

Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*: A Study in the Morality of New York

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Abstract

The present study seeks to expose the hollowness of the American dream that ruins the life of Lily Bart and so many other men and women who chased it at the turn of the century. It aims to highlight the moral bankruptcy of New York where, at the time, people compromised with their morality and ethical values and allowed themselves to be trapped in the glare of fashionable society. The paper also discusses how shrewdness devours naivety and hypocrisy strangles innocence. In the study, we also notice that for every success, women (and men as well) have to, or rather made to, stoop to meanness. It underscores that marriage and true love exist beyond the pale of the shams of the upper reaches of the society. In New York and other such cities, 'reputation' matters more than morality if one has to secure a decent job. It is a world where 'beauty is only skin deep' and nobody seeks spiritual beauty. The study concludes with the fact that true happiness lies in burying the unpleasant past and moving ahead in life with the lessons learnt from the mistakes of the past. It points out that human beings need emotional fulfilment more than success and wealth and for this mutual bond between two true people is all that is required. This realisation comes too late in life to Lily Bart and this is the tragedy of her life and the tragedy of Lily Bart is representative of the tragedy of New York as well.

Keywords: American dream, Lily Bart, morality, naivety, hypocrisy.

Edith Wharton is one of the greatest American women fictionists. She has written a number of novels and short stories. Since she belonged to the leisure class of the society, she was able to see through its sickening morals and failing ideals. Her major novels depict women caught up in a catastrophic situation from which they struggle to come out but eventually give in to the hostile forces. Many of her works are set in and around New York. *The House of Mirth* is one such novel whose protagonist, Lily Bart, leads a difficult life from the start to the end with fewer moments of happiness and hope in between and ultimately dies undeservedly.

The novel, by Wharton herself is described as a "chronicle-novel"(183) in "A Backward Glance". It seeks to chronicle the changing morality of America at the turn of the century to which she has been a witness since her early days. In "A Backward Glance", she writes,

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"fashionable New York... There it was before me, in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand, since I had been steeped in it from infancy, and should not have to get up out of note-books and encyclopaedias"(207).

Wharton, at first thought of titling the novel "A Moment's Ornament"(which is an extract from Wordsworth's poem "She was a Phantom of Delight") but, later on, chose to settle on titling it "The House of Mirth" which is taken from the Bible, "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth"(Ecclesiastes 7:4:). Both the titles stand for the transient nature of Bart's life and its joys. The life of Bart is not only her own tragedy but is representative of the tragedy of the whole of America that, at the time, was in a state of transition.

The novel *The House of Mirth* was published in 1905 and it instantly became the best seller. It attracted a lot of positive and negative criticism for its candid portrayal of the real New York, for unmasking the façade of New York. The story of Lily Bart reminded people of Stephen Crane's "*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*" (1893) which depicted the miserable life of the eponymous heroine who is forced into prostitution and to death most inhumanly. It also resembles, in a way, Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie*(1900) in which 18-year old Caroline Meeber(*Sister Carrie*), from Columbia County, Wisconsin, being dissatisfied with her life there, moves to the metro city to realise her American dream. She becomes a celebrated film actress in New York, but before that she had been in a relationship with many men. In the end, she feels disenchanted and disillusioned. All the three novels expose the hypocrisy of the upper echelon of American society where morality is breathing its last and people are busy enjoying themselves, turning a blind eye to the moral degradation.

Lily Bart becomes an orphan after losing her parents at the age of 20. Without any inheritance and lacking the protection of a benevolent guardian, she finds herself adapting her life according to her aunt, Julia Peniston's wishes. Though Bart does not like her, she depends on her for the necessities of her life. She is 29 years old and she has been on the New York marriage market since the age of 18. A girl of exquisite beauty, Bart has not been able to choose a husband for herself from among the thinning number of available men.

She belongs to a family that has seen wonderful days and she herself is out of the ordinary in terms of elegance, beauty and taste. She, therefore, finds ordinary people dingy and disgusting. She is highly ambitious and wants to grow rich quickly. For this reason, she plays cards and

she runs into debt. She owes a lot of money to Gus Trenor, her friend Judy's stockbroker husband. Trenor wants to seduce her, but she rejects his advances. She wants to get a big amount from her aunt to pay Trenor back. But she refuses to give her any money, though she has been paying for all that Bart needed. This sours their relationship and she tries to make her entry into the circle of the wealthy people to attract a rich man who could marry her and make her life comfortable and luxurious.

Lily Bart comes across a number of men in her life. They are all attracted to her only for her physical beauty. But she cannot settle down in life with anyone of them for one reason or the other. She has true feelings for Lawrence Selden, but he is too poor to deserve to be her husband. Though she owes money to Trenor, she finds him despicable. Simon Rosedale appears too coarse and clumsy to be her partner. Percy Gryce is well-to-do, but that is not the only quality she seeks in a man. Bertha Dorset, the woman who tarnishes her image by taking her on a yacht with her husband George in order to prove that she (Bart) has an affair with him. She succeeds in her plan and the scandal ruins her reputation. This 'yacht episode' angers Bart's aunt and friends who disown her. She is naive in terms of dealing with crooked people. She falls victim to the machinations of Trenor and Bertha and she earns the image of a scandalous woman from which she never recovers in spite of her best efforts to regain her former self.

