

**Tribhuvan University**

**Lily Bart: A Victim of Materialistic Society in *The House of Mirth***

**A thesis submitted to the Central Department of English in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in English**

**By  
Rabin Adhikari**

**University Campus  
Kirtipur, Kathmandu  
May 2006**

**Tribhuvan University**

**Faculty of Humanities and Social Science**

This thesis entitled "Lily Bart: A Victim of Materialistic Society in *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Mr. Rabin Adhikari has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

**Members of the Research Committee**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Internal Examiner

---

External Examiner

---

Head

Central Department of English

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Acknowledgements**

I am greatly indebted to my supervisor Mrs. Sachchi G. Karki of the Central Department of English, T.U., Kirtipur, for providing me valuable suggestions and easy guidance. I can never forget her friendly companionship.

I would like to thank Mr. K.P. Sharma, my senior friend, who helped me in selecting my thesis topic which was such a tough job for me like breaking a rock. My brother Prem and my friend Janak helped me to find articles and other materials related to my thesis in the internet; I really appreciate their supportive efforts. I am grateful to my friend Ramesh for providing me some useful books; it really helped me a lot to get my thesis accomplished. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends Gyanu, Chetan and Dhiraj for constantly encouraging and advising me in the process of writing my thesis.

May 2006

Rabin Adhikari

## **Abstract**

*The House of Mirth* moves around the life of Lily Bart, a member of the upper class New York society in the beginning of the twentieth century. At the age of 29, Lily's only purpose in life is to get a husband who is both rich and loving. Lily lives in a hypocritical and materialistic society which judges a person on the basis of his/her economic position. Lily's lifestyle is shaped by this materialistic society, and she has adopted expensive habits like gambling, buying expensive clothes and jewelries. Lily depends on her aunt and her friends for her financial and other needs. Lily is able to stick in this society because of her beauty and graceful manners and the possibility of her marriage with a rich person. In this judgmental materialistic society, Lily tries to behave little independently to maintain her financial needs. However, the society misunderstands and misinterprets her actions and accuses her of impropriety. Her close friends and her family members ostracize her at a time when she needs their support. Ostracized from her dream world of high-class society, Lily gradually descends into working class people. Lily finds no purpose in her life and envisages only a long life of poverty and dinginess which she hates. Financially ruined and mentally collapsed, Lily commits suicide as a means of escape from the troubles of the material world.

## Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>1-13</b>
Edith Wharton and Her Social Milieu	2
The Novel in the Historical Contexts	5
Critical Responses to the Novel	10
<b>II. Theoretical Tools</b>	<b>14-23</b>
Feminism: A Tool to Redefine Woman's Identity	14
Marx, Engels and Feminism	16
Marxist Feminism: An Attack on Patriarchal Capitalism	18
Identity in the Capitalistic Culture	22
<b>III. Textual Analysis</b>	<b>24-48</b>
The House: A Capitalistic Society	24
Lily's Materialistic Familial Background	27
Lily's Sojourn in the Capitalistic Society	29
Lily's Demise: A Fatal Result of Materialism	44
<b>IV. Conclusion</b>	<b>49-51</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>52-53</b>

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton's most critically acclaimed book and an instant bestseller, is regarded today as her most accomplished and compelling social satire. *The House of Mirth* tells the story of Lily Bart, aged 29, beautiful, impoverished and in need of a rich husband to safeguard her position in the social elite, and to support her expensive habits - her clothes, her charities and her gambling. Unwilling to marry without both money and love, Lily becomes a victim to the kind of gossip and slander which attach to a girl who has been in the marriage market for too long. Wharton charts the course of Lily's life, providing along the way, a wider picture of a society in transition where the old certainties of manners, morals and family have disappeared and the individual has become an expendable commodity.

This research analyses the insidious effect of materialism and social convention upon the female protagonist of the novel, Lily Bart. Lily Bart is a woman of noble character, but the society in which she lives is filled with moral and spiritual corruption. It's a patriarchal, judgmental, materialistic and hypocritical society which has the power to judge a person's (esp. a woman) life, either by legitimizing it or by ostracizing it. The society expects the women to remain virtuous, moral, graceful and beautiful. Women, like Lily Bart, have the position of commodity, to be displayed, to be appreciated and to be possessed by the males. However, some women, like Bertha Dorset, legitimize their immoral and wicked actions through the power of wealth. In other words, Lily Bart is in a society where only the richest are the fittest to survive.

Lily Bart, a product of this materialistic society, has internalized the values of this society. Though she lives among the rich people, she lacks enough money to sustain in this society. Besides, she has accumulated expensive habits like gambling. Lily's aim is to find a rich husband to support her expensive habits, but she is not

ready to sacrifice her love and morality to achieve her goal. The man she loves does not have enough wealth and fails too to understand her. Unlike Lily, her friends and the other members of the society are selfish and opportunist. Lily loves independence, so she tries to act with little freedom but the society rejects it as immoral. She is ostracized from the society and as an unmarried and impecunious woman; Lily slips down from higher rung to lower rungs of society. Being alienated and financially ruined, Lily commits suicide. In the struggle between material and spiritual forces, though Lily succumbs to material forces, she never sacrifices her moral and spiritual values. Lily becomes a victim of her materialistic social milieu, a victim of the society which had produced her.

#### **EDITH WHARTON AND HER SOCIAL MILIEU**

Edith Wharton was born, Edith New bold Jones, into a wealthy and well-connected New York family in 1862. The society into which Edith Wharton was born was still, in the eighteen-sixties, the predominant American aristocracy. Established in New York behind the cast of 'Genteel Tradition', it was a snug and gracious world of gentlewomen and lawyers who stemmed in a direct line from the colonial aristocracy. Though it was republican by nature, it was still a colonial society, a society superbly indifferent to the tumultuous life of the frontier, supercilious in its breeding, complacent in its inherited wealth. It was a society so eminently contented with itself that it had long since become lifeless.

*The House of Mirth* was the first of Edith Wharton's novels to take for its subject and setting the New York leisure class society from which Wharton herself had sprung. Fictions which treated the underside of life in New York - like Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), or Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) was not unusual. However, novels which exposed the wrong side of the elite

society were more of a novelty. As an insider, Edith Wharton knew very well the hypocrisies, pretensions, futility and weaknesses of the upper-class society. As she writes in her autobiography:

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 since infancy, and should not have to get it up out of notebooks and encyclopedias. (206-7)

She was familiar with the politics of that society and knew how cruel it could be. It was her intent to satirize this society, but also to show the profoundly tragic suffering that goes on inside it. The tragedy came from her sense of social and sexual imprisonment and her fundamental awareness of the discrepancy between civilization and the harsh economic laws on which its privileges were founded. Her own society marriage was unhappy. She was disquieted by her own role as a commodity and sexual victim within it.

She analyzes the society from whence she came as being at a point of crisis. The highly structured class system in which her parents and their contemporaries had felt secure was under threat. The threat came from the new power exerted by those whom she portrays making their initial entry into society in *The House of Mirth*. The newcomers of a burgeoning class of big money-makers were making their influence felt. These people too reinforced the already prevalent tendency to regard the acquisition and display of wealth as the most important social asset. In her book *The Social Construction of American Realism*, critic Amy Kaplan describes the changes which were occurring in society at the turn of the twentieth-century:

Social life was thus gradually moving out of the private dining hall and exclusive ball of the Astor Four Hundred Club to the public stage of



the hotel and restaurant where anyone with wealth could come to see and be seen. (93)

It is to these changing circumstances that Wharton exposes her heroine, Lily Bart.

Two of the titles which Wharton considered for the novel before setting on *The House of Mirth* were 'The Year of the Rose' and 'A Moment's Ornament'. Both of these titles not only push Lily into the foreground but also highlight her ephemerality. The final title itself comes 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'. It obviously directs our attention to the essential worthlessness and frivolity of the society from which she originates. While Wharton is specifically charting the course of Lily's downfall, the text provides a much wider picture of a society in transition. A rapidly changing leisure class is Wharton's chief subject and Lily a representative of that which is trampled in the competitive dash towards the twentieth century. The core of Edith Wharton's concern is the gulf separating social reality and the inner self. Often a sensitive character feels trapped by unfeeling characters or social forces. Edith Wharton had personally experienced such entrapment as a young writer suffering a long nervous breakdown partly due to the conflict in roles between writer and wife.

*The House of Mirth* is often compared to the novels of Wharton's contemporary Henry James in their depiction of America's idle wealthy classes and the social codes to which they adhere. But there is a significant difference between them. As W.J.Stucky notes:

James was a metaphysical writer, Wharton a novelist of manners.

James method was to remove his characters from the effects of social forces and to locate his story in the minds of his characters. Wharton was to deal with the impact of social and moral forces on the lives of

her protagonists. Conflict in James is usually internal. In Wharton it is almost always external, involving a superior individual in a struggle with the representatives of a social world with which the individual is fundamentally at odds. (402)

*The House of Mirth* is also compared favorably with the social novels of Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*) and Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie*). *Sister Carrie* contains striking similarities with *The House of Mirth*. *Sister Carrie* is also the story of the struggle of a woman to find her place in society. However, unlike Lily Bart, Carrie Meeber, the protagonist of *Sister Carrie*, knows very well how to get what she wants. She moves from one relationship to another and grasps every opportunity she gets to achieve success. While Lily Bart is very fastidious and delays her actions, Carrie is an opportunist and makes sacrifices and compromises to achieve success. The rise of Carrie Meeber and the fall of Lily Bart both can be attributed to the impact of capitalistic social milieu in which they exist.

