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The House of Mirth

by

Edith Wharton

1905



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The novel is set mainly in New York, but a few chapters are set in a country estate, Bellomont, owned by the Trenors, and a brief episode is set in Monte Carlo. The action takes place during the.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lily Bart - a woman born into the social circles of the old rich in New York, but whose own family has lost its fortune and left her with values that keep her attaining to gain entry into the inner circles through.....

Lawrence Selden - a young man who is also born into this class of New York society, but whose family, like Lily's had lost most of its fortune. He is a lawyer and, as a man, is able.....

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gertrude "Gerty" Farish - cousin of Selden, who with "a quickening intelligence of the heart" is the person in the novel who looks after women who have fallen through the.....

Mrs. Julia Peniston - Lily's widowed paternal aunt, who, Lily says, is "full of copy-book axioms" that only apply to conduct in the 1850s. She "belonged to the class of old New....."

Dillworth - an ex-suitor of Lily's whose mother packed him off to India.

Mr. Simon Rosedale - a man whom Lily Bart meets outside Selden's apartment. He owns the apartment building. He is a Jew and Wharton's portrait of him is anti-Semitic. He is.....

Jack Stepney - a cousin of Lily Bart who paid a debt he owed to Mr. Rosedale by

Mrs. Judy Trenor - a leader of the social scene of the old rich in New York, described as a "tall fair woman, whose height just saved her from redundancy." She is Lily's friend for a time, but.....

Additional characters are discussed in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist of a story is the main character, who traditionally, undergoes some sort of change. He or She must usually overcome some opposing force. In this novel the protagonist is Lily Bart, a woman born into New York's old rich society, but whose family's.....

Antagonist - The antagonist of a story is the character that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. On one hand, the antagonist is Lily Bart's double nature she desires luxury, but she is not able to sell herself to win it. On the other hand and more pervasively, the antagonist of the novel is.....

Climax - The climax of a story is the major turning point that determines the outcome of the plot. It is the point to which the rising action leads. The novel climaxes when Gus Trenor, a married.....

Outcome - also known as the resolution or denouement, this is the place in the plot where the action is resolved or clarified. Lily is ostracized from society and disinherited by her.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The House of Mirth is divided into two books of roughly equal length, with Book I being thirty pages longer. In the beginning of Book I, the protagonist Lily Bart is twenty-nine years old and recognizing that she is on the verge of losing her powers to stay in society by virtue of her looks and charm alone. She needs to get married quickly. The course of Book I describes Lily's problems in reaching this goal. By its end, Lily has survived an attempted rape which nevertheless hurts her reputation and causes her to lose the esteem of

Lawrence Selden and is hopelessly in debt. Book II, begins in Monte Carlo with further and irrecoverable scandal, moves to New York and further debt. It ends in poverty, loneliness, and an accidental death that could easily be called a suicide.

In chapter 1, Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden happen to meet each other at the train station. She is waiting for the next train going out the countryside where she plans to spend the week at the Trenors' house party. She asks Selden to spend the time with her as she waits. They go out of the station and, after some discussion despite the unconventionality of the choice, decide to go to his apartment in an all-men's apartment building. When she is leaving his building to go back to the station, she runs into Simon Rosedale, a very wealthy man who is trying to get into society. In her flustered state at being caught coming out of a man's apartment building, she makes up an obvious lie and then refuses to let him drive her to the station.

In chapter two, Lily worries about her poor strategy in dealing with Simon Rosedale. She knows she could have easily told him the truth and avoided looking guilty. Moreover, she could have let him take her to the station and flattered him out of using the information against her. On the train, Lily arranges herself to look attractive. Mr. Percy Gryce gets on board and she manages to get him to sit with her. She is very careful in her strategy of listening to him and talking to him. He is a very boring young man, but very wealthy. She has decided to try to marry him. When she runs out of things to talk about, she brings up the subject of Americana, his hobby. Just as she has him fascinated with her, Mrs. Bertha Dorset gets on the train and interrupts their conversation.

In chapter three, Lily is going upstairs after having played bridge until very late. She has lost a good deal of money. She looks down at the party and sees Bertha Dorset is pulling Percy Gryce off to the side. She is only slightly worried about Mrs. Dorset's powers to ruin her chances with him. In her room, she thinks of how boring Percy Gryce is, but thinks that the alternative to marrying him is living as her friend Gerty Farish lives, in a tight, close apartment. She thinks she cannot stand to live without luxury. She realizes that lately her hostesses are making her pay her way at their parties by doing secretarial work, entertaining boring husbands, and playing bridge. She sits down to do her finances and realizes she only has twenty dollars left. When she undresses for bed, she sees in the mirror that she has acquired some lines on her face. She thinks of her mother and father. Her mother was a determined socialite, overspending every thing her father made or didn't make. Her father was a driven businessman who finally went broke and died. Her mother's idea of life was that if one didn't have the nicest things, that one was living like a pig. Lily got the idea from her that being poor was a matter of choice and poor taste. When Lily's mother died also, Lily's relatives had gathered and Mrs. Peniston, an aunt, had agreed to try Lily for a year. She had liked Lily a great deal, but did not give her a regular income, only occasional lavish gifts.

