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House of Mirth

by Edith Wharton

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Discussion Questions

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?

About House of Mirth

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.

Author Biography

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones on January 24, 1862, during the American Civil War, into a world that could hardly have been more discouraging of her desire to be a writer. Her parents, George Frederic and Lucretia Stevens Rhinelanders Jones, descendants of prosperous English and Dutch businessmen, bankers, and lawyers, were pillars of the fashionable New York society Wharton would depict in many of her novels. It was a society in which the only acceptable aim for a young woman of the upper class was to enter into marriage with a gentleman of the upper class and become mistress of a household. Edith's mother, a notoriously commanding and aloof woman to whom the birth of her daughter relatively late in life was an embarrassment, was perpetually critical and disapproving of her daughter's intellectual ambitions.

But Edith demonstrated early a formidable intellect and a great love for books. Though her education—at the ends of a series of governesses—was intended only to provide her the social graces necessary for a society wife, she spoke three languages before adolescence, and read widely in the great literature of Western culture. She first attempted to write a novel at the age of eleven, but her mother criticized her first lines, effectively dissuading her from fiction writing for several more years. She did, however, begin writing poetry, and achieve her first publication at the age of thirteen when a magazine published her translations of several German poems.

Attempting to elude the negative economic repercussions of the Reconstruction, the Jones family moved to Europe for six years beginning in 1866, when Edith was five; when she returned to America, after a life-threatening battle with typhoid fever that would indelibly mark her consciousness, she found her country ugly and deeply depressing. Though the family's move to Newport, Rhode Island temporarily revived her spirits, Wharton's affinity for Europe and her ever deepening loathing for the increasing materialism of American life would lead to many return trips to the Continent. She would settle permanently in Paris in the early 1900s. In 1885, after the death of her beloved father, when she was twenty-three and thus dangerously close to being considered a spinster, Edith married Edward "Teddy" Wharton, a gentleman from Boston of appropriate social background twelve years her senior. The first years of her marriage were spent in frequent travel and in making the proper social rounds in New York and Newport. Edith was pleased to be mistress of her own house and garden. But as her confidence grew, and she became more and more involved in and excited by her writing, her kindhearted but intellectually unimaginative husband and their stultifyingly predictable, possibly sexless married life began to drain her spirits.

In 1907, at the age of forty-five, she would begin a passionate love affair—apparently the only of her life—with the journalist Morton Fullerton. The relationship was brief, but it marked a profound emotional and sexual awakening for Wharton. Teddy, meanwhile, began to suffer from mental illness—possibly manic depression. He also took a mistress, and embezzled money from his wife to buy his mistress a house. He was institutionalized in 1912, and in 1913, Edith divorced him. She would never remarry.

Wharton published her first short story in 1891; her first story collection, *The Greater Inclination*, in 1899; a novella called *The Touchstone* in 1900; and her first novel, a historical romance called *The Valley of Decision*, in 1902. That same year she began a correspondence with Henry James, to whom she had been introduced by mutual friends. He judged her at the time as a gifted writer but perhaps too imitative a student of his; their friendship would grow, as would James's estimation of his friend's talents, until James's death in 1916. The *Age of Innocence*, written soon afterward, is marked by several allusions to Wharton's dear friend and to his novel *The Portrait of a Lady*.

The book that made Wharton famous was *The House of Mirth*, published in 1905. Between that book and the publication of her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, in 1934, she published sixteen novels and novellas, eight collections of short stories, several works of nonfiction, and two volumes of poetry as well as many articles, translations, introductions, and reviews. The novel she was working on before her death, *The Buccaneers*, was published posthumously in 1938. This impressive productivity was spurred on in part by the fact that many of her works, including *The Age of Innocence*, were contracted by magazines to appear on a serial basis, requiring her to produce a certain number of words within a limited amount of time and space. Wharton both prospered and chafed under this regime; she wrote prolifically and made a tremendous amount of money, but many critics have noted that the quality of her work, particularly after World War I, suffered under the influence of its rapid production for a mass market.

Beyond her writing, Wharton's life was also distinguished by her selfless service to France and to the European refugees who flooded Paris during World War I, work for which the French government made her—the first woman so recognized—a chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur. When she died in 1937, her coffin was attended by French war veterans on recognition of her adopted country.

Though she was a well-known public figure, Wharton was always guarded about her private life and real feelings. Her autobiography was so unrevealing that her publishers, to Wharton's fury, tried to adjust their contract to permit severe cutting of what they called long "dull" parts. Wharton had destroyed many photographs, letters and literary documents that might well have better illumined her life. Her letters to Morton Fullerton, which she had asked him to destroy, did not surface until the mid-1980s, many years after her death.

Edith Wharton's interior life is known best through her letters to many treasured friends, through their reminiscences of her, and through the miracle of her writing. As Wharton's biographer Shari Benstock noted, "Nothing in Edith Jones's background heralded her diverse creativity and abounding energy, nor was she encouraged her to develop her 'gift.'" Yet she did, through a force of character and imagination which enabled her to produce a body of work remarkable for its craft, its insight into human nature, and its depictions of the complex interactions between individuals and their limited social world, full of pitfalls and obstacles, in which they do or do not reach for meaning.

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