

Character and Its Medium : Edith Wharton's View of the Individual in Society in *The House of Mirth*

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Abstract : Edith Wharton's characterization of Lily in *The House of Mirth* invites consideration of her view of the individual in society. She shows that Lily's consciousness and her way of thinking are shaped by the social environment. Unlike Henry James, who pursues the possibilities of a 'free spirit', Wharton observes Lily's exploration of her way of life in restricted circumstances. Lily is well aware of the necessity of marriage to a wealthy man to secure her place in society, but she hesitates in her course because of her distaste for the compromised morality. Wharton values Lily's resistance by which she saves herself from taking part in the moral corruption of the moneyed people. Lily is not presented as tragic because she comes to be convinced of human fellowship in spite of her desolate situation. Wharton considers an individual's existence as a part of history. Her depiction of society as constantly changing underlines her conviction of the continuity of life.

I

The impact of social organization is the major subject of Edith Wharton's novel. She places her characters in particular social context and analyzes the character's plight on the assumption that an individual person's way of thinking and behavior are limited by social conventions. Therefore, to grasp the social background of the story and Wharton's view of it is the first step to understand her novel.

The House of Mirth (1905)¹ is set in New York, focussing on New York society at the turn of the century. Before writing this novel Wharton traveled to Italy in 1903, by an invitation of the *Century* magazine, to do a series

of articles on Italian villas and gardens. On returning to America in the following year, her first reaction was “What a horror it is for a whole nation to be developing without the sense of beauty...”² Wharton experienced both new and old worlds from her childhood, and she was accustomed to have a comparative view of the two worlds. In 1904, however, it is considered that her attention was centered more on changing America itself than a comparison with Europe. America experienced tremendous industrial developments in the latter half of the nineteenth century with abundant resources available in its ever-expanding frontier. In the eighties, with the momentous changes in the economy—from a production-oriented to a sales-oriented economy—commercial activities became enormous in scale and began to control people’s lives. People’s covetousness for money was witnessed in various aspects of life.

Wharton was born in a well-to-do old New York family and grew up observing the ways of New York social life, which used to be characterized by long American ancestry—“Old New York.” The upper classes that dominated New York until the end of the nineteenth century came from two sources—the old Dutch families and Yankees. Looking back to her early life, Wharton says,

The group to which we belonged was composed of families to whom a middling prosperity had come, usually by the rapid rise in value of inherited real estate, and none of whom, apparently, aspired to be more than moderately well-off.

I never in my early life came in contact with the gold-fever in any form...³

“Old New York”—Wharton is from one of them—were moderately wealthy and enjoyed relaxed life, having close family ties. They valued honor and responsibilities. There is a noteworthy description, referring to “the delightful week-day lunches” in her early married life: “...one of the first rules of conversation was the one early instilled in me by my mother: ‘Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible.’”⁴ This description characterizes “Old New York” as a contrast to the New York society in *The House of Mirth*. Obviously “Old New York” were decent about money:

at the same time, the mother's admonition indicates their nervous consciousness of the new elements in society—exceedingly wealthy commercial people. “Old New York” was a small and stable portion of society. Along with the increase of commercialism at the turn of the century, those exceedingly wealthy commercial people came to gain power in social activities. Concerning the social situations in those days, R.W.B. Lewis explains:

There was of course considerable mingling between the two sets and a partial sharing of mores. But they tended to look askance at each other, to measure breeding against wealth and tradition against display.⁵

The new rich were millionaires: they built fashionable houses along the Fifth Avenue and grand summer houses in Newport. Their sole attention was paid to superficial matters to boast of their limitless money. Their frivolous and irresponsible way of life was deplorable from the eyes of “Old New York.”

With the surge of the new power, New York society experienced a change from “singularly coherent and respectable” society to “the chaos of indiscriminate appetites.”⁶ Such new tendency in New York society, however, represents the tendency of society in general at the turn of the century. Commercialism accelerated people's desire for money. Thus, money became most important in people's lives, which necessarily affects people's way of thinking. Moral confusion was frequently witnessed in daily life. However, New York was most conspicuous in the tendency. Concerning this point, Wharton says as follows:

If it seems more conspicuous in New York than in an old civilization, it is because the whole social organization with us is so much smaller & less elaborate—& if, as I believe, it is more harmful in its influence, it is because fewer responsibilities attach to money with us than in other societies.⁷

Henry James, with whom Wharton had a long-term close friendship, also belonged to the old America and largely shared with Wharton the feelings toward America at the turn of the century. However, James admitted that he had been out of America too long to use the American subject and relied on Wharton as a most adequate person to deal with it. He earnestly advised

her to write on American subject:

