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In Sympathy: How to Read—and View—Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*

Edith Wharton, though a critically acclaimed author, is both misunderstood and under-represented in popular culture. This is particularly evident in the paucity of film and television adaptations of her work. Her novels about the lavish lifestyles of the New York upper classes brought her fame, but they have yet to be revisited well on the big screen. Although the film adaptation of her novel *The House of Mirth* (Terence Davies, 2000) received favorable reviews from critics and several notable awards, it is not remembered much. Nor do people—especially younger generation of readers, read Wharton anymore. Many people are unaware of her name.

Ever since I took a course on Wharton last year, I have wondered why this is the case. Her stories are character-driven, with plotlines tightly woven around upper class society’s rigid standards in turn-of-the-century New York. Immediately I realized how unusual Wharton is as an author; she stands at the edge of her social class and looks in, using her own experiences as fodder for her novels. In *The Cambridge Companion to Wharton*, Millicent Bell mentions how Wharton saw herself as “an intellectual, interested in her culture in a broad sense” (15). Wharton was not as interested in partaking in the goings-on of her society as much as she was in observing and dissecting the mannerisms of her culture, as we can see in *The House of Mirth*. She uses these mannerisms and other forms of behavior to comment on the upper classes of early 20th century New York. Her novels are thus a source of history, providing insight into the way people from the upper classes interacted with each other and those of lower status. They also

offer some understanding of what people yearned for during her time. Wharton's novels are tragedies, but more importantly, they are commentaries on the world of the elite rich and, even more broadly, on how people behave in the face of social restraints.

And yet, Wharton remains neglected by the film industry. I have determined that the cause of this is due to the nature of her characters: she presents readers with what seem to be unsympathetic figures. The main character of *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart, resembles many of Wharton's characters; their lives all revolve around being careful to not violate the rules of their social class while at the same time pursuing what they secretly want for themselves. This makes them seem shallow and materialistic, cowardly and deceitful: in short, characters we as readers are not inclined to like.

Arguably, feeling sympathy for a character is the essence of enjoying a good book. Without a connection to the main protagonist, readers often find it hard, if not impossible, to enjoy a novel. And Wharton doesn't make it easy for us to feel compassion for her characters. In his introduction "Edith Wharton and the Problem of Sympathy", Jonathan Franzen writes, "Without sympathy, whether for the writer or for the fictional characters, a work of fiction has a very hard time mattering" (vii). He is correct in that authors must present characters in sympathetic situations if readers are to identify with the stakes and consequences of their actions. The way in which Wharton writes her novels, however, makes it challenging for readers to connect with her characters.

Through careful reading, I have discovered four main reasons for why this is so, all of which I explore in this thesis. Firstly, her characters are terribly affluent. Given their great wealth and status, Wharton's characters' face problems that don't seem to relate to the issues that the average contemporary reader faces. In addition, her characters suffer from snobbery. Lily is

repulsively snobbish towards the lower classes, especially at the beginning of the novel. Thirdly, Wharton's characters are more emotionally reserved than we as readers would like. Lily does not express how she feels or tells others her thoughts, even if saying what is on her mind would mean the rescue of her sad state and difficult situation. She goes through her problems silent and unaccompanied, creating frustration for her readers; we simply cannot understand why she doesn't tell someone what ails her and asks for help. Lastly, Wharton's consistent use of irony creates a distancing effect between her characters and us. In *The House of Mirth* especially, her narrator makes observations about Lily that readers must often understand to mean the opposite; frequently, the narrator even mocks Lily.

To understand the affluence of Wharton's characters, an additional point must be made about the problematic background of Edith Wharton herself. Wharton was not the protagonist of a classic American rags-to-riches story. Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones, a member of the wealthy Jones family—where the saying “Keeping Up with the Joneses” comes from (Lee 15, 22). Her beliefs also did not match those of other writers at the time, as she was deeply conservative and opposed to the suffrage movement. It is easy to grasp why people would not want to read a woman's novel when they cannot agree with her beliefs. It is also difficult for readers to relate to a woman of such high birth who seems to have known little suffering. Bell writes, “[Wharton] pleased some readers, but by others she was considered too refined or too intellectual or too snobbish or not cheerful enough or too much like Henry James” (1). Wharton simply could not please her contemporaries—and she has fared little better with readers today. After all, how could she possibly understand the troubles many face in the middle and lower classes, and how could she translate those problems into effective ones within her novels?

With a graceful command, I argue throughout my thesis, Wharton eases her readers into all the problems they could possibly want to read about in a novel—if one is patient and allows her to reveal them. Readers start to feel sympathy for her characters when they learn their backstories and begin to understand the characters' reasons for doing what they do. Franzen also mentions another reason for why we should feel sympathy for characters like Lily Bart: “the alchemical agent by which fiction transmutes my secret envy or my ordinary dislike of ‘bad’ people into sympathy is *desire*” (xi). He continues, saying that Wharton generates our sympathy by creating a tenacious aspiration for her characters, so that, eventually, we come around to wanting what her protagonists want as well.

In *The House of Mirth*, our sympathy for Lily Bart begins when we learn that her parents were in a loveless marriage and that money was their main focus in life. As such, it became Lily's main focus as well, despite the fact that her parents' deaths related to the pressure of losing their wealth, because her father died of stress relating to losing money, with her mother following suit. Lily becomes even more sympathetic when readers realize how naïve she is about the cruelty of others, as she is easily tricked and cheated by a range of characters in the novel. She has no one in the upper classes to guide her, to help her maneuver in this world. Meanwhile, she has so many people wanting to watch her fall.

In all Wharton's novels, society is constructed as a lure character in and of itself, one that leads her characters to make immense life decisions based on their attempts to please society rather than their own hearts: what we can now relate to as “peer pressure.” Most humans have an innate desire to fit in, and when many are too afraid to stand out on their own and go their own way, they will concede to society's demands and give in to an unhappy life that is approved by others.