Wharton's another novel *The Custom of the Country* (1913) also has similar elements to that of *The House of Mirth*. However, Undine Spragg, the heroine, is quite open about her own sexual desire. Unlike Lily Bart, she knows exactly how to use her attractions to get a wealthy husband. Undine Spragg, the central character in the conflict of social groups, is not a victim but an invader. She is an amalgamation of opposite tendencies, as sentimental in her judgment of herself as she is ruthless in her judgment of others, and it is this quality Lily Bart lacks.

#### **THE NOVEL IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXTS**

In America's Gilded Age (approximately between 1876 and 1901), the rich got much richer, and the poor got much poorer. It was a time of great industrial expansion in the United States and a time when the stock market was doing well. Great cities

such as New York became worlds of extremes, where on one block lived millionaires in mansions and on another block lived immigrant families in tenements. The American society was filled with crime and social injustice because of the unequal distribution of wealth, and it was becoming more and more mechanical and materialistic as well. It is in this environment that Edith Wharton chose to set her first major novel, *The House of Mirth*. Commenting on the contemporary American situation and its impact on literature Kathryn VanSpanckeren writes:

From 1860 to 1914, the United States was transformed from a small, young, agricultural ex-colony to a huge, modern, industrial nation . . . As industrialization grew so did alienation. Characteristic American novels of the period - Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Jack London's *Martin Eden*, and Later Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* - depict the damage of economic forces and alienation on the weak or vulnerable individual. (47-48)

*The House of Mirth* follows Lily Bart as she lives among the aristocrats and parvenus in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century. Lily has modest income source but she aspires to find a rich husband who could support her expensive habits. Lily is a woman whose identity is entirely constructed through the commodities she surrounds herself by. She is unable to define herself except through the perceptions of others. She is also a woman caught within the prevailing cultural attitudes about middle-class femininity which embraced the idea of women as passive and beautiful. She is perceived by all around her as no more than a beautiful work of art, a person whose outer shell is stunningly crafted but who lacks any interiority. This world in which she lives is informed by, and organized around, the operations of the market-place. Business and social relationships alike are discussed in terms of costs

and payments, credits and debts, and returns on investments. Lily is a self-acknowledged piece of human merchandise that she goes about marketing in order to find a husband. Her assets include her good taste and perfect manners but it is her beauty for which Lily is known and admired. Lily is in love with, and is loved by Lawrence Selden. However, his financial status is as modest as her own. Thus she cannot marry him, since it would mean her social death. So she continues on her quest. Lily's attempt to find a rich husband comes to a sudden and scandalous end when she is accused of having an affair with a man from whom she has borrowed money. Despite her efforts to maintain her social status, Lily slips out of social prominence into poverty and dinginess which she hates so much and commits suicide as a means of escaping from a lower-class world in which her upper-class sensibilities can not survive. Lily fails because she refuses to be an opportunist, values human relations, mortality, her true feelings and emotions higher than other things. Lily Bart is thus a victim of the materialistic social milieu which had produced her.

*The House of Mirth* has been categorized as a 'Novel of Manners' which was very popular in the contemporary England. Jane Austen's *'Pride and Prejudice'* (1813) and *'Sense and Sensibility'* (1811) are pioneer works of this literary genre. Authors such as George Eliot and Henry James used this form to explore the place of women in society and the social effect of marriage, showing in particular the problems that come with marriage and conforming to society. In America, the novel of manners genre has included works such as Hannah Foster's *'The Coquette'* (1797) and even Kate Chopin's *'The Awakening'* (1899).

Novel of manners had developed some specific conventions in the 19th century. First, the protagonist is usually a single woman looking to get married. Second, socio-economic class must be a factor in determining whom the woman will

marry. Third, the novel must include many scenes that portray the proper and improper way to act within high society, and also outline differences and relations between classes. And finally, the novel of manners usually ends with either the marriage or death of the female protagonist. Austen's *'Sense and Sensibility'* is a good example of this form. The protagonist, Elinor, is looking to get married, preferably to someone of a higher social class, and after scenes of London society seen in dinner parties and elegant balls, Elinor marries Edward Ferrars.

During the late 19th century, the novel of manners was one of the most popular novel genres, but it was also a predominantly British form. Many questioned whether such a genre could exist in America, where there were no official social classes. Wharton adapted the form in her own way to better suit the New York society. Instead of a legitimized aristocracy, Wharton creates a social circle comprised of elegant New York snobs. Class mobility, not present in most British manners novels, is a large factor in *The House of Mirth*. It shows the attempts of Lily to assimilate herself into the elite group, only to slide down the social scale into the working class before her death. In fact, Lily's primary goal is not to marry for happiness, as is seen in many Austen characters, but rather for social security. A marriage to Percy Gryce, Lily decides at the beginning of the novel, would be the best way to assure herself of good social standing and a steady income.

Wharton's dissection of hidden sexual and financial motivations at work in society links her with the naturalistic writers like Stephen Crane, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, etc. These naturalistic writers used realism to relate the individual to society. Often they exposed social problems and were influenced by Darwinian evolutionary thought of the "Survival-of-the-Fittest" concept and the related philosophical doctrine of determinism. Determinism views individuals as the helpless

pawns of economic and social forces beyond their control. Associated with bleak, realistic depictions of lower-class life, determinism denies religion as a motivating force in the world and instead perceives the universe as a machine. Naturalism is a literary expression of determinism. Naturalists imagine society as a blind machine, godless and out of control.

*The House of Mirth* has also been described as a naturalistic tragedy, for it documents a painful downward trajectory of Lily Bart through socio-economic strata culminating in her tragic death. The orphaned Lily's beauty and elegant manner 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 ingénue in the presence of likely suitors. Thus Lily should be able to make a marriage for place and money, on which social power and a luxurious lifestyle depend. But Lily is unable to follow the prescribed course single-mindedly, and she is vulnerable as an unmarried and impecunious woman. In telling Lily's story, Wharton repeatedly describes her by means of biological symbols. She is conceived of as the exact sum of heredity and environment, unable to choose the direction of her growth. Using naturalism as a literary tool, Wharton thus portrays a story about the stresses of urbanization, modernization and alienation on people.

Whether it be read from naturalistic viewpoint or from novel of manners, *The House of Mirth* undoubtedly explores the vicious circle and evil aspect of materialistic society. Socio-economic forces play a vital role to form the personality of the protagonist, to determine her existence and to ostracize and alienate her from society.

At the turn of the century Hamlin Garland had described the failure of American dream of success and wealth in his novels. Like many twentieth century

naturalists, he felt that the forces of American capitalism had destroyed the individual freedom: "In the world of business, the life of one man seems to be drawn from the life of another man, each success springs from others' failures" (qtd. in Peter B. High 41).

*The House of Mirth* captures the exuberance and social transformation of the turn-of-the-century America. It traces the vagaries of fortune in the developing capitalist society. Simultaneously a tale of rags-to-riches and riches-to-rags, the novel confronts the reader with a vision of both the comic and tragic aspects of American capitalism. Wharton touches upon a wide range of themes and experiences in *The House of Mirth*, from upper-middle class comfort to grinding poverty. The novel dwells on the moment as it is experienced.

#### **CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE NOVEL**

The critical responses to Wharton's *The House of Mirth* are extraordinarily great. *The House of Mirth* provided Wharton with substantial income source and helped her to be established in the literary market. However, many critics complained that the novel dealt with insignificant and unworthy characters. But Wharton is very clear in defense of her choice of subject in *The House of Mirth*:

The problem was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another. In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the "Old Woe of the World", any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess. The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic

implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer in short was my heroine, Lily Bart. (207)

Giving a feminist interpretation of *The House of Mirth*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff describes the failure of the protagonist in terms of her vulnerability as a woman in patriarchal society in this way:

But other women, women like Lily who had nothing more to offer than a superb capacity to render themselves agreeably, might be lured by the seductive confusion between representation and reality. Should this confusion occur, the woman would view herself not as a person but as an object - to be admired, to be sustained in her beauty. The men around her would have significance principally as connoisseurs or collectors. It is this exquisite, empty image of self that has contaminated Lily's life; it is, ultimately, this confusion between the ideal and the real that leads to her final tragedy. (21)

In one of the most original essays on the novel, Diana Trilling ends up by seeing the protagonist's fate in socio-moral terms:

Like the old Bolshevik confesses to uncommitted crimes in attestation of the superior moral authority of the state, Lily affirms the absolute power of society over the life of the individual by her demonstration that she is finally incapable of effective action on her own behalf. (128)

But challenging this interpretation, James W. Gargano writes:

I cannot agree with Mrs. Trilling that Edith Wharton intends her heroine to acknowledge the tyrannous primacy of the 'state'. Indeed, Mrs. Wharton seems to be saying that, from a spiritual perspective,



society, considered as the supreme lawgiver, is an illusion or a downright fiction. It is an arena of distraction, a kind of Vanity Fair. What *The House of Mirth* asserts is that no life possesses spiritual vitality until it is motivated by belief in its own significance. (140)

Commenting on the novel from naturalistic viewpoint, Blake Nevius describes its theme as "the victimizing effect of a particular environment on one of its more helplessly characteristic products" (56).