Don't pass it by—the immediate, the real, the ours, the yours, the novelist's that it waits for. Take hold of it & keep hold, & let it pull you where it will....Profit, be warned, by my awful example of exile & ignorance....DO NEW YORK! The 1st-hand account is precious.⁸

Wharton herself was prepared to make use of New York “as the theme most available to my hand.”⁹ She thinks hard how to extract “the typical human significance” from the subject of fashionable New York:

In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the “old woe of the world,” any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer is, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart.¹⁰

This description is important as it reveals Wharton's basic view of the New York society at that time, as well as its thematic implications. She has a negative view of the tendency of the contemporary society: she senses a threat that humanity is being impaired. She intends to trace the impact of social organization on the individual. Thus her focus of creation is centered on the heroine Lily.

II

Society provides an important context in Wharton's novels. It is true that the world she presents in this novel is “severely limited”¹¹ as Cynthia Griffin Wolff comments, but we should notice that the New York society at the turn of the century, where affluence prevails, represents people's desire in commodity culture. Along with the permeation of commercialism, money and power tend to be identified. Such tendency necessarily confirms women's position as secondary to men because women were economically dependent on men. Thus, the patriarchal structure of society is intensified. Such circumstances are important components in Wharton's characterization of Lily.

Wharton presents Lily in such a way as social organization limits her way of life. She is bound by the money-oriented, patriarchal social structure: not only her behavior but also her consciousness and way of thinking are shaped and restrained by it. This is the point basically different from Henry James. James's characters are "free spirits." They live in a certain social structure which gives them restrictions, but they are naturally free in spirit. Their consciousness expands in any direction, although they are often frustrated by unexpected social claims. For example, Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady* thinks and judges freely and behaves in her own way. She refuses Lord Warburton's proposal—the opportunity that "nineteen women out of twenty would have accommodated themselves to it without a pang."¹² She loves liberty more than anything else, and confidently believes she can find out how to live for herself. When she comes to see that she was trapped by Mme. Merle and Osmond, she is depressed, but she resolves to keep her integrity. James traces the possibilities of "free spirits," while Wharton's heroine is not given such expansion of spirit. Lily is a woman of twenty-nine years old. Her parents are dead and she lives with her aunt Mrs. Peniston who belongs to "Old New York." Her beauty and her age are stressed because they have significant implications in the society she belongs to. Also the situation that she is a dependent with only a small income of her own defines her way of life. To be beautiful is one of the most desirable attributes in commodity culture, because high prices are willingly paid for rare and beautiful objects. They have the notion of commodity, concerning a beautiful woman. Not only men but also women share this notion. For example, Lily's mother who sank into desperation by her husband's bankruptcy, turns to her daughter's beauty as "the last asset in their fortunes." A noteworthy description is found concerning the mother's consciousness:

She watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian; and she tried to instil into the latter a sense of the

responsibility that such a charge involved.(34)

Here, Lily's beauty is objectified. Her personality is ignored: she is a "mere custodian" of the "property." Obviously, the mother's direction to the daughter is to take utmost care of the property to sell it at a high price, which is the ultimate destiny of a beautiful object. In this way, Lily is brought up in the environment where the grounds for judgement are entirely material. Wai-Chee Dimock makes a shrewd observation on this point:

As a controlling logic, a mode of human conduct and human association, the marketplace is everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and invisible. Under its shadow even the most private affairs take on the essence of business transactions, for the realm of human relations is fully contained within an all-encompassing business ethic.¹³

Dimock points out that Lily is clearly caught up in the ethos of exchange. Her consciousness of being a beautiful object directs her way—to be purchased at a high price. When she is talking with Selden in his shabby room, she says:

If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop—and if we can't keep it alone, we have to go into partnership.(12)

It is certain that she does not have Selden in her mind as a prospective purchaser. Her consciousness of the cult of woman as a beautiful object necessitates money to adorn her; as she does not have enough means of her own, she needs to entice a wealthy man into marriage. Her extreme consciousness of her age is also related to business ethic: twenty-nine is the borderline to be valid as a merchandise. Thus, economic and biological needs urges her to find an appropriate purchaser. Lily herself intends to be incorporated into patriarchal social structure. She sticks to the luxurious life, which she assumes to be the core of her existence, "the only world she cared for," (50) and she is fully conscious of her present marginal position in

that world.

