to be believed as long as the one disseminating it is rich and powerful. What role does fake news play in the plot of the novel? How does it play a significant role in Lily's downfall?
13. In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, why do the power brokers of New York society want to exclude Lily Bart from among their company? To what extent is her beauty a factor, or her lack of wealth or family? Are they driven more by snobbery or jealousy?
14. Consider the ending of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Does Lily Bart die of an accidental overdose of sleeping medicine or does she commit suicide? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novel.
15. Edith Wharton, the author of *The House of Mirth*, was strongly influenced by Charles Darwin's concept of natural selection. How does the idea of the survival of the fittest appear in the novel? How does it contribute to the eventual downfall of the protagonist?
16. Both Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* deal with and satirize New York society, but the two picture it very differently. The earlier novel portrays the New York upper class in the first decade of the twentieth century as powerful and dominant, while the later one looks back nostalgically on a society that, after the First World War, was on the verge of irrelevance in a rapidly-changing world. Compare and contrast the two views of society portrayed in the two novels and discuss what changes in the world in the intervening years would have contributed to the differences in perspective found in the two works.
17. The dynamics of marriage in the context of a highly stratified society are often central to novels of manners such as Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Unlike the novels of Jane Austen, such as *Sense and Sensibility*, however, which were written at the onset of the Romantic era, Wharton's novels were written at the rise of American Realism. Discuss how love, marriage, and social class are handled differently in the two novels. How are these treatments influenced by the literary movements of which they are a part?
18. Lily Bart, the heroine of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Becky Sharp, the central character in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, are both willing to do anything necessary to rise in society and gain wealth and prominence. Compare and contrast the values and actions of the two young women. Why does Becky succeed, at least to some extent, while Lily fails? How do the failure of one and the success of the other contribute to the satires of society intended by the authors?

19. Writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are often styled Realists because of their rejection of the ideals of the Romantic movement and their insistence on portraying life as it really is. Often they see impersonal fate as determining the lives of their characters. To what extent does fate play a central role in the outcome of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and the death of its protagonist? In what ways does Lily Bart bring her downfall upon herself, and to what extent is she simply the victim of bad luck? Use specifics from the novel to support your arguments.
20. Discuss the portrayal of Simon Rosedale in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. What indications does the author give that New York society is anti-Semitic? How do Rosedale's difficulties trying to enter high society differ from those of other aspiring social climbers like Lily or Wellington Bry and his wife?
21. Choose one of the main characters, Lily Bart or Lawrence Selden, in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and discuss the extent to which he or she is likable and admirable. Does the author want the reader to sympathize with the young couple that constantly is unable to give in to the love that is evident to the reader but frustratingly unclear to the characters themselves? Be sure to include details from the novel to support your argument.
22. Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* was published first in serial form, and the readers of the magazine where it was published flooded her with letters begging her to allow the two main characters to marry at the end. Do you agree with them? How would the story have been different had Wharton followed their advice? Would it have altered the basic thrust of the novel or affected its main themes?
23. Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* strongly criticizes the society in which the author was brought up. One of the areas her critique is most evident has to do with the role of women, who are unable to support themselves unless they marry wealthy men. Would you consider Wharton's first successful novel to be a feminist work? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specific incidents and quotations from the book.
24. The protagonist of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart, is a woman of two minds. She desperately wants to be part of high society and knows that she must marry a rich man in order to attain the desired position, but her values lead her at the same time to reject such a shallow approach to life. To what extent does this inner conflict drive the plot of the novel? How does it lead to the eventual demise of the main character?
25. In Book I, chapter 1 of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, the author describes her protagonist as one who "was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate." To what extent was Lily Bart the product of her familial upbringing? In what ways did she adopt the attitudes of her parents and in what ways did she reject them? How do these responses influence her life, especially in the two years covered by the novel?

26. In Book I, chapter 6 of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lawrence Selden speaks of what he calls a "republic of the spirit." What does he mean by this? Is he here speaking for the author? Would she, too, like a world that operates like the one he describes? Evaluate this ideal, being sure to make use of the Scriptures in your critique.
27. Most readers of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* would agree that Lawrence Selden and Gerty Farish are the most admirable characters in the story. Why is this the case? Consider their values, their relationships, and their connections (or lack thereof) to the upper-class society that the author so scorns.
28. In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, to what extent may Lily Bart and Gerty Farish be seen as foils, where each brings out the salient qualities of the other by contrast? What differences between the two women are most central to the points the author is seeking to make about the society of her day?
29. In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, she makes a point at the beginning of the story of telling us the age of her protagonist. Lily Bart is 29 when the novel begins, meaning that she dies at the age of 31. Why is her age significant? How does it shape her actions and the broader developments in the plot of the novel?
30. In Book I, chapter 3 of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart is described in these words: "She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce . . . but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life." How does this quotation illustrate perfectly the two sides of the protagonist, her insight and her ambitions, that eventually lead her to ruin?
31. In Book I, chapter 5 of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart is described in these words: "Lily smiled at her classification of her friends. How different they had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining, now they stood for what she was giving up. That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way." How does this quotation illustrate perfectly the two sides of the protagonist, her insight and her ambitions, that eventually lead her to ruin?
32. In Book I, chapter 6 of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lily and Lawrence are discussing the meaning of success. To Lily, success is "to get as much as one can out of life," while to Lawrence it is "personal freedom." How do these definitions of success point to the heart of why the two are never able to get together despite their growing love for one another?
33. In Book II, chapter 8 of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, the author describes her protagonist in these words: "Lily was not of those to whom privation teaches the unimportance of what they have lost." Why is this quotation a powerful summary of the reason for Lily's eventual downfall and death?

34. The closing sentence of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* pictures Lawrence Selden kneeling beside the deathbed of Lily Bart, to whom he had intended to propose marriage. The author describes the scene in this way: "He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear." What was the word in question, and why did it make all things clear? Support your conclusion with details from the earlier portions of the novel.
35. In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, the first thing we learn about Lily Bart is that she is a woman of extraordinary beauty. Does her beauty turn out to be a blessing or a curse? Why do you think so? Support your arguments with specifics from the novel.
36. Edith Wharton took the title for her novel *The House of Mirth* from Ecclesiastes 7:4 - "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Why was this verse an appropriate choice to supply the title of the novel? Does the first part of the verse have any relevance to Wharton's message?