To understand and feel sympathy for Wharton's characters, one must understand the world in which they live and why it is so difficult for them to leave. With no parents, Lily Bart has only an aging aunt to guide her. Because of this, Lily's upper class society is the only home she has; by risking the loss of her money or marrying a poor man, she will essentially lose her sense of home. It is difficult for her to contemplate leaving the upper class that she belongs to because she is accustomed to that culture and wants to not only survive but also thrive in it. She cannot imagine being happy as a member of the lower class, despite her encounter with characters, such as Gerty Farish, who are, indeed, content living with far less than she does.

However, just because Lily is part of upper class society does not mean that she does not struggle with money; in fact, this is the main problem in the novel. As Franzen points out, another way in which Wharton allows her readers to feel for the plights of her woeful protagonists is that they struggle with money. "...But one of the mysterious strengths of the novel as an art form...is how readily readers connect with the financial anxieties of fictional characters," he states (x). This is because readers, too, understand the anxieties or disappointments that come with not having enough money to live the way you aspire to live. The stakes are high in Wharton's characters' worlds; somehow, they must manage to keep or gain money with little to no risk of losing it. Without money, they lose positions in the upper classes.

Wharton's focus on female characters who desperately wish to conform to the rigid structures of an upper class society puts her in direct opposition to another famous female author, Jane Austen. Even though both authors share an interest in dissecting the social manners of their time, Austen is wildly more popular than Wharton (even though Wharton is, in my opinion, the better writer). Austen has also been adapted far more often. This is because many of Austen's female protagonists are unquestionably sympathetic; we admire them and desire to be in their

shoes. Of all Austen's heroines, the most beloved—and the most adapted—is Elizabeth Bennet. She is young, independent, strong-willed, and does not care about money or what she should do to please society. She marries for love and is not afraid to speak her mind. And, unlike the very "indoor" Lily Bart, she is often portrayed *outside*, walking to different vicinities, no matter how far, and unafraid of having her hems "six inches deep in mud" (Austen 36).

Nearly a century after the publication of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* came *The House of Mirth*, where the heroine Lily Bart is in many ways a polar opposite to the much-loved Lizzie Bennet. Easily swayed by her circumstances, Lily aims to please society in order to keep her station in the upper class, wants to marry men for their money, and is in her late twenties; she thus must marry soon or risk losing the interest of men because of her age.

Lizzie Bennet certainly sets herself apart from Wharton's characters by way of her fierce sense of independence, her honesty, her common sense, her ability to face the facts of her life: all characteristics Lily lacks. Lizzie confirms that, often, literature's most beloved characters are those we can admire deeply. And yet, as we well know, literature is full of characters whom we love but don't admire. Consider Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*. Or, more recently, Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* and Walter White of *Breaking Bad*. These main characters continually do deplorable deeds, yet they remain sympathetic in the eyes of many viewers, who watch episode after episode unfold and continue to root for them, notwithstanding their wrongdoings.

Television, like film, has a range of tricks at hand to generate our sympathy for even its most evil characters. One of these tricks involves point of view shots. In her NPR article "Point of View: How So Many People Rooted for 'Breaking Bad's' Walter White," Michaeleen Doucleff interviews psychiatrist Joseph Magliano to comprehend how people could possibly feel sympathy for such a despicable character. Magliano states that the creators are able to effectively

blanket White in sympathy because they let viewers “see a world full of obstacles through Walt’s eyes” (Doucleff). Magliano goes on to discuss a simple film technique, called a “point-of-view sequence” (otherwise known as a reaction shot) that enables viewers to identify with Walt, which involves allowing the camera to see what Walt is looking at, and then returning to his face to gauge his reaction. Viewers can then identify how he feels about the obstacles he is presented with. In this way, film and television act as entirely different mediums from novels, where narrators must tell us what each character is thinking and feeling. Without voiceover, film and television often rely on reaction shots to convey the thoughts and emotions of characters. This, in turn, opens up our sympathy.

In today’s world, these two mediums are more than just forms of amusement; for many, such as me, they offer a wonderful means of storytelling. Seeing imaginary worlds originally conceived in novels come to life is a fascinating experience, as I hope to show in my discussion of Davies’ 2000 adaptation. Film and television certainly have their limitations, but as forms of mass entertainment, they have the power to introduce—or re-introduce—Wharton to audiences, especially younger generations who may not yet be interested in reading a lengthy and intricate novel written over a hundred years ago. The stories that Wharton has to tell are much too important and much too relevant to be forgotten. Davies’ adaptation often manages to make the story of Lily Bart compelling, but as I show in this thesis, it fails to do so just as frequently. The primary reason for this, I argue, is Davies’ failure to create enough sympathy for Lily.

I have no doubt that a new adaptation of Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, which gave Lily Bart the kind of sympathetic understanding she deserves, would be a success. I also have no doubt that an adaptation that captured the elegance and extravagance of Wharton’s age could be

wildly popular. Apparently, I'm not alone; the juggernaut success of Julian Fellowes's *Downton Abbey* has inspired him to create another series, *The Gilded Age*, set in late nineteenth-century New York (McLennan). With Fellowes set to bring Wharton's historical world to television, there is hope that she will finally earn the attention she should have. Move over, Jane Austen!

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Edith Wharton presents Lily Bart as a truly complicated and often maddening character. Indeed, disliking Lily is not uncommon for readers. A National Public Radio writer says that she is "angered and saddened by [Lily's] materialism, her social game-playing, and acquiescence to being an accessory or an ornament" (Guiliano). Another critic says, "Lily is in many ways as shallow as her friends, as devoted to the rituals of couture and cards and as narrow in her prejudices" (Gorra). Franzen similarly states, "On the surface, there would seem to be no reason for a reader to sympathize with Lily" (ix).

But a sensitive reader, I would argue, realizes that Wharton provides many reasons why readers should feel sympathy for Lily Bart even as we judge or condemn her. We are given these reasons gradually; indeed, Wharton deliberately creates a subtle, slow shift in our response to Lily—and this shift is certainly a fundamental part of the experience of reading *The House of Mirth*. As the first half of the novel progresses, our feelings of sympathy develop slowly; then, as each incident in the second half of the novel seems to impact her life in a profoundly negative way, our compassion for Lily develops much more intensely. Before our eyes, Lily Bart transforms from a posh, sophisticated, snobbish character into a naïve and ignorant pawn for her society to push around as they please. Lily becomes increasingly tragic as the novel progresses.

