

## **Book Review of “The House of Mirth” by Edith Wharton**

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### **Abstrak**

*Novel “The House of Mirth” ini merupakan novel karangan Edith Wharton. Novel ini menceritakan kisah seorang gadis, yang bernama Lily Bart, yang berkeinginan untuk memperbaiki status sosialnya karena kebenciannya kepada kemiskinan. Di dalam novel ini terdapat banyak isu yang dimunculkan, yaitu status sosial, budaya, ekonomi, dan cinta. Dalam final project ini penulis berusaha menganalisis mengenai tema, symbol, kelebihan dan kekurangan yang terdapat dalam buku ini, sehingga dapat menjadi referensi sebelum membacanya.*

Kata kunci: Edith Wharton, Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden, analysis, luxurious life, marriage.

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

*The House of Mirth* is one of the greatest Edith Wharton’s works. The novel is about the personal struggle to fit into society and, ultimately, to get married.

The form 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.

The novel also examines the long physical and mental decline of a young woman who, because of her own cowardice and indecision,

slips out of social prominence into poverty and dinginess. It presents a very harsh dose of reality and ends rather pathetically.

Then, it can perhaps best be viewed as an attempt to add a very dark truth to an otherwise optimistic genre, an attempt consistent with the literary spirit of the time in which Wharton was writing.

#### **1.2. The Objectives of the Study**

1.2.1. To analyze the theme of “*The House of Mirth*”

1.2.2. To analyze the symbol in the “*The House of Mirth*”

1.2.3. To analyze the characters in the “*The House of Mirth*”

1.2.4. To analyze the strenght of “*The House of Mirth*”

1.2.5. To analyze the weakness of “*The House of Mirth*”

#### **1.3. Edith Wharton Biography**

Edith Wharton is one of the major figures in American literary history. She was born in January 24, 1862 to George Frederic Jones and Lucretia Stevens Rhineland in New York City. She had two brothers, Frederic Rhineland and Henry Edward. Author of more than 40 volumes--novels, short stories, poetry, non-fiction, Wharton had a long and remarkable life.

In 1885, when she was 23, she married Edward (Teddy) Wharton, who was 12 years older. Although from a similar social class and background, he lacked her artistic and intellectual interests and she divorced him in 1913 after nearly 30 years of marriage.

Many of Wharton's novels are characterized by a subtle use of dramatic irony. Having grown up in upper-class pre-World War I society, Wharton became one of its most astute critics, in such works as *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*. In 1902 she built The Mount, her estate in Lenox, Massachusetts. There, Edith Wharton wrote several of her novels, including *The House of Mirth* (1905), the first of many chronicles of the nature of old New York, and entertained the cream of American literary society. In 1920 she wrote *The Age of Innocence* and won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1921, making Wharton the first woman to win the award. She also received the French Legion of Honor for her philanthropic work during World War I and in 1923 she became the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate from Yale.

Edith Wharton died in 1937 because of a stroke at the domaine *Le Pavillon Colombe*, her house on Rue de Montmorency in Saint-Brice-sous-Forêt, France. The street is today called rue Edith Wharton. She is buried in the American Cemetery in Versailles, France.

## 2. Summary

Lily Bart is an attractive 29 years old unmarried woman who lived in high class sociality. Since the death of her mother who

had intense hatred of the poorness, Lily began to live with her aunt, Mrs. Peniston. However, Lily spent most of her time staying at Bellomont, the home of wealthy and established Gus Trenor and his wife, Judy Trenor. At the Bellomont, Judy regularly threw extravagant parties that attended by most of high class people in New York. They always gambling at the party, which is being a problem for Lily because she had gambling addiction and could not stop gambling, even it ruined her finances. The reason she still not married was that she hope to marry a rich man to securing her place in society. Lily was actually in love with Lawrence Selden, a young lawyer, but unfortunately Selden did not have enough money to marry Lily, although Selden was also in love with Lily.

Lily was determined to marry Percy Gryce, but before she could, he got engaged to another woman. She needed cash to keep her going until she married, so she asked Gus Trenor to speculate on the Wall Street stock market for her. Gus agreed and it was worked, the money started to flow. Later Lily finds out that the money which speculated was not actually her money.

One day, Lily received an invitation from Bertha Dorset to join her and her husband George on a cruise in the Mediterranean. But later, Bertha accused Lily of having an affair with George and publicly disgraced her. Lily heads back to America when Mrs. Penniston died, and she only left Lily ten thousand dollars. Lily sank further and further into poverty, and then finally taking a job as a milliner (hat maker). She started to take a prescription drug called *chloral* to help her sleep at night. She waited desperately for her ten thousand dollar inheritance, but she know that she wanted to pay Gus Trenor back for the speculation he did for her, so that she can get out of his debt.