James W. Tuttleton regards the protagonist herself responsible for her downfall. He opines:

Fundamentally, it is the story of a failure of connections, of Lily Bart's failure to get into relation with an order of cultural values superior to the goal of worldly pleasure pursued by the fashionable *haut monde*. Lily rejects Laurence Selden, the cultivated but poor young man who loves her, pursues a rich husband, fails to find one because of her fastidious tastes, and dies in a cheap boardinghouse of an overdose of chloral. The novel thus dramatizes what Mrs. Wharton called the triumph of "the house of mirth," or mindless pleasure-seeking, over "the republic of the spirit", a concept signifying psychological freedom from the accidents of material existence. Lily Bart is not a tragic heroine, but her fate is full of pathos because it is as much caused by the materialism of her social world as by her own whims. (320)

There are many interpretations regarding the cause of Lily Bart's social downfall. However, the aim of this research is to prove that Lily Bart's death is caused by the materialistic nature of her society. Lily places much importance on appearing to be wealthy by wearing expensive clothes and acquiring costly habits such as gambling.

She participates in conspicuous consumption but also seeks to transcend this role forced on her and she yearns for a more meaningful form of existence. Lily's mistake is in trying to demonstrate her use-value through a constructed image, rather than through human acts and qualities.

## I. THEORETICAL TOOLS

### FEMINISM: A TOOL TO REDIFINE WOMAN'S IDENTITY

Feminism is associated with the Women's Movement or the Feminist Movement which is a transformational social movement that focuses on changing the mostly institutional and social attitudes, beliefs activities, practices, and identities that form the basis of social life arranged according to an assumed gender hierarchy. In this context Sheila Ruth writes:

The woman created in and by the male perspective is called by the women's movement the *male-identified women*. The alternative, the women identified woman, is surely a feminist vision. She is a person who indeed understands herself to be subject (self), not object (other); she respects both her womanhood and her humanity, she takes her direction and definition from values that are her own, born of her own self-perceived qualities and goals as well as those of other women; she contributes to society that which she takes to be meaningful, and does so in her own way. (85)

This kind of revolutionary vision was propounded by the feminist movement, but it took a long struggle to achieve this dream and this struggle is still going on. Though in the United States the feminist movement gathered momentum after the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the women's movement has a world history that goes back to earlier centuries. During the Enlightenment, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft published a book that advocated women's rights. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Wollstonecraft attacked the societal idea that women were created simply to please the male gender:

The mighty business of female life is to please, and restrained from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression, sentiments become events, and reflection deepens what it should, and would have effaced, if the understanding had been allowed to take a wider range. (Wollstonecraft 398)

Wollstonecraft asked that women be given equal opportunity in social, political, educational and labor matters. The fundamental principles she enunciated are that the mind does not know sex and that, as Claire Tomalin has remarked "... society is wasting its assets if it retains women in the role of convenient domestic slaves and alluring mistresses, denies them economic independence and encourages them to be docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of all else" (qtd.in Adams 394). Margaret Fuller's *Women in Nineteenth Century* (1845) and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) were other two major works of early feminism which argued for social and cultural freedom and equality of women.

It was the Industrial Revolution, with its widespread social changes, that caused the Women's Movement to develop rapidly in Europe and the United States. It opened women's eyes to the fact that their economic dependence on men and their lack of educational, political, and social opportunities were key factors in their subordinate position in society. Various organizations founded and run by women for women arose. Such awareness brought about the nineteenth century movement for woman suffrage, the fight for abolition of slavery, and the 1848 opening of the Queen's College for women in London – the first of its kind in higher education for women. Throughout the nineteenth century, American women worked together to address needs and grievances of women. By the first half of the twentieth century they had won the right to vote, control their earning, own property, and be employed. Yet

the issues of full participation in party politics, the limits placed on women's labour participation, and the traditional notion of woman as naturally destined to be mother, wife and homemaker lingered.

The feminist movement in the second half of the twentieth century sought to address those concerns as women in the United States took the lead in fighting for total emancipation. The period was ushered by the publication of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928), which pointed out that woman's economic dependence is a major source of women's oppression and subordination: "Woolf held for the radical changes that would or should occur as women's freedom and their suppressed values began to affect conceptions of power, family, and social life, in the past shaped by men" (Adams 817). The other important work was Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949: *The Second Sex*, 1953), in which she "vociferously refused the notion of a female essence prior to individual existence, and attacked the patriarchal myths of woman that presume that false essence" (Adams 993). De Beauvoir believed that woman's liberation is also man's liberation. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1977), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) were some other major and influential works of contemporary feminism.

### **MARX, ENGELS AND FEMINISM**

Marxism presents one of the best-known and intellectually most elaborate theories of social oppression. Beginning with Marx and Engels and continuing through the whole body of neo-Marxian literature, this perspective develops the theory of social class oppression. It focuses on the domination of workers in the interests of the ruling class and on the pervasiveness of class domination, oppression, in patterning both national and international social relations. Marxian feminism brings

together Marxist class analysis and feminist social protest. Yet this amalgam produces not an intensified theory of oppression but rather a more muted statement of gender inequality. The foundation of this theory was laid by Marx and Engels.

According to Marxist theory, in capitalist societies the individual is shaped by class relations. People's capacities, needs and interests are seen to be determined by the mode of production that characterizes the society they inhabit. This Marxist theory attracted many new feminists of the 1960s because it addressed the origin of suppression of women to the capitalist system under which they experienced oppression, and it "revealed the problem of women's subservience, as use- and exchange-value, among men" (Ahearn 15).

The major concern of Marx and Engels was social class oppression, but they frequently turned their attention to gender oppression. The most famous exploration of this issue is presented in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, written and published by Engels in 1884 from extensive notes made by Marx. In pre-technological times, Marx and Engels believed, men and women lived together for subsistence and survival. Women were charged with the care of the household and were well respected and politically equal to the men, who provided food and engaged in the 'productive' work. However, as technology developed and it became possible to produce more than could be immediately used by the group, surplus emerged and with it private property, productive goods controlled by individual men. The accumulation of goods that could be publicly exchanged for others yielded power; and since women's work could not be amassed, and women served only their now-segregated families, women became wards of men, losing their status and power in an exchange economy and becoming wholly subordinated. As the importance of private property developed, the matter of inheritance altered the significance of children, and women's

reproductive labour was appropriated by men as their productive labour had been. Hence, the imperatives of virginity, chastity, and monogamy developed for women as the patterns of inheritance persuaded men to issue their paternity. Ultimately, Marx and Engels argue, with the passing of private property and class, monogamy will disappear, marriage and sex will be based on love and choice, and women's original freedom and value will be restored [461-566].

In this way *The Origins* presents a powerful feminist sociological theory of gender inequality and oppression by making the claim that women are an oppressed class, by analyzing how this oppression is sustained by the family, an institution regarded as almost sacred by powerful sectors of society and by tracing the ramifications of this subordination for women's economic and sexual status. Hence, it could be argued that Marx and Engels were also feminists.

#### **MARXIST FEMINISM: AN ATTACK ON PATRIARCHAL CAPITALISM**

Marxist feminism is a sub-type of feminist theory which focuses on the dismantling of capitalism as a way to liberate women and states that capitalism which gives rise to economic inequality, dependence, political confusion and ultimately unhealthy social relations between men and women, is the root of women's oppression. Marxist feminists see gender inequality as determined ultimately by the capitalistic mode of production and the major social divisions as class related.

Women's subordination is seen as a form of oppression which is maintained because it serves the interests of capital and the ruling class. As Sheila Ruth points out in *Issues in Feminism*:

What better support for a post-industrial, particularly a capitalistic, economy could there be than a definition of gender roles that bound males to continued efforts to produce and most females, at least in the

middle classes, to continued efforts to stay home and consume for much of their lives, if not entirety? Such a circumstance would ensure, if nothing else, good profits for industry. (122)

In capitalist societies, women become segregated into the domestic sphere and men into the outer world of paid work. Economic and social inequality between the sexes is increased and women's subordination in marriage, the family and in society in general is intensified. She further argues:

[...] females rank as a lower caste, generally deprived of wealth, power, and prestige. They are trained psychologically so that direct expression of hostility towards males is often impossible. Excluded from the power structure of all institutions, their opportunities to change the normative structure of the society are very limited. In short, they are prime candidates for a value-oriented movement. (236)

Marxist feminism supports the idea that the biological difference cannot justify any form of oppression and inequality in human societies. Marxist feminists believe that biological differences are not responsible for oppression and inequality between sexes. Instead, they argue that it is the class structure that is responsible for the oppression and inequality between sexes. In *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (1999)*, Wilfred L. Guerin defines Marxist feminism as:

Marxist feminist criticism focuses on the relation between reading and social realities ... Karl Marx argued that all historical and social developments are determined by forms of economic production. Marxist feminists attack the prevailing capitalistic system of the west, which they view as sexually as well as economically exploitative. Marxist feminist thus combine study of class with that of gender. (202)



Marxist feminists believe that the capitalism is primarily responsible for class structure in the society. They further challenge the idea that the equality is possible in capitalistic system.