In the second half of the novel, Lily is kicked off the Dorsets' yacht and turned down for marriage by Simon Rosedale due to her increasingly questionable reputation. After these two

incidents, about three-quarters of the way through the novel, we witness her immediate fall; she is forced to work for her money in jobs that she cannot perform or handle, and her living quarters get smaller and smaller. She has no family and few friends, none of whom completely understand what she is going through. Book One thus establishes Lily's social position and her desires; Book Two reveals her worsening situation—and elicits more and more sympathy from us.

If Lily's increasingly rapid devolution is one of the ways in which Wharton generates sympathy for her heroine, so is her physical beauty. As Wharton well knew, beauty plays an important role in how we sympathize with characters, whether we want to admit it or not. Typically, readers do not sympathize with ugly characters; we look for them to be attractive, perhaps so that we can endeavor to be more like them. Wharton's heroines are all beautiful. Lily is immediately revealed to be a gorgeous woman in the novel; Wharton goes to great lengths to emphasize this in the scene where Selden greets her at Grand Central Station. Passersby stop to look at her, “for Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveller rushing to his last train” (5).

Franzen discusses the effect a character's outward beauty has on a reader. He states that “it represents a kind of natural capital, like a tree's perfect fruit, that we're instinctively averse to seeing wasted” (x). As readers, we tend to assume that beautiful protagonists will be charitable and good-natured. What Wharton instead gives us is the unsatisfying combination of a woman with much outward beauty, but little inward kindness towards people who are socially inferior to her. The first thing that strikes readers is Lily's beauty; Selden is “refreshed” by the sight of her beauty at the train station (5). Almost immediately, however, we see a glimpse of her potential for unkindness; in conversation with Selden at the train station, Lily says, “It isn't a bit hotter

here than in Mrs. Van Osburgh's conservatory—and some of the women are not a bit uglier" (6). And yet, despite this comment, we are immediately drawn to Lily's attractiveness; although we may not approve of her behavior, our infatuation with her beauty, her poise, her elegance, keeps us reading.

And yet, Lily doesn't make it easy for us to like her. Her snobbish behavior towards others is unpleasant to witness. Lily shows the truth about her unpleasant personality early on, and as she degrades Lawrence Selden's cousin Gerty Farish in his own apartment, she quickly downgrades to an unsympathetic character within pages.

"Oh, I know—you mean Gerty Farish." She smiled a little unkindly. "But I said *marriageable*—and besides, she 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. I should hate that, you know." (8)

Lily is harsh towards Gerty for being a woman who lives on her own. She implies that Gerty is unmarriageable because she is poor. The irony, of course, is that Lily is wealthy and beautiful, yet she is unable to find a husband. This passage foreshadows Lily's future; by the end of the novel, she will be no better than Gerty, unable to even afford a cook to make meals that "taste of soap." She speaks of Gerty as though Gerty were far beneath her, not even worthy of deserving praise from Lily for how she handles her independence. Lily's snobbery also gets the best of her because she has no regard for the fact that she is talking badly of Gerty in front of Gerty's own cousin, Selden; there is no filter for Lily Bart when it comes to speaking ill of the downtrodden. However, Gerty proves throughout the novel to remain Lily's only female friend, even if Lily does not particularly view her in a friendly manner. The narrator calls Gerty's affection for Lily "a sentiment that had learned to keep itself alive on the scantiest diet," meaning that Lily did not

reciprocate such feelings back to Gerty (118). Lily is too proud to accept Gerty's friendship because the latter is of a much lower class. This pride can indubitably be off-putting to readers.

In addition to her snobbery and pride, Lily is foolish enough to walk into traps, set by herself as well as the more menacing members of her society. One of the earliest instances of her walking into her own trap is when she agrees to play bridge with Mrs. Bertha Dorset and Mrs. Fisher at Bellomont in order to be seen as sociable; in her society, socialites often met for a high-stakes game of cards so that they could be seen out with other members of high society and flaunt their wealth. After a night of gambling, she loses, finding that she has a meager twenty dollars remaining in her purse and less money than she thought in her checking account (20). Set to pay back her dressmaker and jeweler, Lily has less money than she had anticipated. This is one of the first occurrences in which she could have resisted the lure of her social circle and saved money to pay off debts. Instead, she permits herself to partake in the game, losing a considerable amount of money along the way.

Lily also walks into her own trap by being seen with men alone. This results in people of her community suspecting she is having affairs with both married and single men. She goes to Selden's apartment by herself, but as she is leaving, the owner of the apartment building, Simon Rosedale, catches her. Flushed, she says that she "came up to see [her] dress-maker", to which Rosedale replies, "I didn't know there were any dress-makers in the Benedick...I believe it's an old word for bachelor, isn't it? I happen to own the building—that's the way I know" (14). An objectionable act for women to do, her unchaperoned excursions with other men hurt her reputation considerably. As does her decision to lie. While she recognizes the damaging effects of having been caught visiting a man alone, Lily is foolish enough to repeat the mistake; she is also caught with Mr. Trenor, allowing Selden to believe she is having an affair with him while

his wife, Judy, is away (125); and in the final part of the novel, Lily is caught travelling back to the yacht only with Mr. Dorset, which leads to Bertha's denouncement of Lily's reputation (164). During a time when single women were not to be seen alone with men, especially married men, this was daring, even reckless, for Lily. Her acceptance of the Dorsets' invitation to travel to Monte Carlo on their yacht in the first place is a step into the trap for Lily as well; despite her money issues at home, she continues to travel as if she has money to burn and no cares to worry about. Rather than stay home and get her affairs in order, she leaves, offering herself as a pawn in Bertha's own twisted game of affairs.