Lily returned home for the night to discover that her inheritance check had finally come. She wrote out a check to Gus Trenor for the nine thousand she owed him, put everything

in order, and take her *chloral*, more than the maximum allowed dosage, to help her sleep. Whether or not Lily intentionally committed suicide or accidentally overdoses is unclear.

The next morning, Selden woke up and decided that he is in love with Lily again. He rushed over to her apartment to propose, only to find that she was dead of an overdose.

### 3. Review

*The House of Mirth* is a love and social story, written by Edith Wharton to expose the social culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is one of the most popular Edith Wharton's novels. Although it was a very popular novel, it also had weaknesses. The writer had reviewed it, to analyze the novel about the themes, the symbols, the strengths and the weaknesses.

#### 3.1. Theme

- **The Safety of Love and Death**

In the novel, the author presents love and death as the only two safe places for a woman to be. Lily especially subscribes to this theory, feeling burdened by her debts and financial ruin and surrounded by loveless marriage. Love or death seems to be the only possibilities for salvation. In the story, Lily finds herself at a crossroads, either she can choose love, marry Selden, and find happiness without wealth; or she will find rest in the finality of death. Lily's obsession with wealth and luxury continually prevents her from accepting Selden's love, and so the safety love can offer is not a viable choice for her. She is left with death as her only option.

- **Marriage**

Marriage is the duty and goal for Lily Bart, a single girl who lives with the social elite in New York in the late 1800s. Lily struggles with the novel's central conflict: marry for love, or marry for money.

- **Wealth**

Money will take you fairly far in the elite social circles of New York in the late 1800s presented in the novel. The extravagant displays of wealth in this novel should shock and amaze us. In the novel, poverty is having only a few servants in your mansion at a time. Or, at least, that is what society elite consider to be poverty. Millionaires aside, the novel also glimpses into the world of the working class, who earn less in a year than the rich throw away as dinner scraps.

- **Women and Femininity**

Gender roles are clearly established in this novel. Men bring home the money, and women look pretty and keep tabs on the couple's social currency. Though they keep up good appearances, women in this novel can certainly be vicious, at least to each other. Married women guard their husbands carefully, both their affections and their money. Interestingly, however, it is the women who have the affairs in this novel, often with younger, less wealthy men who live off the married women's money in exchange for company.

#### 3.2. Characters

There are several main characters of the novel; the writer will explain characters that have the most important role in the novel, such as:

- **Lily Bart**

The protagonist of the novel, Lily Bart, is a beautiful young woman searching for the right husband who will give her the money and status to remain in upper-class New York social circles. The reason she still not married is that she hope to marry a rich man to securing her place in society, but she passes up numerous chances and always thinking that she can do better in another chance. The novel follows a two-year period in Lily's life as she moves from party to party, struggling to stay within the favor of the wealthy while mounting larger and larger debts.

Unfortunately, her financial situation forces her to try some risky investing with the help of a married man, which ends up backfiring and resulting in her being cast out of the circles she so desperately wishes to join. When her family rejects her for the same untrue rumors, Lily is forced to join the middle class, working as a hat maker. Her slide into poverty and depression continues, and eventually, Lily takes too large a dose of sleeping medication, and dies in her sleep. Her focus on financial success never allows her to truly consider a marriage to Selden, her truest friend and most ideal match.

- **Lawrence Selden**

Selden is a lawyer by profession, but he is not particularly wealthy, which prevents Lily from marrying him even though they love one another. Throughout the novel, Selden struggles between his desire to remain detached from society and his wish to court Lily and convince her to marry him. At the end of the novel, he resolves finally to propose marriage to Lily, but his decision comes too late, he finds Lily dead in her apartment.

- **Gus Trenor**

Trenor, the husband of Judy, is a lonely, moody man who has a particular liking for Lily even though he is married. Lily asks him to invest her money for her in the stock market. Instead, Trenor invests his own money and gives Lily the profits. When Lily finds out that the money is not truly hers, she resolves to pay Trenor back rather than agree to be his friend.

- **Judy Trenor**

Judy, Lily's close friend, is the social overseer of the events at the Bellomont. She regularly hosts extravagant party and gives Lily a place to stay for up to weeks at a time.