Marxist feminist strongly protest against the commodification and objectification of women in capitalistic societies. They argue that women have been treated like an art object, to be admired, to be possessed, and the men play the role of connoisseurs. Women have been nourished in this fashion of male ideology and so they have internalized this male image of women. In this connection, Joan Wallah Scott proclaims that: "Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away. Sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjugation of women" (158).

Marxist feminists argue that domination of women by men is intimately connected with patriarchal capitalism, because patriarchy and capitalism are mutually supportive. For example, within the household women produce labor power in the sense of bearing children, and caring for their husbands, who are workers, which supports men but the women do not get benefits for this domestic work. Patriarchy, as an ideological foundation, has thus served the interests of men as well the interests of capitalism. Commenting on the operation of patriarchy, Janet Saltzman Chafets writes:

Patriarchy is probably the oldest forms of exploitation of one part of population by another. It probably has also served as the model for all other forms of relegation, be they on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, or class. Once such a system is established, those in high caste positions, in this case males, develop a vested interest in the maintenance of the basic structure and their own advantaged status ...

the short-run interests of males as males and, perhaps more importantly, as leaders of political, legal, economic and cultural institutions are best served by maintaining and reinforcing traditional gender roles. (115)

In this way, patriarchal capitalism creates an order for it to sustain in the society and in this process it subordinates the women by creating ideologies of gender, religion, family, duty, race class, etc. Marxist feminists like Juliet Mitchell, Michele Barrett argue that women of markedly different class background have fewer life experiences in common than women of any particular class have with the men of their class. Within any class, women are less advantaged than men in their access to material goods, power, status, and possibilities for self-actualization. The causes of this inequality lie in the organization of capitalism itself.

They argue that the embeddedness of gender inequality within the class system is most simply and starkly visible within the dominant class of contemporary capitalism, the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois men own the productive and organizational resources of industrial production, commercialized agriculture, and national and international trade. Women of the bourgeois class are not propertied but are themselves property, the wives and possessions of bourgeois men, men who understand at the deepest level the art of possession. Bourgeois women are attractive and distinctive commodities in an ongoing process of exchange between men and are often means of sealing property alliances among men. Bourgeois women produce and train sons who will inherit their fathers' socio-economic resources. Bourgeois women also provide emotional, social, and sexual services for the men in their class, and in return they are provided with luxury and comfort. In this luxury and comfort, Marxist feminists argue, they forget their exploitation.

## IDENTITY IN CAPITALISTIC CULTURE

In his *Theory of the Leisure Class (1899)* social theorist Thorstein Veblen made an important contribution to the growing attack on the capitalist economic and social system. It was few years before Wharton wrote *The House of Mirth* that Veblen had identified the idea of 'conspicuous consumption' and critiqued the way in which middle classes spent excessive amounts of money on highly visible, though often 'useless', goods, the sole purpose of which was to advertise wealth. This theory argues that:

America's very rich do not produce the wealth of the nation; they simply use it. The American economic system ... encourages competition in making money rather than in making products. After they have made their money, the rich use it wastefully. They buy expensive things in order to show people how rich they are. (qtd. in Peter B. High 102)

It was the time when the division of labor within middle-class marriages was drawn along gender lines. The husband invested his energy into business and accumulating money, while his wife was the family shopper and bought ostentatious clothing, jewelry, furniture and ornaments. Therefore, although both men and women attained their sense of identity via these visibly ornate goods, and were equally invested in consumer culture, men tended to be 'producers' while women were 'consumers'. As a young woman raised in this era Lily Bart, the protagonist of *The House of Mirth*, fully understands that without the trappings of wealth she would have little value to the people with whom she mix. She has been brought up to believe that middle class women were indeed the consumers of luxury goods, and so her excessive desire for clothes, jewelry and other items are more than individualized greed. Instead, it is an

expression of a society that encourages people to define their identity and create a sense of value, through luxury goods. Though Lily participates in 'conspicuous consumption', she seeks to transcend this role forced on her and yearns for a more meaningful form of existence in which she fails. Lily's descent from the house of mirth to the house of mourning proves that in capitalism a consumer identity can only provide pleasure and escape, not happiness or social change.

## II. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

### *THE HOUSE: A CAPITALISTIC SOCIETY*

*The House of Mirth* deals with the world of an elite New York society that evaluates its members constantly to determine whether or not they are still worthy of membership. Lily Bart, the protagonist, is a member of this group though she herself is in impecunious condition. In order to sustain in this society, Lily must marry a rich person, or alternatively abandon this social circle and lead a self-contained, mediocre life. But she is determined to live a happy, prosperous and affluent life. The society in which Lily Bart dwells is a growing capitalistic society absorbed by material gain and monetary worth. In this society, the economic worth of everything is known. For instance, for Simon Rosedale, Lily Bart is a valuable asset as long as she retains the superficial endorsement of the movers and shapers of social taste, like Bertha Dorset. Although he pities her, once her reputation has been spoiled, she has no social worth unless she regains her previous position by using the Dorset-Selden letters to effect her re-entry into society. He analyzes everything in terms of business transaction and profit:

But I know the quickest way to queer yourself with the right people is to be seen with the wrong ones; and that's the reason I want to avoid mistakes . . . There it is, you see. I'm more in love with you than ever, but if I married you now I'd queer myself for good and all, and everything I've worked for all these years would be wasted. (224)

For Bertha Dorset, Lily Bart is a scapegoat whom she uses to distract her husband's attention so that she can have extramarital affair with Ned Silverton. As Carrie Fisher makes the situation clear when she explains:

We all know that's what Bertha brought her [Lily] aboard for. When Bertha wants to have a good time she has to provide occupation for George . . . there are rumours that Bertha is jealous of her success here and at Cannes, I shouldn't be surprised if there were a break any day. Lily's only safeguard is that Bertha needs her badly - oh, very badly.

(165)

When Bertha feels that Lily knows too much about her, she publicly accuses Lily of having an affair with her husband. Though everybody knows the reality, the society excludes Lily as immoral, whereas the real immoral Bertha Dorset is declared guiltless because she is backed by her strong financial position.

For Lawrence Selden, who sometimes claims to know "the real Lily" (134) and "take her beyond - beyond the ugliness, the pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul" (136), she is a beautiful, refreshing object which he wants to possess. Though he expects propriety and love from her, he himself keeps relationship with Bertha Dorset, a married woman. When he sees Lily coming out of Gus Tremor's house at night, he immediately forms his opinion on the basis of appearance. He himself lacks faith but demands it from her. He fails to show courage enough to go to her rescue when she needs him the most.

Gus Tremor, the husband of Lily's dearest friend, intends to have sexual relationship with her in return for his loans to her. He deceives her into believing that "he could make a handsome sum of money for her without endangering the small amount she possessed" (75). His ulterior motives become clear to Lily only when he tricks her into coming to his house alone at midnight and makes a claim that "the man who pays for the dinner is generally allowed to have a seat at table" (128). And Judy Tremor, who behaves like an intimate friend of Lily in the beginning, discards her

without knowing the reality, only for the reason she believes, Lily has unfairly taken financial advantage from her husband.

Appearance is what counts in this world; the appearance of propriety or of impropriety is more important than the actuality. The continual and unquestioned acceptance of the adulterous Bertha Dorset in the society and the ostracism of the guiltless Lily Bart from the society are its examples. It's a declining Victorian society at the turn of the twentieth century where the Victorian norms of manners, morals, customs and conventions are still prevalent. The slavish adherence to custom is expressed in the social rituals of Mrs. Peniston, whose return "to town in October" and the drawing up of "the blinds of her Fifth Avenue residence" (87) can be seen as an act which is as emptily conventional as her narrow and niggardly interpretation of her duties as Lily's guardian. She has no real interest in Lily's fate beyond the maintenance of the appearance of respectability. When Lily informs her about her debts and appeals for help, her casual reply is that "you [Lily] must suffer the consequences" (151). Mrs. Peniston's blindfolded decisions are based on her conventional attitude of the roles of woman which is very inapt in a changing society.