Like most of the characters in *The House of Mirth*, Lily is also reserved and aloof. In keeping with the mannerisms and class distinctions of the time period, the characters tend to talk around their problems, rather than directly state how they feel. In our tell-all, confessional age, this would possibly frustrate today's readers. Problems might have been solved quickly, for example, had Lily told Selden that she loved him, or vice-versa; she could have admitted her gambling problem to her wealthy Aunt Julia Peniston and asked for help; she could have told close friends and family of her financial difficulties. Instead, she chooses to present herself as gliding through life, even going so far as buying new dresses despite her debt. She does not seek help and suffers in silence.

Because of the characters' reserve, the novel circles around the issues at hand. Only a few times are they presented head-on, such as when Gus Trenor confronts Lily about her owing him money and when Bertha Dorset announces that Lily would not return to their yacht. But overall, the novel skirts dilemmas, leaving the plot feeling almost absent of action. Dissatisfied readers are left wanting to change the story for themselves, perhaps to carry Lily out of her miserable problems quicker or to help her avoid them altogether. But however frustrating it may be, *The*

House of Mirth is social history; it reveals how “proper” manners dictated that the upper classes were not to confront issues, leaving people to improperly cope with their predicaments.

Lily’s snobbish attitude, insensitivity, and reserve are all dislikeable to readers; they are also reinforced by the distancing strategies Wharton uses in writing the novel. Wharton cleverly employs her narrator to create emotional distance between Lily and us as well as to control how we respond to her. The narrator witnesses the novel’s events as we would—that is, from a neutral distance—while commenting on the events with a seeming absence of emotion or psychological insight. Lily is, to our narrator, not a perfect, divine deity who can do no wrong. The narrator often speaks with sarcasm and irony to present Lily as a flawed person rather than a perfect woman. The narrator is not always on Lily’s side, and like a neutral commentator, she remarks only on what she observes.

Another distancing strategy is how often Wharton moves between calling Lily Bart “Miss Bart” and simply calling her “Lily,” as in the passage where Lily, after having just left Selden’s apartment, meets a charwoman refusing to move aside for her:

“I beg your pardon,” said Lily, intending by her politeness to convey a criticism of the other’s manner.

The woman, without answering, pushed her pail aside, and continued to stare as Miss Bart swept by with a murmur of silken linings. Lily felt herself flushing under the look. (13)

Lily struggles with the pressure of trying to be the strong, superior figure to the charwoman, whereas Miss Bart can “sweep by” with no consciousness of the woman’s impertinence. The alternation of the two names for Lily Bart gives readers a sense of who she is in the moment outwardly versus inwardly.

In other words, the narrator's use of "Miss Bart" or "Lily" indicates which Lily Bart she is seeing: Miss Bart, the posh, elegant, thinks-she-can-do-no-wrong socialite, and Lily, the human, blundering, hopeless romantic with faults of her own. Another example of this use is when Lily plans on attending church with her first potential suitor, Percy Gryce, and then changes her mind: "It might have afforded him some consolation could he have known that Miss Bart had really meant to go to church....Her intentions in short had never been more definite; but poor Lily, for all the hard glaze of her exterior, was inwardly as malleable as wax" (43). In this passage, "Lily" is a different person from "Miss Bart." "Lily" is "as malleable as wax," able to be persuaded and easily moved in directions other people wish her to go. "Miss Bart," on the other hand, is a serious socialite, sticking to her set plans and willing to do whatever she can to land a husband. Miss Bart is intimidating, busy, and sure of herself, a person whom I would want to avoid if I knew her in real life. Yet Lily is a person whom I feel like I know personally—someone who is trying to please everybody and not upset the status quo, despite her longings to do things for herself and seek out a lifestyle that benefits her desire to have love and family.

These various distancing strategies are a smart move on Wharton's part. So much can be portrayed by the clever use of narrators and their relationships with the protagonists, or by subtle phrasings; such as, in this case, a sense of sympathy or repulsion for Lily. In her discussion of Wharton's writing style, Bell states that "Wharton's attitude toward her characters, even toward her heroine, Lily Bart, was at the same time felt to be too frigid, too distant, showing, as the English writer Alice Meynell said, an 'extremity of reserve' which hid her feelings too well" (2). Lily is initially seen as an unkind woman, and with even the narrator keeping her distance, the problem of maintaining readers' attention arises. But, if readers recognize the strategies Wharton uses throughout the novel, a rewarding result is that they understand the cause of Lily's

indecisiveness due to the societal pressure put on her—something that is still relevant in today’s society.

With the realization that Wharton’s ingenious use of her narrator controls how we respond to Lily, we must also embrace the issue of Lily’s background. Simply put, Lily has no guidance; although she lives with her Aunt Peniston, without her parents or a mothering figure to show her how upper class society works, there is no one to lead her through the world and teach her what she should and ought not to do. Feminist critic Elaine Showalter treats Lily as a lonely, unguided figure in her essay “The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton’s *House of Mirth*. ” Showalter claims that the women in the novel are not truly sisterly to each other; instead, they are competitive and often cruel, especially in the despicable way they treat Lily. “Lily feels no loving ties to the women around her; in her moment of crisis ‘she had no heart to lean on.’ Her mother is dead and unmourned; . . . Her treatment of her cousin Grace Stepney is insensitive and distant, and Grace is bitterly jealous of her success” (144). Because we receive a backstory on Lily’s family history early on in the novel, we become more receptive as readers to Lily. With her parents’ deaths occurring just as she entered the world of upper class society, Lily enters the competitive and aggressive world of the wealthy unguarded and unguided; without a mother or father to truly care about her well-being, she enters it alone, attempting to present herself as an untouchable figure, a celebrity in her own right. The only woman who is not this way to Lily is the same woman whom Lily degrades at the beginning of the novel—Gerty Farish. Gerty, who is the only one there for Lily when she begins slipping away from upper class society, remains ever present, despite Lily’s denial of her help. Since Gerty is of the lower class, accepting her friendship means risking even more of Lily’s own reputation.