However, Lily Bart is a resilient being who, in a bid to reclaim her position in the upper reaches of the society by following Carry Fisher's pattern of advising people to enter into the aristocratic society. But her scandalous past spoils her chances of being the secretary of Mr. and Mrs. Gormer. And Bertha is responsible for this episode. So, now she has no choice but to take the position of secretary to Mrs. Norma Hatch, a milliner. Mrs. Hatch's home is the 'Emporium Hotel' where she leads a disreputable life. It is a place where "Mrs. Hatch and her friends seemed to float together outside the bounds of time and space. No definite hours were kept; no fixed obligations existed: night and day flowed into one another in a blur of confused and retarded engagements" (HM, 300). Being not used to working as a manual labourer, the quality and quantity of her production is low and poor. She becomes frustrated beyond measure and to relieve herself of her frustration, she starts taking chloral hydrate, a dangerous drug, that eventually leads to her tragic death.

Lily Bart's tragedy evokes pity and fear in the heart and mind of the readers because in each endeavour of hers, she is a failure. She tries to rise by being a member of the upper class society from which she is driven out partly due to her naivety and partly due to the villainy of Bertha

Dorset. The scandal does not let her stay in the fashionable society and her failure to trim hats meticulously throws her out of the honest job and she, like her dead father, finds herself "a very useless person"(HM, 336). She is, as Janet Beer puts it, " a representative of that which is lost in the sprint towards the twentieth century"(24).

As a woman, Bart falls somewhere between Gerty Farish and Bertha Dorset. Farish is better than Bart, while Dorset is worse than her. Bart is morally superior to many other women of the upper class society because she does not agree to marry any Tom, Dick and Harry for their wealth. She has a standard of her own and she will not fall from that even though she remains unmarried. She wants money from her aunt because she has to repay Trenor. She cannot use the love letters of Lawrence and Bertha to blackmail them as she loves Lawrence and does not want to spoil his reputation in the social circle. Therefore, she burns them.

In the novel, every attempt of Bart to rise only takes her down the social ladder. In this connection, Janet Beer writes,

The majority of the most crucial incidents in the novel, in terms of the narrative progression of Lily's slide into obscurity and poverty, are occasions where she is exposed -in public -as having misjudged the extent to which she is qualified or permitted to be a participant in the changing social order (25).

Her attempt at gambling only ruins her instead of making her rich. Her attempt to take up jobs drives her out of them. Her attempt to find a lover kills her feelings. In her attempt to find a husband, she leads a lonely life. And in her attempt to live a reputable life drives her to a disreputable death. One more example includes the act of hers to imitate the portrait of 'Mrs Lloyd' by Joshua Reynolds in the tableaux vivants organised by a wealthy couple, Wellington Brys, where she looks awesome and is admired by all including Lawrence who kisses her passionately. This episode, again, becomes the cause of her further undoing. She is described as a vendible woman which she is not.

Lily loses her parents, her inheritance, her lover, her jobs, her reputation and her life in chasing the so-called American dream. New York, the glittering city of hope, becomes her Golgotha. Her hamartia is that she pays no heed to the sincere advice of Lawrence and is caught up in the trap of envious Bertha. Nobody criticises Trenor, Rosedale, Bertha, Mrs Hatch and others for

their immortality because they are wealthy. Lily's character assassination is done because she is a poor orphan without an inheritance.

Lily realises that life is a series of trials and errors and if one has to progress in life, one must bury one's past and move ahead. She learns this lesson at the humble house of Nettie Struther whose husband accepts her despite knowing her disreputable past and loves her as an empath. She has an epiphany here and sadly ponders over her chances of being with Lawrence if she had told him the reality of her life. But the realisation comes too late, "her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther's kitchen"(HM, 348).

Towards the end, after the death of her aunt, she receives an inheritance of ten thousand dollars with which she repays Trenor, proving thereby that she was not a cheat. However, her loneliness worsens her condition and her addiction to the dangerous drug increases day by day and, one day she has an overdose of chloral hydrate which causes her death. But just before her death, she dreams of cradling Struther's baby in her arms. The dream which could never be fulfilled in her life. Lawrence comes to her with the proposal of marriage. But it is too late. However, he notices the proof of her honesty there in the form of bank receipts which corroborate that she had no liaisons with Trenor or anybody else. She was a Pure Woman and she was more sinned against than sinning.

To sum up, the novel *The House of Mirth* is an indictment of the American dream that had led people to their decline and decay. The people of New York, at the turn of the century, struggled to either make their entry into the upper reaches of society or to stay there. For this, they could compromise with their morality because power and position held more charm than human conscience and ethical values. Lily Bart is the end product of the American dream. Her act of gambling, the ensuing financial indebtedness, her failed attempts to get an honourable job, her failure to get a proper husband- all stem from her desire to chase the The Big Dream, in chasing which she, eventually, perishes. A girl of exquisite beauty and decent background slides into ignominy in her attempt to rise to glory and renown.

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