This society judges everything on the basis of use-value. Lily's use-value lies in her beauty and elegant manners; it's her real asset. By investing this wealth in the marriage market, she intends to find a rich husband. For this, she must also maintain the appearance of propriety, though she hates this kind of hypocrisy. Although the members of this society lack morality and propriety, they themselves demand it from others, and Lily Bart is trapped in this contradictory nature of her society. As the critic Janet Beer notes:

Lily is supposed to retain an unblemished and innocent reputation as well as the character of propriety, but her social success actually

requires her to demonstrate sophisticated and often cynical skills. She must try to maneuver and manipulate the people and possibilities thrown in her way in order to secure financial advantage. (XII, Beer)

### **LILY'S MATERIALISTIC FAMILIAL BACKGROUND**

Lily's parents were rich aristocrats who were financially ruined when Lily was still in her teenage. After the death of her parents, she was adopted by her aunt Mrs. Peniston. Lily had experienced the pleasures of rich life and the troubles of poor life as well in her early life. Lily inherits many of her traits from her mother, who was concerned with keeping up the appearance of wealth even when none existed:

Mrs. Bart was famous for the limited effect she produced on limited means, and to the lady and her acquaintances there was something heroic in living as though one were much richer than one's bankbook denoted. (26)

When Lily's father announces that he is ruined, the very first words out of Mrs. Bart's mouths were an order for Lily to "shut the pantry door" (29) so that the servants would not begin to doubt their wealth. Mrs. Bart also tries to cover their relative indigence to Lily, telling her that her father was merely tired and out of mind. Much like her mother, Lily is obsessed with maintaining the appearance of affluence even when she lacks wealth. Lily's mother nurtures her beauty and makes her realize that "it[Lily's beauty] was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt" (30). Lily was trained to become a decorative object. Lily's mother persistently tells her that "people can't marry you [Lily] if they don't see you" (31). Lily had been pampered and spoiled and "she knew very little of the value of money" (28). Lily has absorbed many of her mother's ideas and she is sure that she can conquer poverty through her beauty. She has been encouraged in the expansive



development of her taste at the expense of practical knowledge. Lily “was fond of pictures and flowers, and of sentimental fiction, and she could not help thinking that the possession of such tastes ennobled her desire for worldly advantages” (31). At her deathbed Lily’s mother’s last adjuration to her daughter was to “escape from dinginess if she could” (31). The whole upbringing of Lily Bart is constructed around the walls of materialism and with the principle of maintaining outward appearance even at the cost of subduing her inner self. She was told to maintain appearance and escape poverty at any cost. This past has deeply shaped Lily's present. Lily's hatred for dinginess and poverty are deep rooted in her early childhood, in her mothers teaching which filled her with high ambitions and dreams:

No; she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in. (23)

Lily's obsession for money is thus rooted in her past. Lily's mother had always stressed in maintaining appearance because it suggested wealth, success. Lily needs wealth because it is the only atmosphere in which her exquisite femininity can thrive. Lily's goal is to end up in a socially prestigious and financially sound marriage. Her absolute fears are rejection from the society and "dinginess", which her mother also dreaded; that’s why Lily subdues the voice of her inner soul; that’s why Lily shows dual nature – one that is obsessed with wealth and one that is tired of hollow materialistic world. As she finally realizes: "she had been brought up to be ornamental, [and] she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose" (260).

### LILY'S SOJOURN IN THE CAPITALISTIC SOCIETY

The novel opens in Grand Central Station where the protagonist, Lily Bart, is waiting for a train to Bellomont. As she waits, she is spotted by her friend Lawrence Selden. Selden immediately begins to interpret Lily's presence in the railway station. Lily lives in a society where every little detail is noticed and interpreted and for which there are numerous possible interpretations. As part of the incessant interpretation of other people, the society had a cruelty that lends itself to testing. Even the tiniest details of a person's life are scrutinized by other members of the society. For instance, these opening lines of the novel provide a good example of this kind of social scrutiny:

Selden paused in surprise . . . what was Miss Bart doing in town at that season? If she had appeared to be catching a train, he might have inferred that he had come on her in the act of transition between one and another of the country-houses, which disputed her presence after the close of the Newport season; but her desultory air perplexed him. She stood apart . . . wearing an air of irresolution which might, as he surmised, be the mask of a very definite purpose . . . he could never see her without a faint movement of interest. (3)

Lily Bart is interpreted with the words "inferred" and "surmised", not words that lend themselves to establishing the truth, but rather to playing games. Selden, not content to merely observe Lily, decides to challenge her social skills: "It amused him to think of putting her skill to the test" (3). This is a cruel society, one that is always testing, and one where the slightest event in the past haunts the present. Selden's observation of Lily Bart, at the same time, also makes it clear that Lily is a valuable object for him which he wants to possess: "she stood apart from the crowd . . . the dinginess, the

crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was" (3-5). On the other hand, it also becomes explicit that this valuable social product is becoming obsolete because Lily is still unmarried at the age of 29 and, as Jack Stepney verbalizes, she is "up at auction" (139) for marriage.

Lily Bart is conscious of the disadvantage of being a woman in a patriarchal society, "What a miserable thing it is to be a woman" (6), she tells Selden. However, Lily dares visit Selden's apartment alone with him and remains there talking to him for a long time in spite of the fact that it might turn fatal for her social reputation. During their talk, she exposes her reality and ambition to Selden: "You know I am horribly poor – and very expensive. I must have a great deal of money" (9). Since Lily has been brought up in a materialistic environment, she hates poverty and dinginess. When Selden tells Lily that women, like Gerty Farish, enjoy certain privileges, her response is bitter: "She [Gerty] has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap" (6). Lily hates such a poor life. For Lily happiness is related to money; unless she gets enough money, she couldn't be happy. Lily also astutely comments upon a woman's status as decorative object in a patriarchal society:

Your [Selden's] coat's a little shabby - but who cares? If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself . . . who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop - and if we can't keep it alone, we have to go into partnership [marriage, the only business a woman is allowed]. (11)

Lily's condition is pathetic because she has no choice except marriage, a respectable marriage to a rich person. Therefore, Lily needs to maintain her outward appearance

by wearing expensive clothes and other jewelries, which she can hardly afford. But outward appearance matters far more than substance if one is a woman, and particularly if one is a woman without money. Lily has to depend on her rich friends like Judy Trenor for her expenses and extravagances until her marriage, for she has only a meager income source.

Lily's encounter with Simon Rosedale, a social climber who is still at the corner of the high society and who intends to marry her for his social advancement, reveals her vulnerability as a woman in a conventional society. When Rosedale questions Lily's presence at the Benedick, Lily quickly tells a lie to cover up the truth, fearing that he may gossip about a possible affair between Selden and her. But it becomes a problem for Lily because she has told a bad lie to Rosedale. Since Rosedale happens to own the building, it's a rather bad shock to Lily who wants to get away as soon as possible. Her bad lie also places her under Rosedale's scrutiny, putting her in a position that she now has to get out of. Lily is in a social world of mean-spirited mind games and lies, in which people cannot be trusted.

There is always a sense of ascendance and decadence implicit in everything that is done in the novel. For example, when Lily encounters Simon Rosedale in the street, though she tries to avoid him, Rosedale imposes himself upon Lily and offers her a ride to the station because "Mr. Rosedale was still at a stage in his social ascent when it was of importance to produce such impressions" (14). Rosedale knows the value of Lily Bart, an influential member of the social elite, and the cordial relation with her means raising his own social prestige and position. He is one of the rising elite who will soon join the fashionable New York set even though he is ostracized when Lily first meets him.

One of Lily's attributes is her ability to mold herself into whatever guise is necessary for creating the right effect. This can be seen in the importance of her learning about Americana before speaking with Percy Gryce, a wealthy conventional aristocrat who can't abide smoking and gambling habits in woman, whom she targets as a prospective husband. Lily has already used Selden to learn about Americana, the only thing in the earth that interests Gryce, and although bored to death with him she nonetheless wins Gryce's attentions with her elegant manner and alluring talk.

Lily's special skill in the representation of herself lies in an uncanny ability to experience herself as others must see her. For instance, on the train when she looks ahead to the possible meeting with Gryce, Lily "arranged herself in her corner with the instinctive feeling for effect which never forsook her" (10). The ceremony of the tea she shares with him is a model of manipulation. Her every mood, motion, public attitude is a deliberate piece of acting. She knows, always, when she is being observed. She then automatically plays to her audience she has learned so thoroughly to experience herself as an object that is being observed by others that her sense of "self" is confirmed only when she elicits reactions from others. But when she is alone her inner emptiness becomes terrifying, unbearable.

Lily has to play bridge at Bellomont because "it was one of the taxes she had to pay for their [her hostesses] prolonged hospitality" (23). She is of use to her hostess, helping her reorganize, redecorate, and invite people. However, this usefulness is of a kind that, although important, is still redundant. Her work with Mrs. Trenor promotes a sense of servitude rather than possession, a fact that will allow the society to dismiss Lily when they feel like it. However, the irony of the situation is that Lily loses a large amount of money, whereas Bertha Dorset, who could easily bear the loss of such amount of money, wins.

Lily's beauty is one of the most remarkable aspects of the novel. It is the only true wealth that she possesses. The fear with which Lily looks at the two lines in her face is real. Since her beauty is her only currency, she must remain beautiful in order to marry into wealth. In the course of three days at the Bellomont Lily goes from a fear of her social and economical insecurity to an arrogance that comes with the false assumption that she can marry Gryce. This changes entirely the way she views her prospects:

She would be able to arrange her life as she pleased, to soar into that empyrean of security where creditors cannot penetrate. She would have smarter gowns than Judy Trenor, and far, far more jewels than Bertha Dorset. She would be free for ever from the shifts, the expedients, the humiliations of the relatively poor. (43)

It is almost absurd that someone's outlook on life could change so drastically and suddenly: "Life was not the mockery she had thought it three days ago" (44). Lily's perception of herself is based on her social status, that is why she is so committed to becoming accepted even if it means to marry someone she does not love. The narrator suggests that "Lily was inwardly as malleable as wax" (47). The premise is that as long as Lily remains unmarried, her social position will fluctuate widely, depending on her current financial status.