Lily's inability to accept Gerty's help is evidence of her pride, a sentiment that is exhibited at the Brys' dinner party. When she is the subject of a tableau vivant at the party, she uses this as an opportunity to bring attention to herself. The audience is amazed by her beauty and portrayal in the tableau vivant, and the triumph of her successful performance "gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power" (Wharton 108). Because her power over society had been waning due to her debts and inability to marry, this new attention feeds her desire for admiration and attention. With all eyes on her and all remarks focused on her beauty, it makes her feel untouchable—as though she is more hallowed than the guests present at the party. After the scene has ended, she "held herself aloof from the audience till the movement of dispersal before supper, and thus had a second opportunity of showing herself to advantage". Lily may not have guidance in her life, but she refuses to let that keep her from thriving in the world she was born into. As Showalter states, "Lily has certainly been deprived of the financial and emotional supports she has been raised to expect and has been even more seriously deprived of the environment for the skills in which she has been trained" (144). It is not Lily's fault that she wants to live in this type of society. Having been raised in it and come to recognize it as home, it is understandable why she should want to keep her place within it, despite the crushing blows others force on her to keep her from reaching her goals.

As readers, we should immediately be suspicious of how others treat Lily within the first few chapters of the novel, whether or not we are completely sympathetic to her yet. While visiting Selden in his apartment, she tells him, "'You don't know how much I need such a friend. . . The other women—my best friends—well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me'" (Wharton 9). This statement is enough to make readers question why Lily would stay in such a society and remain friends with such people; although we learn the

reasons why at a later time in the novel, immediately this statement opens up Lily's troubles to readers. Readers experience such problems as well; the difficulties of dealing with abusive friends are unfortunately common problems, even in our modern time and with all age groups, making Lily all the more sympathetic.

Because of the demands put on her by her society, Lily is—as I mentioned—easily swayed by the stresses and strains of conforming to the upper class. Gus Trenor tricks her simply because she is ignorant of the ways in which she must deal with money. He corrupts Lily, forcing her into even more debt than is possible for her to pay off in good time, which aids in her downfall. She also readily accepts Bertha Dorset's invitation to join her on their yacht, even though Bertha has plans to ruin Lily's reputation so that she can have an affair herself. By placing blame on Lily, Bertha avoids fault and escapes the controversy with little harm done to herself and no guilt—despite the fact that the married Bertha was, indeed, having an affair with another man. By seeking to place the blame on Lily, Bertha proclaims that she believes Lily and Mr. Dorset were having an affair, rather than risk her own reputation.

Another reason we feel sympathy for Lily is because of the pressure on her to marry. Lily fervently looks for a suitable husband, taking the task quite seriously, because of her need to stay in upper class society. Marriage during Wharton's time was profoundly important, as Jennifer Haytock writes in her book *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism*. She argues that “the prospect of marriage frequently offers the illusion that the individual can become complete in that he or she will be part of a unified whole. This illusion is especially pervasive for female characters, as men usually have other opportunities for fulfillment through their jobs and other social contact” (131). Lily is extremely limited by the constraints of her society. Without a husband, she simply cannot be expected to survive within the upper class (as we find out later,

she finally resorts to taking up a secretarial job with Mrs. Hatch, which she leaves for a low-paying milliner's job).

When it comes to searching for a husband, Lily does not have the ability to look for love; she must look for wealth. Wai-Chee Dimock treats Lily's search for a husband as a business agreement in his essay "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*." He says that Lily is "busy marketing herself throughout most of the book, worried only about the price she would fetch. She tries to induce Percy Gryce to purchase her....Lily is clearly caught up in the ethos of exchange" (124). Maureen Montgomery concurs; in her book *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York*, Montgomery questions, "Is not marriage itself a form of prostitution when so little choice is afforded women?" (37). As uncomfortable as it is to read of Lily marketing herself as if she is a prostitute, it enhances our understanding of her desperation.

A woman finding a husband is nothing new to literary fiction storylines, even by today's standards. But what drives us to want to read about a woman who seems only interested in money? While reading the novel and learning how to connect with Lily on different levels, we inadvertently find ourselves wanting her to reach her goals, as immoral as they seem. This is certainly a mode of sympathy, one that Franzen understands well. He explains, "the alchemical agent by which fiction transmutes my secret envy or my ordinary dislike of 'bad' people into sympathy is *desire*. Apparently, all a novelist has to do is give a character a powerful desire...and I, as a reader, become helpless not to make that desire my own" (xi). Wharton definitely invests Lily with a strong sense of desire. Lily wants to marry a wealthy man and flourish in upper-class society; as she tells Selden when comparing herself to Gerty Farish, "She

likes being good, and I like being happy” (8). To Lily, happiness relies on staying within the means of the society she was born into, whatever the cost.

However, that leaves me to question if that is her true desire in life. Does Lily really *desire* to market herself out to a man she barely knows and marry him for his money? Although this desire certainly drives the plot of the novel, I would argue that she secretly wants much more. As we see with Lily’s relationship with Selden, she desires to have love in her life. She does not have a friend to lean on, or a parent to comfort or guide her. Instead, she has herself; her love for Selden pulsating throughout the book shows how they are torn about what to do regarding their situations in life and if it would be appropriate for them to marry. The wants of her society and her own desires do not line up; because of this misalignment, Lily must choose a path to go down, knowing that she is unable to blur the fine line between social status and happiness. The novel is a story of her choosing to follow one path although she yearns to be on that of the other.

Given these vital choices and her indecisiveness, it is clear to see that Wharton has characterized Lily as having two personalities and desires, both reaching for different goals. The narrator’s use of “Miss Bart” displays Lily as calm, cool, and sophisticated, whereas “Lily” is the true spirit of the character—the flawed, uneasy woman we eventually come to terms with. The last point in which the narrator uses “Miss Bart” for the sake of presenting her as a sophisticated woman is in Book Two, Chapter 10. Lily has descended into the working class, and is now forced to make hats for a living in order to afford her small room. Unable to keep up with the hat-making because her skills are terrible, Lily faces humiliation from her forewoman in front of all the women she works with.