In chapter four Lily must help Mrs. Trenor with secretarial work. She tells Mrs. Trenor she is confident that she has won Percy Gryce. Mrs. Trenor wants to call Lawrence Selden to come and distract Mrs. Dorset, but Lily insists that it isn't necessary. Out in the garden later that morning, Lily is feeling.....

THEMES

MAIN THEME

The main theme of *The House of Mirth* is the economic position of women in upper class U.S. society at the beginning of the century. Denied legitimate means of self-support, women were.....

MINOR THEME

One of the minor themes of the novel is the character portraiture of Lily Bart as she struggles between her society's money-oriented values an inherent sense of decency which keeps her from.....

MOOD

The mood of *The House of Mirth* is lightly ironic up until the last few chapters when it becomes sentimental.

The narrator maintains a fine balance between an ironic portrayal of her.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862 to a wealthy New York family. Her mother was Lucretia Rhineland Jones and her father was George Frederic Jones. Her family was part of a closely knit social circle that included all the oldest and wealthiest families of New York. Edith was raised like all girls of her class to get married. She had her formal "coming out" in 1885 and soon after she married, but unhappily. Her husband was Edward Wharton, an older man from a wealthy Boston family. He developed a mental disorder and had a series of emotional breakdowns until he was completely insane. Edith Wharton gradually began to write short fiction during these years. She published her first short story in 1889. Her first book was a popular treatise on interior decoration. Then she came out with a collection of short stories and later, a novel, *The Greater Inclination* (1889). She wrote about her novel's success years later in her autobiography it "broke the chains that had held me so long in a kind of torpor." She wrote two more novels and published another collection of short stories before *The House of Mirth* came out in 1905.

In 1913, she divorced husband. From that time forward, Edith Wharton lived in France where she had a villa not far from Paris. Her best known short novel, *Ethan Frome* (1911) departs from.....

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Edith Wharton wrote in a style called social realism. The proponents of social realism are very varied, ranging from Mark Twain to Henry James, from William Dean Howells to Sinclair Lewis. Literary realism, like all styles of literature arose out of a social moment, a historical context, and its proponents rarely agreed on what constituted realism. William Dean Howells, influential because an editor, wanted his colleagues to write of the "smiling aspects of life," not the grubby world of prostitutes and melodramas, and so he inspired a generations of younger writers like Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser to do just that and so we have novels like *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets*, and *Sister Carrie*. Edith Wharton, though, not averse to tackling the frowning aspects of life, is much closer to William Dean Howells in literary taste than she is to Crane or Dreiser. Her closest ally among the realists was Henry James. There is a famous story of literary collaboration and advice here as with many writers. When Henry James read Wharton's novel

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

BOOK 1

CHAPTER 1

Summary

Selden is in Central Station when he sees Lily Bart. She is looking as if she is not in a hurry and he is curious about what is keeping her in the busy train station. He always likes to speculate about what Lily Bart is up to. He decides to walk past her to see if she stops him. She does and says she needs him to rescue her. She gives him a long story about having been on her way out to the Gus Trenors' at Bellomont when a series of accidents made her miss her train and now she is waiting for two hours for the next one.

Selden finds Lily Bart amusing. He is out of her league as a suitor so he doesn't mind spending time with her. She asks him to take her somewhere for tea. As he walks beside her, he notices how well she maintains her looks and compares her favorably with other women they pass. He thinks of her as "highly specialized." He thinks of her as if she were some kind of product that had cost a lot to make, "that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her." He wonders for a moment if her beauty isn't like some kind of fine glaze covering a vulgar clay, but then decides that a coarse texture won't take a high finish.

As they walk down the street, he suggests a cafe, but she rejects it as having too many boring people in it. They come upon a building, The Benedict, which he says is his own apartment building. He invites her up. She blushes, but then says she would like to. Selden thinks her blush is artfulness, not innocent or

spontaneous. The apartment is empty. They have tea together and discuss several things. Lily says it is terrible to be a woman--a marriageable one--because she does not have the freedom to have an apartment of her own. Only governesses or widows can have that kind of independence. Selden thinks of Gerty Farish, his cousin, who has an apartment of her own, but Lily dismisses Gerty as unmarriageable. Lily realizes Gerty is his cousin and apologizes. She says Gerty likes to be good and she, Lily, likes to be happy.