One of the main problems with Lily's personality is that her desire to join the elite society is matched by her desire to avoid the boredom of it. Even though the arrival of Selden removes Mrs. Dorset from Percy Gryce and gives Lily a clear field to capture him, she is not sure about wanting to marry him. That is why she misses church with Mr. Gryce. At dinner Lily's comparison between Gryce and Selden reveals that she really loves Selden more than Gryce. She also sees that Selden is

detached from the elite social world; he is described as an "outside observer" (50) looking on. Lily cannot marry Selden, even though he is the better man, because he does not have enough money or connections. The great irony of the novel is that Selden is the only man whom Lily really loves and respects. Lily is in a society of vice, a society in which Lily, the only virtuous person, will suffer. Bertha Dorset, a married woman, spends her time trying to win Percy Gryce until Selden shows up. In this world Lily will be judged as if she were one of the un-virtuous, even though she never breaks in her morality.

Lily and Selden's discussion of the idea of success shows their opposite nature. Selden describes success as "personal freedom . . . from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit" (60). Selden also has dual nature; though he presents himself as rather introverted and self-contained person, he likes to enjoy the company of rich people, and thus he is himself involved in "material accidents." Selden's own moral-aesthetic code is deeply flawed. It is a code that even he can follow by suppressed hypocrisies. However, though Selden has not got enough wealth, he has the advantage of being a male. Therefore, people do not judge him on the basis of his appearance and he is free of social scrutiny also, whereas Lily Bart does not have this privilege. When Selden tells Lily that since she intends to marry someone very rich, "it's as hard for rich people to get into [the republic of spirit] as the kingdom of heaven" (61), Lily expresses her own philosophy of freedom which is "not to think too much about money, and the only way not to think about money is to have a great deal of it" (61). Thus, Lily and Selden both show contradictory nature: one is obsessed with wealth and also seeks love and happiness, the other seems to reject materialism for spiritual happiness and also actively involves himself in the materialistic affairs. Selden is as

much a parasite on the society of the house of mirth as Lily is: the fact that Selden is ready to accept Lily if and only if Lily can become flawless proves it. At one time Selden and Lily come very close to confessing to one another their feelings, but when they hear a car engine - a symbol of the society they have left - Lily is pulled away from confessing her true feelings because she is so determined to be an established member of the society; and to achieve this goal she must sacrifice her love to Selden.

Lily's conversation with Mrs. Trenor provides a good example of how the past plays an important role in present society. Lily Bart had been associated in the past with Prince Varigliano. Lily was once engaged to the prince, but the engagement was broken at the last minute when Lily was caught flirting with another man. Lily has a number of weaknesses, all of which Bertha Dorset knows about and will use to harm Lily when the occasion arises. The first of these occurs when Bertha Dorset breaks Lily's relationship with Percy Gryce by informing Gryce of Lily's gambling habit. Bertha cruelly informs Lily that Percy had never seen "a girl play cards for money till he saw [Lily] doing it the other night?" (69). The irony of the situation is that had she not played cards, she would have been excluded from the social set in a different way.

After the incident of Bellomont, Lily begins to get a sense that she is sliding back toward her old life, before she was an aspiring member of the society. Lily's mood changes frequently in the novel; she is usually at one extreme or another: freedom or slavery. Interestingly, both states are based on her financial status. When Lily has come into money, she feels herself wholly free:

It was keen satisfaction to feel that, for a few months at least, she would be independent of her friends' bounty, that she could show herself abroad without wondering whether some penetrating eye would



detect in her dress the traces of Judy Trenor's refurbished splendour.

(98)

Whenever Lily feels burdened by debt, she feels enslaved. Earlier on in the novel, when Lily is staying at Bellomont, she even asks herself whether the maid who helps tidy the Bellomont is better off than she, because the maid is not a slave to debt, clothing and gambling like Lily: "it sometimes struck her that she and her maid were in the same position, except that the latter received wages more frequently" (25). The freedom-versus-slavery motif comes up frequently in the novel, particularly when Lily faces the problem of how to pay off her debt to Gus Trenor.

Lily is quick to manipulate people and situation in her favor. When Lily hears about the stock market, she immediately thinks about whether or not it could benefit her. To decide this, she thinks about her friends and whether or not they have benefited, which also answers the question of whether or not the stock market would be a socially acceptable concept. She then figures out who will help her, and she realizes that Gus Trenor can take care of her finances without compromising her social standing at all, because Trenor is already married and is the husband of her best friend Judy Trenor, so there would be no space for any kind of social scandal. She then asks Trenor to help her, and he readily assents. Thus, every step of Lily's thought process involves a calculation of how an idea could benefit her and whether or not her friends have also made use of the idea. This is an important insight into Lily's value system as a character. However, Lily's inability to measure the "vast mysterious wall street world of 'tips' and 'deals'" (72) soon puts her into deep trouble.

The novel portrays some of the ironies of society, most of which are related to money. Ideally, because Lily needs money the most in order to join society; she should be the one who marries a rich man such as Gryce. Instead, Gryce marries Eric

Van Osburgh, a woman who is already extraordinarily wealthy and has no need for money. It is also ironic that even though Lily and Selden love one another, Lily feels that she cannot marry Selden because he does not have enough money. In the latter case, society's emphasis on social stature and money places people in situations that force them to act against their will.

Lily's consciousness is formed by the materialistic society in which she lives. Lily is very convinced that only money brings happiness in life and respect in society. Her every movement is guided by how to achieve material prosperity. Having a lot of money means happiness and freedom to Lily and lacking money means slavery, and Lily does not want to be a slave. When Lily receives from Gus Trenor a check of profit from her investment, it takes her into the world of dreams, gives her a sense of freedom from other obligations:

The fact that the money freed her temporarily from all minor obligations obscured her sense of the greater one it represented, and having never before known what it was to command so larger a sum, she lingered delectably over the amusement of spending it. (98)

But unfortunately, Lily can never hold on to money very long. One of the motifs of *The House of Mirth* is the meaning of financial wealth. Money is in fact a symbol in the novel, but it stands for different things to different people. To Lily, money represents freedom from her tedious obligations and the ability to live life however she wants. To Selden, who grew up in a humble family, money is not as important as the enjoyment of life and happiness in relationships. Selden, who always plays the outside observer to the social world, has seen that money is coveted and can lead people to some very serious problems if they deal with it carelessly in hopes of making more, particularly by gambling. It is, after all, her lust for money which leads

Lily to gamble and speculate on Wall Street, both of which lead to her financial ruin and expulsion from society.

It slowly becomes clear that Trenor has romantic interest in Lily. When Lily asked him to invest for her, he hoped that Lily reciprocated that interest but he slowly realizes that she is not interested in him except as a tool by which she can make money. Trenor is one of the more interesting characters in the novel because of his rash anger that leads him to lose his temper. He is obviously very lonely and unhappy with his marriage to Judy Trenor, and he tries to find companionship with Lily Bart in his otherwise loveless life. But its implications are very detrimental to Lily Bart's position in society.

The Bry fashion show presents an interesting question of reality in the novel. Lily's pose in the tableaux vivants is virtually perfect; everyone admires her as if she were a beautiful work of art to be studied. In her recreation of Joshua Reynolds' 'Mrs. Lloyd', Lily makes a final attempt to present her 'real' self to Selden, and creates an image of herself as both beautiful and virtuous. Indeed, Selden himself perceives that he has finally glimpsed the 'real' Lily Bart. But if this is the 'real' Lily then, despite her good intention, she is once again reduced to merely an object of visual beauty. The fact that she has misplaced her intentions is, however, not her fault alone, but also the fault of the society in which she lives. Constrained by the monetary and emotional impoverishment of her life, Lily has adopted her society's image of women narrowly and literally: she has long practiced the art of making herself an exquisite decorative object. She has learned to evoke approval and appreciation in others by a subtle and ingenious series of graceful postures. It is art she has practiced so well and for so long that she can no longer conceive of herself as anything but those postures: she can formulate no other desire than the desire to be seen to advantage.

The role of acting is also vital in *The House of Mirth*, and it comes continuously. For example, no one at the dinner parties lets his/her true self emerge. Everyone acts to create a guise that will make others esteem them more. Thus, the Lily we see at the parties, like the Lily in the tableaux vivants, is a false representation of reality that does not accurately describe the truth. Indeed, all of Lily's decisions are based on how people will perceive her, as though she were always calculating the ideal way to make herself more popular, so Lily disguises her true self and her true personality. One of her only real gut instincts is her hatred of "dinginess" she inherited from her mother. Much of her acting is solely designed to avoid that dinginess, but at the same time, Lily must always live according to the rules of society. In keeping with the slavery-versus-freedom motif, Lily is a slave to acting a part that will make her liked.