"In the whole work-room there was only one skin beneath which the blood still visibly played; and that now burned with vexation as Miss Bart, under the lash of the forewoman's comment, began to strip the hat-frame of its overlapping spangles." (221)

This is one of the last times the narrator uses the phrase "Miss Bart," its function to reiterate Lily's fall from grace and the station in life in which she now sits. The narrator calls her "Miss Bart" again nine pages later: "That evening in her own room Miss Bart—who had fled early from the heavy fumes of the basement dinner-table. . . ." (230). As this example also shows, the narrator now employs "Miss Bart" as a mockery of her heroine's current position, reinforcing her diminished societal ranking. Soon after this, the narrator only uses "Lily," enhancing the fact that Lily is not a wealthy member of the upper class any longer; she is now simply a working woman. More importantly, her consistent use of "Lily" allows reader to finally see the real Lily, not the "Miss Bart" as shown to us at the beginning, whose idea of happiness was to aspire to be a trophy wife. This Lily is aware of what has happened, conscious of her downfall, and completely depressed as a result. By finally seeing the real Lily, readers are able to finally bond with her and feel sympathy. How could we not, when the last time we see Lily she is lying in bed, imagining that she is holding Nettie's baby, dreaming about loving someone who would love her back? She goes to sleep dreaming of that image, never to wake up again.

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In his 2000 film *The House of Mirth*, director Terence Davies undertakes the challenge of creating sympathy with Lily Bart through the medium of film.

One disadvantage to film, exemplified in Davies's *The House of Mirth*, is that the thoughts and feelings of characters are far less obvious than they are in a novel. Since Davies

does not use voiceover in his film, and dialogue about emotion is very minimal, there is no way of knowing what characters are thinking or how they feel unless their facial reactions express it. In this way, literature seems to have the upper hand; Wharton's narrator describes what characters are thinking for us, so there is no guessing on our parts.

But while literature is able to create compassion for characters through language, narration, and backstory, film has other ways to do so that employ our senses. Robert Stam makes a powerful case for the adaptations of books into film. Within his introduction to the book *Literature and Film*, Stam discusses the “multi-track medium” benefits of film, including that it “can play not only with word (written and spoken) but also with music, sound effects, and moving photographic images” (17). These abilities help audiences associate a fictional world with the real world—their world.

One benefit of a film adaptation is that it makes everything visual, with the characters being represented by flesh-and-blood actors. As Stam discusses, “A novelist’s portrayal of a character induces us to imagine the person’s features in our own imagination....[In film] we are faced with an embodied performer, encumbered with nationality and accent, a Carol Lynley or a Dominique Swain” (15). Instead of imagining a character in our mind, we are given a living being, Gillian Anderson, to perform as Lily Bart. With actors, audiences are given an embodiment of how a character is presumed to look, according to the book’s description. Of course, the addition of live performers may also create discontentment. If an actor is chosen for a role that audiences disagree with, this can cause viewers to dislike the overall film. However, in most cases, the addition of an actor allows us to form a sort of physical connection—or as Stam puts it, “the body of the performer, the body of the spectator, and even the ‘skin’ and the ‘haptic visuality’ of the ‘body’ of the film itself” (7)—that binds the viewer in the real world to the actor

on the screen. With physical bodies performing as real people would, seeing events and emotions unfold visually brings out strong affections for characters.

Immediately, Lily appears in the film as a wealthy, sophisticated socialite, the splendor of her appearance in full display as she glides on screen at the train station—large navy hat, thin black veil draped across her face, her golden brooch shimmering against the gray of her dress, parasol and bag in each hand. “Mr. Selden,” she says in a lilting voice, smiling as the camera zooms in on her face before she exclaims, “what luck!” Her lone walk through the doors of the train station, accompanied by the non-diegetic musical score, enhances Lily’s presence and lets the audience see her for the first time visually. In this moment of first impression, Lily is central, even amongst the other travellers arriving and leaving the train station. Lily must be shown here as being at the height of her life, because, as we know, it is downhill from here.

According to film critic Parley Ann Boswell in her book *Edith Wharton on Film*, Lily Bart’s entrance in the film is unlike anything one could read in a novel description. “Davies’s opening scene of Lily, where she appears out of nowhere, floats through steam, and lights under an archway that dwarfs her, has no counterpart in the novel” (135). This statement is precisely what makes film and the act of adapting literature for the screen so alluring. There is nothing quite like seeing the physical splendor of Miss Lily Bart in her full glory as she appears on the screen.

But while film offers new opportunities for appreciating a novel, it also struggles with giving the audience all necessary information. One of the glaring issues with the film adaptation of *The House of Mirth* is the omission of Lily’s backstory. Her family history is very important to our understanding of Lily. Since Lily is given no such background in the film, the audience is not made aware of the complex reasons for why she acts the way she does. This is often a

stumbling point with film: when and where to properly insert character backstory without taking the audience out of the main story. When films cannot portray a backstory smoothly, it is often eliminated or condensed, as in Davies' *The House of Mirth*, into a quick conversation.

While in the carriage, Lily's Aunt Julia Peniston says, "Really, Lily. You're as careless and as frivolous as your poor parents were." She then calls Lily out on an improper comment, stating, "Only someone without family would make such a vulgar remark," to which Lily laughs and replies, "Aunt Julia, you are my family!" While this lets the viewers know that Lily is without parents, it does not give any history regarding what happened to them, why they were "careless and frivolous", and why Lily strives to be like them—reasons that we receive in the novel. As a result, asking the audience to sympathize with Lily becomes a challenging task. However, this also gives viewers a sense of just *who* Lily still has as family: Aunt Julia. A crotchety old woman who criticizes Lily's deceased parents and condemns Lily, even later when she is most in need, Aunt Julia is not the loving, mothering guidance Lily needs. Instead, she is like the other women in their society Lily battles against—mean and selfish, as we see when she does not allow Lily to speak for herself against her alleged affairs and gives most of the remaining inheritance to Grace rather than help Lily.