Next Lily asks Selden why he never comes to call at her house. She says that even if they could not make a marriage match, he could come as a friend. Selden is wondering all the while why Lily is being so flirtatious with him. He wonders if she can be anything but flirtatious. Lily tells him she wants a friend with whom she can get real honest opinions. She hopes he can be that kind of friend. She tells him she is under a lot of pressure to marry. He asks why she doesn't just do it to get it over with since it is her vocation (her job or calling). She tells him she has the disadvantages of being very poor and very expensive at the same time. Selden remembers a suitor named Dillworth. Lily says Dillworth's mother didn't approve of her and sent Dillworth to India.

They smoke cigarettes and Lily looks over his books asking him questions about the price of books and the price of Americana. He wonders about the topic, but doesn't think too much of it. Selden is a lawyer. He says he doesn't mind his work and he would never marry to get out of it. Lily thinks of the difference between men and women. A man can be unfashionable and still be invited to the social events of the New York elite, but a woman must maintain a high level of fashion or she will be dropped immediately.

Lily realizes it is late and takes her leave. She insists on going by herself. On the way out a woman janitor gawks at her and she feels upset. She wonders if the woman was astonished by her beauty or was comparing her to other women who had visited Selden's apartment before. When she gets downstairs and out the door she runs into Mr. Rosedale, a man she finds annoying. He clearly intimates that she has been inside the apartment house--one which houses only bachelors. She slides out from under his questions and jumps into a cab.

Notes

Wharton accomplishes a great deal in the first chapter in setting up the context of the story to unfold. Lily Bart is described as a commodity who is uncomfortable in that position. As a young woman of the upper class who nevertheless has no fortune, it is Lily's life goal to get a husband. Her life is made up of a round of social events set up for that purpose. She is now twenty-nine years old and clearly on the verge of desperation in a search for a suitable husband. She wants independence, but is not willing to sacrifice her social place for the life of an independent woman. The only example of an independent woman she can think of, Gerty Farish, is shabby and socially isolated. Instead of choosing Gerty's way toward independence, Lily seems to have set her sights on the power play of gender relations to get what independence women are allowed at the turn of the century.

Selden is a man who seems to exist on the edge of the social circles in which Lily travels. This makes a similarity between him and Lily. Yet he is in a more comfortable position, because, as a man, he has his independence already, he has a profession--the law--and he needn't marry any time soon. His marginal position by virtue of his low income enables him to look with some irony at the social maneuverings of the center, and he looks at Lily from the comfortable position of a spectator.

CHAPTER 2

Summary

When she gets into the hansom cab, Lily goes over the flaws in her encounter with Mr. Rosedale. If only she had told him the truth, she would not be in trouble. Telling him she had been visiting her tailor at an apartment house for bachelors makes her seem guilty. On top of that mistake, she had snubbed him when he had asked her to let him drive her to the station. She had snubbed him before. He was trying to find his way into the elite

social circles of the old rich in New York and was having a great deal of difficulty doing so. Lily's cousin, Jack Stepney, had tried to pay a debt to Mr. Rosedale by inviting him to social functions. Lily usually acted very kindly to strangers at these functions, but had been unable to do so with Mr. Rosedale and her snub had been recognized by all the people at the party. Soon Mr. Rosedale was regarded with contempt by all the major hostesses.

On the train, Lily sets herself up in her seat in a charming way hoping to find some young man to exercise her charms on. She sees Mr. Percy Gryce, a wealthy young man who is also invited to the country party, and who is very shy. She contrives to get him to sit with her and when the conversation begins to get boring, she brings up the topic of Americana. Percy Gryce loves Americana, but no one is interested in talking to him about it. Lily has just gotten some facts about it out of Selden so is able to impress Percy Gryce with a sense of her real interest in the subject. His late uncle left him a huge collection of Americana and the Gryce collection is often mentioned in catalogues of Americana. Lily calculates every action in her dealings with Percy Gryce. She has heard his mother talk when she has visited Lily's aunt, Mrs. Peniston and so she knows what kind of people the Gryces are. She tries to be somewhat domestic and to listen to him submissively.

Lily is annoyed to be interrupted by the arrival of Mrs. George Dorset, a woman who makes a big fuss when she gets onto the train of sitting with Lily and Percy. When Mrs. Dorset asks Lily for a cigarette, Lily sees that Percy is shocked, so she acts as if she has never smoked and that the question is ludicrous.