Despite the prominence of acting in the novel, there are some moments when a character breaks out of the social norms of behaviour in order to discuss his/her emotions plainly. One such case is in chapter 13, when Gus Trenor tells Lily, "I know I'm not talking the way a man is supposed to talk to a girl - but hang it, if you don't like it you can stop me quick enough - you know I'm mad about you" (129). In this scene, Trenor breaks out of the way he is "supposed" to act towards Lily, which is a dangerous thing to do in such a judgmental society. In doing so, though, he opens a very large plot element, when he says to Lily that "the man who pays for the dinner is generally allowed to have a scat at table" (128). It becomes clear that Trenor was investing in the stock market not with Lily's money but with his own, and he was giving his profits to Lily. Lily begins to realize this as Trenor skirts around the issue. The implications for her are severe because she has been living and spending under the assumption that the money Trenor was giving her was in fact her own, not his.

Now, she feels a need to repay him financially, even though he seems to suggest that she can pay him back simply by spending large amounts of time with him.

Nevertheless, Lily wants to pay him back, even though there is no simple way for doing so because of the large sum of money involved. The predicament of this situation makes her realize that:

[...] a woman's dignity may cost more to keep 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 (149).

Lily's immediate resort is Selden but she soon realizes that "Selden's love could not be her ultimate refuge" (153), which leads to the question of what her ultimate refuge could be. Lily thinks of how all her problems could be brought to a close by drowning herself, but she decides against that in favour of recovery. The recovery Lily desires is one that is built on love, which means many things, including social admiration.

Like Lily, Selden also goes through an interesting emotional crisis. Selden sees Lily emerge from Trenor's house at night and thinks that the rumors about Lily and Trenor are true. Selden's fault lies in the fact that he thinks what has happened when in reality he knows nothing. As he leaves Monte Carlo and returns to Nice he asks himself, "What the deuce am I running away from?" (165), indicating that he cannot decide whether he should face Lily, or stay away from her. Selden cannot forget Lily in spite of his attempts to avoid her. When he sees Lily in Nice he is immediately captured by her beauty. He cannot avoid her. But Selden finds some changes in Lily. The change in Lily's nature is reflected in Selden's unconscious opinion of her: "He seemed to see her poised on the brink of chasm, with one graceful

foot advanced to assert her unconsciousness that the ground was failing here" (182). It is the metaphor for Lily falling from her heights and not even being aware of the fact.

Lily happens to possess Bertha Dorset's love letters to Lawrence Selden and resolves to use the letters she had purchased as a means of getting back at Mrs. Dorset for ruining her chances with Gryce, but Lily vacillates in her decision because of the moral question of blackmail involved. For Lily, to break the moral code that she has upheld means sinking to Bertha Dorset's level, a fact that Lily is unwilling to accept. Lily is also quite good at seeing the irony in her position: "It struck her with a flash of irony that she was indebted to Gus Trenor for the means of buying them [the letters]" (237). Lily recognizes it as distasteful that she is able to purchase her means of defeating Bertha Dorset with money gotten rather immorally.

Lily's cousin, Grace Stepney, plays a devilish role in damaging Lily's social position. The reason is very trivial: Grace has not been invited to one of Mrs. Peniston's infrequent dinner parties, and she believes that Lily has committed a heinous crime by excluding her. Grace poisons Mrs. Peniston against Lily by telling her that Lily is having an affair with Gus Trenor, a married man, and that Lily is extracting "material advantages" (110) from him. She also informs Mrs. Peniston about Lily's gambling habit and her debts. She even goes as far to telling an unfounded lie that "Judy Trenor has quarreled with her [Lily] on account of Gus" (112). Grace successfully brainwashes Mrs. Peniston into believing that Lily is involved in immoral acts. Mrs. Peniston is filled with resentment against Lily, for "It was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made" (112). Grace takes revenge the same way Bertha Dorset did for a perceived slight against her. One of Lily's of problems is that she is unable to take revenge the way the other women do

and therefore suffers for her immorality in spite of being the most virtuous of the entire group. Grace succeeds in turning Mrs. Peniston away from Lily and eventually disinheriting her. It is also in Grace's interest to do so, since she stands to inherit everything.

When Lily confesses her gambling debts and even admits to have learned a "dreadful lesson" (152), Mrs. Peniston reacts hysterically: "if you have run into debt, you must suffer the consequences . . . it's your foreign bringing-up - no one knew where your mother picked up her friends" (152). Lily behaves honestly and morally, that's why she dares to confess her weaknesses before her aunt and pleads for help to repay her debts. A highly conventional woman with Victorian moral attitude, Mrs. Peniston fails to comprehend Lily's position in a changing society. She even fails to play the role of Lily's guardian by not defending Lily against the charges of society. In fact, Mrs. Peniston has no real interest in Lily's fate; she only maintains the appearance of respectable woman by adopting Lily.

In her troubled time of financial need and moral dilemma, Simon Rosedale comes to Lily with an offer of marriage. It's a very tempting proposition for Lily because Rosedale's wealth could free her of her problems. Rosedale is quick to analyze Lily's dilemma and proposes her with a businessman's outlook:

You're not very fond of me – yet – but you're fond of luxury, and style, and amusement, and of not having to worry about cash. You like to have a good time, and not to have to settle for it; and what I propose to do is to provide for the good time and do the settling. (156).

It's a really difficult situation for Lily because though she needs money, she can't marry a man she does not love. But since she can't afford to offend Rosedale, she asks for time to think of his "kindness" (157). Though Lily manipulates the situation to her

advantage, it's a mistake of Lily not to accept Rosedale's offer to get what her goal is. She has already lost a chance with the Italian prince. She has also lost an opportunity with Percy Gryce by spending time with Selden rather than with him. Lily's indecision and inability to commit herself, as well as her incessant belief that she can "do better" (180), is ultimately what accounts for her failure to marry. Because she is intent on marrying not for love but for society, she would have been a great success if she had simply married any man of wealth when she had the chance.

One of Lily's weaknesses is that she believes others too easily, that's why she accepts Bertha's invitation to join her on a cruise to Mediterranean. Bertha uses Lily to distract her husband and involves herself in an extramarital affair with Ned Silverton. Lily even protects Bertha by discouraging George Dorset's attempts to divorce Bertha when he suspects Bertha of having extramarital affair. Dorset asks Lily to help him expose Bertha in public but Lily rejects it because she believes:

[...] all the disadvantages of such situation were for the woman...she was not fond of Bertha Dorset, but neither was she without a sense of obligation, the heavier for having so little personal liking to sustain it. Bertha had been kind to her, they have lived together, during the last months on terms of friendship. (178)

However, Bertha is jealous of Lily's success among the European aristocrats: Lily is appreciated by the European aristocrats while Bertha is ignored. The true mark of the irreversibility of Lily's social decline occurs when she is kicked off the yacht. Bertha Dorset publicly accuses Lily of having an affair with her husband. But Lily does not protest and threaten Bertha in return by revealing her love letters to Lawrence Selden. However, the reason lies in the fact that she is different from the social elite in precisely the way that she does not violate the moral codes. For Lily to resort to



blackmail would mean that she is no longer Lily. The irony of the situation is that Bertha's story is considered more believable than Lily's denial simply because Bertha is wealthier. In this upper-crust New York society, the truth is dependent on wealth rather than factual merit. As Lily analyses the situation: "it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story [than mine], because she has a big house and an opera-box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her" (197). This has some very dangerous implications in terms of power; Bertha has total control over Lily because of her wealth and status. Bertha's finances give her the means to throw Lily out of society and keep her out.

#### **LILY'S DEMISE: A FATAL RESULT OF MATERIALISM**

With the death of Mrs. Peniston, a pattern of rejection begins to develop around Lily. First, she is kicked out of high society by Bertha. Now, she has almost been kicked out of her own family by her late aunt, who disinherited her. But it had been "always understood that Mrs. Peniston was to provide handsomely for the niece; and in [Lily's] mind the understanding had long since been crystallized into fact" (194). Instead the treacherous Grace Stepney inherits everything. Lily has been provided only an amount of ten thousand dollars. After Lily has been disinherited, her relatives and friends start to avoid her. In Lily's words, her relatives "were afraid to snub [me] while they thought [I] was going to get the money – afterward they scuffed [me] as if I had the plague" (196). Lily no longer has society or her family to fall back on, that leaves her virtually no support except from Gerty Farish, and her continual support from Selden.

The successful incorporation of Wellington Brys into society by Carry Fisher serves as a model for how Lily's life ideally would have gone. In the beginning, the Brys were at the borders of high society. With little coaxing and some string-pulling

from Carry, they are eventually elevated to the position of the ideal couples in New York. The irony of the situation is that the Brys very eagerly welcome Lily's friendship in the beginning as a means of joining the high society, but after Bertha publicly humiliates Lily, they too start to avoid Lily. The Brys' successes in the stock market give them a chance to be assimilated into the elite group, whereas Lily's poor financial condition keeps her out of the same group.

Since Lily has reached on the verge of collapse, Carry Fisher appeals her to marry immediately. Carry does not even care who the husband is, provided he is of reasonable stature, like Rosedale. Carry recognizes Lily's position that Lily is no longer part of a family or social sphere, which leaves her floating with no real roots. A husband is the only way for Lily to regain a place and financial stability in society. Thus, the importance of marriage has changed for Lily. At the beginning of the novel, a marriage to a rich man would have given her boost into upper levels. Now, Lily needs a husband merely to survive and set a foot in society's door once again.