But it is not just the absence of backstories and concomitant confusion this absence causes that make it difficult for us to sympathize with Lily; it is also the length of the film (135 minutes) and its relative lack of action or humor. For contemporary audiences not used to watching films without action or comedy, *The House of Mirth* moves slowly. Lily often talks around her dilemmas rather than approaching problems head-on. This makes the movie seem slow as it creates frustration for the audience; we would like to see more "action" and more confrontation. As in the novel, Lily is emotionally reserved and does not express her feelings to

others easily. In the novel, Lily expresses to Selden that the other women “use me or abuse me; but they don’t care a straw what happens to me. I’ve been about too long—people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry” (9). But in the film, the script removes this piece of dialogue, instead allowing her to say only, “I’ve been about too long, people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say that I ought to marry” (Davies). Wharton immediately sets up Lily’s problems for the readers, and this is one of the few places where Lily openly admits her feelings; the film version takes even this away, leaving her to instead express her need to find a husband. The film is slower to reveal the issues Lily will be facing for the rest of her life; especially with the omission of the pivotal “use me or abuse me” line, it is not until Bertha begins acting suspicious and cruel that Lily’s complicated relationship with women is revealed in the film.

Nonetheless, Davies’ adaptation still excites feelings of compassion for Lily. Boswell points out, for example, “Before we hear a word of dialogue or see any another character on screen, we have been given enough visual signs to anticipate Lily’s fate: the clock is ticking, the schedules are set, and Lily Bart, pinned alone under a massive structure, has been framed” (135). As soon as the viewers see Lily, she is running out of time; not only is her biological clock ticking, we can actually hear the noise of ticking clocks in the film, reminding us that her fate is looming. Boswell again mentions two other instances in which the sound of ticking clocks is heard: “When Aunt Julia condemns Lily with a final, severe, ‘I consider that you are disgraced, Lily,’ we hear nothing but a ticking clock, which simulates Lily’s silent desperation. Late in the movie, after Lily has been disinherited and comes to Grace for a loan, Lily pleads her case without benefit of a sympathetic soundtrack. ‘I’m at the end of my tether!’ she cries....Grace, motionless and blank-faced, says nothing, while another clock ticks softly” (136).

Davies uses the trope of ticking clocks throughout the film for a multiplicity of reasons. As Boswell states, Lily has terrible timing; in nearly every instance, it is her unfortunate timing that lowers her reputation. In this way, time becomes one of Lily's main antagonists; however, Lily cannot possibly escape the unforgiving hands of time. The sound component of having clocks within the film adds a sense of haste and anxiety to Lily's predicament. In the film, Lily optimistically says, "My genius would appear to be the ability to do the wrong thing at the right time." To which Selden wisely replies, "Or vise-versa." It is more apparent that Lily does the right things at the wrong times, such as accepting Rosedale's proposal (if one views that as "right"). Time is her enemy, and the ticking of the clocks reminds us of that.

Because the characters that drive the plot are emotionally reserved, the film adopts a tone that is both quiet and restrained. The novel itself is quiet—there is relatively little action, with most events occurring in conversational tones between the characters. There is no yelling, fighting, kicking, or screaming in the novel; as a result, there is little of this in the film. Davies does give us some dramatic shouting and crying at pivotal points in the film, such as when Lily cries to her aunt for money and yells at Selden near the end, but these dramatic explosions are few and far between. There is also a noticeable absence of music in the film, except during transitional periods to show a new "chapter" in Lily's life. For the most part, the film is silent, music- and action-wise, which is why it feels like a slow-moving film.

Davies's use of slow, deep, music and what Boswell calls a "hauntingly minimal soundtrack" provoke feelings of despair for Lily (135). I would argue that all of the important moments of Lily's life appear in the film sans-soundtrack (Lily's begging of her aunt and cousin for money; her being rejected from reentering the Dorset's yacht; her passionate monologue to Selden about the state of her life when she is working as a personal assistant to Mrs. Hatch; and

so on). Boswell articulates it well, writing, “the silences during these scenes can be deafening” (135). Denying the audience background music gives them a reason to hang on to every word that is spoken and to really understand what the character is feeling. The dialogue is enhanced, and a greater focus is put on the actors’ tones of voices, facial reactions, breathing, and the use of diegetic noises that surround them. Boswell also introduces the idea of Davies’ sparing use of soundtrack as a return to the silent era of filmmaking (141). Around the time that Wharton was writing, she might have seen silent films such as Porter’s 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery* and George Méliès’s 1902 film *Voyage to the Moon*. Davies attempts to return to that period of filmmaking by reducing the use of non-diegetic so that viewers can better equip themselves to the diegetic sounds of the film, such as voices and ticking clocks, as well as the remarkable visuals he presents to us.

The potency of the auditory effects is enhanced by strong visuals. With sights displayed alongside powerful sounds, we as viewers are treated to a sumptuous screen experience. Visually, Lily appeals to our senses; her striking red hair and bright eyes enchant us, while her smile is dazzling and warm—in the instances when she *is* smiling. Essayist Anne-Marie Evans writes that the film “places Lily’s body at the center of the narrative” (173). Similar to my discussion of the novel’s use of marrying women as relatable to prostitution, it is not Lily’s mind that is focused on within the film, but rather her body. The visual aspects of Lily are critical in feeling compassion for what she goes through; the other women in the book dislike her due to their envy of her beauty. The mise-en-scène Davies stages before our eyes, moreover, controls how we sympathize with Lily, showing her to be small and insignificant compared to the large, looming, wealthy space she is in (such as large rooms, windows, paintings, and doors she is surrounded by).

Other ways of making the viewers feel the enormous weight put on Lily's shoulders by society is by surrounding her with large objects in the pivotal moments onscreen. Boswell writes that Davies uses visual cues, such as her being "dwarfed by grand structures or framed by draperies, windows, mirrors, and works of art" as a means of getting the audience to feel for Lily (137). The massive structures that surround her seem too big for her; they are grand, looming constructions that, like her society, hover over her. In the scene where Lily finally accepts Rosedale's proposal of marriage only to be rejected by him, we see this dwarfing strategy in play. As Lily walks away, behind her is a large, looming grandfather clock; behind her also is a door, which looks massive compared to Lily's body. As a result, Lily looks small and out of control of the situation, as though the room is going to swallow her up.