Notes

Chapter two switches to Lily Bart's consciousness. She seems always to be calculating the effects of her actions on her future prospects. It is clear that Lily Bart is in a very tenuous social position as an unmarried woman of no fortune who is twenty-nine years old. Her encounter with Mr. Rosedale bothers her a great deal since she has been caught in a lie which she needn't have told and since she couldn't bring herself to flatter him by letting him take her to the railway station. In this encounter we learn a great deal about Lily. She is calculating in her dealings with all people, always looking for a way to get her advantage, but she is also hindered in these calculations by a sort of moral reticence to subject herself to too much indignity. It seems that if she is essentially to sell herself in marriage to anyone who is rich enough and has the right social credentials, she would have to give up her high standards. Yet, she doesn't seem to be able to. She is not only calculating, then, but also intelligent and perceptive, more so than most of the people of her social circle.

The contrast between Lily and Percy Gryce shows up the contradiction between her financial prospects and her moral or intellectual nature. Percy is the perfect match in all the usual ways--money and social credentials--but he is a bore. Lily knows this and attempts to catch him anyway, but.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Lily Bart - Lily Bart is both a victim of her upbringing and her society and a shaper of her own sorry destiny. In this mix lies Wharton's realism. While being careful to show Lily as a person conditioned by her upbringing to use her beauty and charm to attract men for marriage and to marry only for money, she is also a person who is making active decisions.

On the side of social conditioning and social pressure, Lily Bart's most immediate influence is her mother. Mrs. Bart always spent above her means, made her husband feel lowly for suggesting that she do otherwise, and considered poverty to be nothing more than poor taste. She seems to have been a rather heartless person. When her husband's business fails, she treats him as a nonentity until he.....

Lawrence Selden - He doesn't have a great many scenes in the novel, but he plays a large role in the moral landscape of the novel. He could be seen as the star-crossed lover of Lily Bart, but he doesn't fit that romantic role very well. Wharton's commitment to realism prevents her from painting him as a romantic hero, or even

as an entirely good figure. Lawrence Selden is in roughly the same economic shape as Lily Bart, but he enjoys the privileges of a man in his time. He has earning potential as a lawyer and therefore has no pressing need to marry for money. Men in his society are also not expected to be decorative as women are and therefore don't have to spend so much money on clothes. He can live very comfortably in his.....

Gerty Farish - She is a woman who is closely connected to the old wealthy families and is occasionally invited out of a sense of charity to their functions. She is Lawrence Selden without the income from his law practice and she is Lily Bart without her willingness to jump through hoops to keep getting invited to social events and without Lily's beauty. Gerty Farish is often treated as a sort of caricature in the novel. Edith Wharton saves her from such a fate at the climax of the novel when her self-effacing good-heartedness fails her and she falls for Lawrence Selden. When she realizes he doesn't love her back, but.....

Carrie Fisher - She represents a successful Lily Bart. She recognizes all that she must do to make a living and she does so with a great deal of finesse as well as bemusement. She plays a minor role in the novel, but is quite important to the larger concerns of the novel. She shows one more position of women in the society. She is a divorced woman who must earn her living. She does so by helping people of

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Edith Wharton plots *The House of Mirth* on a series of encounters set in vividly distinct social settings. The first social setting is Lawrence Selden's apartment at the Benedict and the meeting is between him and Lily Bart. The second is the Trenors' country house during a week-long party. The encounter is between Lawrence Selden and Lily Bart. In later scenes in the novel, Lily thinks back on these two scenes as the ironic parallel they present to the situation she is in presently. For instance, she takes.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The economic position of women at the turn of the century is the central concern of *The House of Mirth*. Edith Wharton structures her novel around the career of Lily Bart, a woman who is raised to use her beauty for economic gain, but who has an impulsive reticence to carry through with what this transaction actually requires of her--the exchange of sex for luxury. Wharton described the subject of her novel as the superficial New York society. She wrote that it was a difficult subject for a novel since it had such little depth. The solution was show the society in relation to one of its members. She wrote, "a frivolous.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Examine the characterization of one of the social climbers of the novel (Mrs. Bry, Mrs. Gormer, Norma Hatch, or Simon Rosedale). Does Wharton give them depth or are they caricatured?
2. Look at the scenes between Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden. Do these scenes function mainly to comment on action or do they also forward action?
3. What kind of lover/husband would Lawrence Selden be?

What does Lawrence Selden's insistence that he is merely a spectator mean in relation to his ability to judge Lily's morality?.....

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