- **Percy Gryce**

Gryce is a young, rich, eligible bachelor on whom Lily sets her sights early in the novel. Unfortunately, just as Lily decides she must marry him, he announces his engagement to Evie Van Osburgh. He is another missed opportunity for Lily.

### **3.3. Symbol**

In *Sound and Sense*, Laurence Perrine (1982) maintains that “A symbol maybe roughly defined as something that means more than what it is” (74). “Symbols vary in the degree of identification and definition that their author give them” (84). “The symbol is the richest and at the same time the most difficult of the poetical figures” (85).

A symbol has a highly suggestive image. An image transferred by something that stands for or represents something else, like flag for country, or autumn for maturity. Symbol can transfer the ideas form in the image without stating them.

The author use several symbols for deputize some sentences in the novel, to makes the reader understand the story more deeply. The symbols that the author uses such as:

- **The Furies**

The furies were mythical creatures in ancient Greece who embodied vengeance. Basically, if you did something wrong, these scary, winged creatures would hunt after you for the rest of your life. In the story, the author symbolizes Lily's fear because of her debt as the furies.

”. . . She had once picked up, in a house where she was staying, a translation of the Eumenides, and her imagination had been seized by the high terror of the scene where Orestes, in the cave of the oracle, finds his implacable huntresses asleep, and snatches an hour's repose. Yes, the Furies might sometimes sleep, but they were there, always

there in the dark corners, and now they were awake and the iron clang of their wings was in her brain . . .” (156)

This is Lily's reaction after she flees Trenor's house late at night and finds herself compromised and in despair.

“Oh, Gerty, the Furies---you know the noise of their wings---alone, at night, in the dark? But you don't know---there is nothing to make the dark dreadful to you---” (172).

Lily clearly identifies herself with Orestes, a man who gets punished by the furies in ancient Greek mythology.

“Lily went up to her own room and bolted the door. She was trembling with fear and anger---the rush of the Furies' wings was in her ears. She walked up and down the room with blind irregular steps. The last door of escape was closed---she felt herself shut in with her dishonour.” (182)

“In the solitude of her own room she was brought back to a sharp contemplation of facts. Her daylight view of them necessarily differed from the cloudy vision of the night. The winged furies were now prowling gossips who dropped in on each other for tea. But her fears seemed the uglier, thus shorn of their vagueness; and besides, she had to act, not rave. For the first time she forced herself to reckon up the exact amount of her debt to Trenor.” (178)

Lily has identified the furies as the sense of obligation she feels to pay Trenor back his nine thousand dollars. That was why the sound of the wings subsides when she has hope of getting the money from her aunt, and comes back with a fury when Mrs. Peniston refuses to help. Running away from New York to Europe means Lily is actually taking the same course of

action that Orestes did; trying to flee the furies. But it does not work. Lily returns to New York to find that, sadly, her debt did not magically disappear while she was gone. She assumes the obligation to pay it back once more.

The furies are mentioned again when Selden offers Lily a solution about her debt:

“She was quite sure that he would come and see her again, and almost sure that, if he did, she could bring him to the point of offering to marry her on the terms she had previously rejected. Would she still reject them if they were offered? More and more, with every fresh mischance befalling her, did the pursuing furies seem to take the shape of Bertha Dorset; and close at hand, safely locked among her papers, lay the means of ending their pursuit. The temptation, which her scorn of Rosedale had once enabled her to reject, now insistently returned upon her; and how much strength was left her to oppose it?” (305)

Lily is no longer concerned about having to pay back her debt, she was concerned that she will cop out, use the letters, and marry Rosedale for the quick solution. As Lily's perceptions and attitude have changed, so have changed the novel's symbols and the ideas they represent.

#### • Dating and War

In this novel, the author means dating is not just a game, it is also war. Lily thinks of Percy Gryce as her prey and organizes a method of “attack” while on the train to Bellmont. Her beauty is described as a “weapon”.

“To attack society collectively, when one's means of approach are limited to a few acquaintances, is like advancing into a strange country with an insufficient number of

scouts; but such rash tactics have sometimes led to brilliant victories, . . .” (138)

- **Water**

The author uses water symbols like "flood," "water," "drown," "submerge," "sink," "float," and "ocean" in the story. The author uses water symbols to describe sadness and sorrow.

“She knew that she hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch.” (42)

Think of the image of drowning in a great flood of water as a sort of despair. In Lily’s mind, the greatest despair, has to do with poverty. To Lily, the flood of water is "dinginess."