Not only are there enormous objects surrounding Lily to make her seem small and vulnerable; there are also repeated uses of Lily's reflection to show the fragility of Lily's demeanor and her inward struggle to figure out who she is. Davies frequently uses windows and mirrors that show us Lily's reflections; "In the film, we often gaze at Lily from behind while she gazes at herself, and we are allowed to watch the two Lilies," Boswell suggests (138). Stam elaborates on this aspect, suggesting that Lily's reflection in the train window is a presentation of "a woman who has achieved a certain self-consciousness that can never move beyond solipsism" (91). Perhaps this is Davies's way of showing audiences the difference between "Miss Bart" and "Lily"—with Lily being the reflection in the mirror, the true depth of Lily Bart gazing back at Miss Bart.

Another visual cue to indicate Lily's entrapment is the use of windows, or more precisely, the use of curtains and blinds. In the beginning of the film, Selden's apartment windows are covered completely. Society cannot "look in" at their relationship, and nobody

knows she is even there until Rosedale catches her leaving. She peeks down on Percy Gryce entering his carriage from a window without curtain; when she walks in on Bertha and Selden talking, the curtains and blinds are pulled back, allowing sunlight to seep in. At Aunt Julia's house, Lily offers to tend to the blinds after her aunt expresses her frustrations that the maids cannot draw them down evenly. In this instance, with the blinds coming down on Lily, there is a metaphorical meaning: Lily is beginning to get shut out of upper class society. When Lily is speaking passionately with Selden on her current life situation and job with Mrs. Hatch, the window behind her has curtains pulled back, but a thin lace curtain is pulled over the entire window. Once she begins working as a hat-maker, her single room is gloomy and dark, with the windows curtained. She is completely isolated from the society she was once a part of. Before taking her fatal dose of sleeping medicine, she writes off her inheritance to Gus Trenor and then pulls down her window's blind behind the already-pulled curtains. In the final scene, Selden approaches her window first and pulls up the blind, slightly moving the curtain, where the light falls upon the lifeless Lily. It is in these grim scenes that Davies allows viewers to commiserate with Lily; although her character started out wealthy and sophisticated, time and society were not in her favor, and her heart was too good for where she was placed.

The advantages of their respective mediums allow Wharton and Davies to show Lily Bart as a complicated and mistreated character who deserves to be sympathized with. Although challenging at first, the arduous task of taking an unlikeable character and making her tragically compassionate is successful in both their endeavors. As expected, their way of presenting Lily in this light is different—Wharton uses backstory, double name meanings, and lack of guidance as key pinpoints to attract concerned readers, while Davies uses mise-en-scène and sound techniques to relay the message of Lily's calamity. Both use the most of their mediums to

channel sympathy for Lily, and if we, as readers and viewers, are patient enough to allow the artists to employ their crafts in order to make us understand the predicament Lily is in, we more readily understand and feel for Lily and her complex situation. Sympathy is gained through understanding. Once we understand her feelings, motivations, and desires, we can truly feel compassion for her when she is, time after time again, unable to achieve anything that she was brought up and desired to have.

It is easy to see why the nature of her desires repels us from Lily. But I also believe that the real reason we find her disagreeable is because Lily Bart is, in fact, just like us. Even in today's world, many would agree that it would be just as nice to have enough money and power in society as having the love of a partner; our wants are not all that different from hers. What separates Lily Bart from other literary heroines is the fact that she does not have a clear vision of what she wants—she is tugged in both directions, and we are pulled along with her. We want to read about characters who have a set idea of what they desire, perhaps in order to escape our own indecisiveness in real life. We want to be strong characters in our own books of life, when, in reality, many of us are no better at making life-changing decisions than Lily.

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A Google search on “The Second Gilded Age” results in hundreds of articles, dating within the last few years, about why we are now in the next Gilded Age. The rich are getting richer and they are unafraid to flaunt what they have. Every day in the media appear images and news articles about the latest celebrities’ excursions and vacations. As for the lower and middle classes in America unable to have such abundant riches: we are left in awe at the glories of the wealthy, similar to those who might have read Wharton’s novels during her time. The lives of the rich and ridiculous are constantly under a magnifying glass today, being scrutinized by both the

media and the everyday people consuming it. Through the media, we learn that the rich have issues and problems that many in the lower classes cannot imagine; like us, they are human beings still apt to make mistakes—perhaps even more so.

Lily Bart is one of Wharton's most beautifully tragic characters. Her entire story is a downward spiral of mistakes that she cannot get out of, and her ultimate fall from grace leaves a cautionary tale to those wanting what she had. Money does not always lead to happiness; and in Lily's case, I do believe that even if she had married one of the two handsomely available bachelors, Percy Gryce or Simon Rosedale, her life still would have been unhappy. Lily seemed initially unlikeable due to her class and status—a rich woman in high society with seemingly frivolous “problems,” such as a finding a wealthy husband, does not satisfy the wants of a reader hungry for an admirable heroine. But with Lily Bart, I would argue we find a character more useful, more sympathetic, than strictly admirable heroines like Elizabeth Bennet; in Lily Bart, we see ourselves, or more precisely, our flaws. Indecisive and unsure about her life goals, Lily's change of plans mirrors our own. Like many of us, she begins defiant and positive about what she wants. However, we witness the changing of her mind as she becomes uncertain of these initial ambitions. No longer is she so sure that it is *money* that she wants, but perhaps love, or even a child. Her conflict over which desires to go after are parallel to our own ever-altering life plans; I know that I would certainly love to have a set plan for my life, but it is not so easy when my own aspirations change and I find that what I wanted before may not be what I want any longer.

If our lives were exhibited in a novel or film with all faults revealed as they were with Lily Bart, would it not also be difficult to sympathize with ourselves? Sympathy for Lily depends on a realization that she is who we are, and she desires what we want, especially in this day and

age, the Second Gilded Age. While reading *The House of Mirth*, many readers might think they could *never* connect with Lily's snobbish and catty attitude, when in reality, we are more like her than we care to admit. A cautionary tale, *The House of Mirth* is relevant today because it presents an example of what could happen if our society continues its love for wealth and status. In an age where television drama has become our dominant form of storytelling, now is the perfect time to undertake another adaptation of the novel. It could be the new *Downton Abbey* everyone is waiting for, but this time reflecting America's class divisions back to itself.

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