Lily rapidly descends from one rung of society to a lower rung. She joins the Gormers' circle, but Bertha Dorset again obstructs her progress and breaks her relation with Gormers by exercising her superior social powers and "insinuating horrors" (220) about Lily. Lily's state noticeably declines while Rosedale rises to the upper level. Lily realizes the nature of the change when she contemplates marrying him. Since Lily is no longer useful to Rosedale in a social context, Lily decides to rely on love to win him over. This is of course impossible; even Selden was able to prevent love for her from clouding his judgment, and a man such as Rosedale would never be so foolish as to put love before social standing. As Rosedale explicates the situation:

Last year I was willing to marry you, and you wouldn't look at me; this year - well, you appear to be willing. Now, what has changed in the interval? Your situation, that's all. (223)

Lily has declined to the point where she is no longer useful, and Rosedale has risen to the point where he does not need her. However, her beauty still attracts him, and his concession is to accept her as a wife provided she reestablish her ties with Mrs. Dorset. Lily, however, refuses to use Dorset-Selden letters in order to achieve this goal; she takes the moral high road and will suffer for it.

Lily tries to sustain herself by working as a secretary to Norma Hatch, a scandalous widow, but has to leave her job in order to avoid herself being involved in Mrs. Hatch's scandals. However, Lily discovers after having left Mrs. Hatch that it hardly matters whether she is there or not. She had no duties to perform and, long after she had left, those who wished to believe ill of her still thought she was working with Mrs. Hatch in order to prosecute a plan to debauch young Bertie Van Osburgh. To become a working girl is finally the only alternative left to Lily. But she becomes "an object of criticism and amusement to the other work-women" (249). However, outstandingly as she is at wearing hats, she cannot manage to assemble them. She is by her own account, "a very useless person" (270), simply unfit for survival in the competitive modern world. Lily tries to survive in the face of suffering. She acts stubbornly, insisting that she will eventually pay off all her debts even though they have been requited. Lily feels her financial losses deeply, but more importantly, she feels friendless. Lily's role as an actor in society is essentially over. She is no longer a classy woman in control of herself, but rather a lonely soul incessantly worried by money.

Reduced to a dingy life of boardinghouse, Lily finally decides to use Dorset-Selden letters for her social reestablishment. On the way to Bertha Dorset's house Lily makes her second unconventional visit to Lawrence Selden, and "the fact that...to attain her end, she must trade on his name, and profit by a secret of his past, chilled her blood with shame" (225). Selden acts toward her with restraint, but this time the restraint comes from old disillusion rather than from the habit of detachment. Lily is more changed of the two, for her body is wasted and her loneliness at being excluded from her social world is intensified by the sense of being shut out of his as well. She speaks to him directly and sincerely without her old light irony, thanking him for letting her see and know the folly of the house of mirth: "I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw on 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" (270). Lily's proof of her uncorrupted nature and her love for Selden becomes justified when she secretly drops the packet of letters in the fire. In so doing, Lily also sacrifices her only hope of being reestablished in the society. Lily has appropriately paid Selden her spiritual debt.

On the same evening Lily is also able to pay her financial debt to Trenor because of the chance arrival of the check for the total sum of her inheritance. This act relieves Lily from the burden of self-humiliation. Lily takes the calculated risk of an extra dose of sleeping drops to overcome the expected insomnia and mental anxieties about the material world. Lily's desire to escape the material world causes her to play with death, the only solution for a woman of her class who has been excluded from material world. Lily's death is intentional because Lily sees no way to get out of her current situation. The only thing Lily can imagine for herself is a long life of poverty and dinginess she has always hated, and only death could liberate her from this kind

of accursed life. From beginning to the end, Lily Bart is misinterpreted and ill-treated by her friends and relatives. Though Lily Bart never gives in her morality, she is accused of impropriety. However, to the end of her life, Lily keeps her morals and principles intact, though it means losing the things she aspires for. Thus, Lily Bart is a victim of her materialistic upbringing and the materialistic society in which she lived.

### **III.CONCLUSION**

*The House of Mirth* is the story of young Lily Bart and her tragic sojourn among the upper class of the turn-of-the century New York. It touches on the insidious effects of capitalism and social convention as well as on sexual and financial aggression to which women of independent nature, like Lily Bart, are exposed.

*The House of Mirth* explores in detail the complex relationships between vision, gender and desire in the emergent consumer culture of America. Visual relations are determined in *The House of Mirth* by the invisible laws of commodity exchange. The market figures in the text as an impersonal power, constituting the invisible referent of social relations. Most of the novel's action takes place in semipublic spaces of consumption and commercial amusement: in the lavish homes of the rich, in the opera hall, casinos, and fashionable restaurants. The market in *The House of Mirth* is an inescapable, controlling environment, which is largely controlled by men. The novel presents the marketplace as a space of male predation and female danger, especially sexual danger. Lily Bart's sentimental approach to the market and her negligence in the money matters as an impecunious single woman leaves her vulnerable to the lascivious designs of men like Gus Trenor and ultimately leads to her social downfall.

*The House of Mirth* is structured around the career of Lily Bart, a woman who is raised to use her beauty for economic gain. But Lily has an impulsive reticence to carry through with what this transaction actually requires of her – the exchange of sex for luxury. Lily Bart has an excellent character, but her society is hypocritical, showy and morally corrupted. Lily identifies with the money values of the society and is willing to work hard to acquire a secure place in it. But she is also aware that it is often ugly in its showy superficiality and that it is casually cruel for the sake of self-protection.

At the time the novel is set, women had very little means of earning a living. Working class women, of course, worked but middle and upper class women played a different role. They served the economy in more symbolic ways as symbols of status to show off their husbands' wealth and as social organizers. In both cases, women were obviously subservient to men. They must be married to play these roles in the unofficial economy. Their husbands were the only means of their financial and other needs. For a wealthy woman like Evie Van Osburgh, getting married is a matter of waiting until the right man comes along. For a poor woman like Lily Bart, who has very restrained source of income, getting married is a matter of serious pursuit. The failure to do so means living a life of dependency on capricious family members or living on her small income as Gerty Fairish does in much straightened conditions. Since Lily Bart has been raised to believe the supremacy of wealth, she decides that she cannot live like Gerty Farish. She becomes desperate by the time she is twenty nine to find a rich husband, no matter whether she likes him or finds him a horrible bore. She is ready to sacrifice her love for wealth. But when she is falsely accused of having an affair with a married man, the society begins to ostracize her. Lily tries to control her situation but her reluctance to compromise with the evil society further leads her social downfall. She becomes detached and alienated from the same society which she had always aspired to be a part. From a member of high class society she descends to a member of working class people. Unable to cope with her poor and miserable life, Lily commits suicide as a means of escaping the material world.

Thus Lily becomes a victim of the materialistic society which had produced her. Lily's vulnerability as a lonely woman in a highly materialistic society, her lack of financial security, her strong sense of morality and her reluctance to compromise with the selfish materialistic society leads to cause her social and physical downfall.

### Works Cited

- Adams, Hazard ed. *Critical Theory Since Plato*. Mary Wollstonecraft (398-394). Virginia Woolf (817). Simone de Beauvoir (993). Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers: Fort Worth; Philadelphia; San Diego; New York, Orlando; Austin; San Antonio; Toronto; Montreal; London; Sydney; Tokyo, 1971.
- Ahearn, Edward J. *Marx and Modern Fiction*. Yale University Press: London, 1989.
- Beer, Janet. Introduction. *The House of Mirth*. By Edith Wharton. Wordsworth Editions Limited: Cumberland House, Crib Street, Ware, Hertfordshire, 2002. XII.
- Chafetz, Janet Saltzman. *Masculine, Feminine or Human? (An Overview of the Sociology of Gender Roles)*. University of Hudson: F.E. Pecoek Publishers, Inc. 1998.
- Engels, Fredrerick. "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State". *Selected Works*. Ed. Eleanor Leacock. New York: International Publishers, 1972.
- Gargano, James W. *The House of Mith: Social Futility and Faith*. American Literature. 44 (1972):138-143.
- Guerin, Wilfred L., et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- High, Peter B. *An Outline of American Literature*. Longman: London and New York, 1986.
- Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1992.



- Nevius, Blake. *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fictions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953.
- Ruth, Sheila. *Issues in Feminism*. Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1980.
- Scott, Joan Wallah. *Feminism and History*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1996.
- Stuckey, W.J. *Edith Wharton*. *American Literature*. 115 (1908): 401-403.
- Trilling, Diana. *The House of Mirth Revisited*. *American Literature*. XXXII (1962-63): 205-210.
- Tuttleton, James W. *Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth*. *The Yale Review* 47 (1914).
- VanSpanckeren, Kathryn. *Outline of American Literature*. The United States Department of State, 1994.
- Wharton, Edith. *A Backward Glance*. Constable & Co.: London, 1972.
- Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death*. *American Literature*. XLVI (1974) 45-48.