“Over and over her the sea of humiliation broke---wave crashing on wave so close that the moral shame was one with the physical dread . . . His touch was a shock to her drowning consciousness.” (154)

Lily is despairing once again, and once again that despair is described as drowning in a flood of violent waters. Except, this time, it has nothing to do with money. Lily is feeling a flood of shame and immorality, not of "dinginess."

“. . . it was all as meaningless as the boom of waves in a drowning head, and she felt, as the drowning may feel, that to sink would be nothing beside the pain of struggling to keep up.” (165)

Gerty Farish realizes that Selden is in love with Lily, not her.

“Alone with her cousin's kiss, Gerty stared upon her thoughts. He had kissed her before---but not with another woman on his lips. If he had spared her that she could have drowned quietly, welcoming the dark flood as it submerged her. But now the flood was shot through with glory, and it was harder to drown at sunrise than in darkness.” (169)

“Well, he had strength for both---it was her weakness which had put the strength in him. It was not, alas, a clean rush of waves they had to win through, but a clogging morass of old associations and habits, and for the moment its vapours were in his throat. But he would see clearer, breathe freer in her presence: she was at once the dead weight at his breast and the spar which should float them to safety.” (167)

### 3.4. The Strengths of the Book

- **Detail Description**

The writer found that the book is more than enough to describe how the time, situation, environment, and everything has been described in very extremely details. So that we are able to feel the situation in the book and imagine as clearly. We can find it in the early of the book mostly in the chapter I and commonly in all chapter at the beginning, middle, and end.

“They both laughed, and he knelt by the table to light the lamp under the kettle, while she measured out the tea into a little tea-pot of green glaze. As he watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails and the sapphire bracelets slipping over the wrist . . .” (9)

“The door opened, and Gerty, dressed and hated, entered with a cup of tea. Her face looked sallow and swollen in the dreary light, and her dull hair shaded imperceptibly into the tones of her skin.” (177-178)

“It was a day in late April, and the sweetness of spring was in the air. It mitigated the ugliness of the long, crowded thoroughfare, blurred the gaunt roof-lines, threw a mauve veil over the discouraging perspective of the side-streets, and gave a touch of poetry to the delicate haze of green that marked the entrance to the Park.” (307)

- **Morality**

The novel presents an antithesis between money and morality. Main character Lily Bart experiences a transformation through the course of the novel from materialistic and amoral to poverty hatred but sensible. Many of the novel's conflict-ridden decisions come down to a question of priorities: be good, or be wealthy. It's clear from that the author condones the former as the better choice.

### 3.5. The Weaknesses of the Book

- **Gambling**

The story described that there are extravagant parties that throws regularly and attended by most of high class people in New York. They always gamble at the party. And the novel also explained that Lily, the protagonist, has gambling addiction which brings her to the dinginess. So that, the writer thinks the book is not good for children.

- **Unclear Explanation**

The author put an unclear explanation to the story, which will be difficult to the readers to know the meaning about the

story without find out about the explanation first.

The unclear explanation in this novel is Greek mythological story that the author uses to symbolize the situation of the protagonist Lily Bart who ruined her life with several debts.

“ . . . She had once picked up, in a house where she was staying, a translation of the Eumenides, and her imagination had been seized by the high terror of the scene where Orestes, in the cave of the oracle, finds his implacable huntresses asleep, and snatches an hour's repose. Yes, the Furies might sometimes sleep, but they were there, always there in the dark corners, and now they were awake and the iron clang of their wings was in her brain . . . ” (156)

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The furies were mythical creatures in ancient Greece who embodied vengeance. Basically, if you did something wrong,

these scary, winged creatures would hunt after you for the rest of your life. The go-to ancient text here is a tragic play by the Greek playwright Aeschylus, called "Eumenides". In it, a man named "Orestes" is relentlessly pursued by the furies as punishment. Eumenides means "friendly ones" and refer to the furies.

#### 4. Conclusion

The book is the story of Lily Bart, a 29 years old woman who lived in the high class society. She wants to marry a wealthy man to save her from her debts and have better social status. The novel is about the personal struggle to fit into society and, ultimately, to get married.

The book contain a strenght, in the details description. The book is more than enough to describe how the time, situation, environment, and everything has been described in very extremely details. So that we are able to feel the situation in the book and we are able to imagine as clearly.

The book also has the weaknesses, such as gambling addiction. For those who are still under 18 years old, it is not recommended. There is also an unclear explanation which makes the reader must find out by themselves.

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