As far as a marriage is an economic transaction, it is difficult to expect happiness in marriage. When Lily aims a mercenary marriage with Mr. Gryce who has eight hundred thousand a year, she is depressed at the prospect of a boring life with him: "It was a hateful fate—but how escape from it? What choice had she?" (25) She needs his money to "arrange her life as she pleased, to soar into that empyrean of security where creditors cannot penetrate." Her present status of a dependent, moving from one place to another, is not what she wants. Therefore, although her distaste for the marriage is clear, she intends to offer herself to be possessed: "she determines to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: he one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it." (49) "To be possessed" means to regard oneself as a commodity. Wharton shows that such humiliation is what women have to bear in a marriage as economic transaction. In the parallel case of her cousin Jack's courting Miss Van Osburgh, the situation is different. Comparing herself with Jack, Lily thinks in the following way:

All Jack has to do to get everything he wants is to keep quiet and let that girl marry him; whereas I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, when one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time.(48)

This difference comes from the difference of social positions of men and women. There are double standards: men are valued differently from women, and money is valued differently in relation to their social positions.¹⁴ Patriarchal nature is intensified in money-oriented society.

A beautiful object itself is valueless until it is purchased: therefore its fate is precarious. Any of the possible purchasers Wharton presents are inhuman and oppressive—Percy Gryce, Gus Trenor, George Dorset and Sim Rosedale. Suffocating life is suggested in a marriage to Gryce: Wharton uses the expressions like "an appalling house, all brown stone without walnut

within, with the Gryce library in a fire-proof annex that looked like a mausoleum"; his mother is "a monumental woman with the voice of a pulpit orator and a mind preoccupied with the iniquities of her servants" (22); "Mr. Gryce's egoism was a thirsty soil, requiring constant nurture from without".

(21) Gus Trenor requests Lily limitless obligations by the transaction which she ignorantly believes to be of business nature—a manipulation of her own money in stock market. He is mean because using the language of marketplace such as "investments," "returns," "interests," "payments," he demands sexual favors. Dorset is more passive and it takes more time for him to propose to Lily. His wife Bertha lures Lily for him to come with them for a long vacation on their yacht. Her purpose is to let Lily attract her husband while she is having another affair. Dorset finally proposes a deal: if she will help him by proving his wife's infidelity, he will divorce Bertha and marry Lily. Rosedale is even more inhuman: he holds fast to business principles. Knowing that Lily does not love him, he proposes overt business transactions:

Oh, if you mean you're not dead in love with me, I've got sense enough left to see that....You're not very fond of me—*yet*—but you're fond of luxury, and style, and amusement, and of not having to worry about cash. You like to have a good time, and not to have to settle for it; and what I propose to do is to provide for the good time and do the settling. (176–177)

Wharton indicates that a marriage to any of these men will naturally be inhuman because it is a business deal. A buyer tends to be arrogant and oppressive once he obtains the object he desires. Lily is well conscious of the deal. Her interests are directed to material advantages in marriage such as Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset have obtained. She understands that they are powerful owing to their rich husbands. However, she is unable to put her heart and soul to business transactions. As Maureen Howard points out, "it is not fate, after all, but a fastidious irresolution"¹⁵ of Lily that she misses a chance to wed.

III

Lily repeatedly uses the word "dingy" to indicate what she abhors. She hates dinginess in the sense of dirty, discolored life as is seen in Gerty Farish. Her way of speaking of Gerty to Selden, Gerty's cousin, shows how deeply she despises a shabby life:

"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 soap. I should hate that, you know." (7)

Gerty represents poverty and insignificance which Lily despises. Gerty stands as a warning when Lily thinks of the direction of her life: "To be herself or Gerty Farish." (25) "To be herself" means to enjoy a luxurious life as an ornament. For that purpose she must pursue a marriage to a rich man, however hateful the prospect may be. She does not think Gerty marriageable. Here, her sense of economic transaction works. Gerty is a plain girl in shabby clothes; so, she is not a marketable object. Gerty herself sadly admits that she does not have Lily's power of obtaining happiness. Gerty's awareness shows it was regarded as a matter of fact that women depend on men not only for economic security but also for their self-esteem.

What was disturbing Lily, however, on her way to the intended goal is the fact that she finds dinginess in the moneyed people, too. Of course they are not dingy in the sense of leading a shabby life, but Lily senses dinginess in the life where spiritual fulfillment is not expected. She finds dinginess in the expensive routine of her aunt's life. Mrs. Peniston who "belonged to the class of old New Yorkers who have always lived well, dressed expensively, and done little else" was a "looke-on at life." (37) Lily thinks such a passive life is dingy. She is hesitant because of the prospect of dinginess in the life she is going to obtain through the mercenary marriage. This indecision makes her fail to capture Gryce and subsequently drives her into difficult situations.

It is Selden that attempts to turn her eyes away from a marriage she aims at. He pretends to stand aloof from the extravagant, materialistic life of the moneyed class. He says that his idea of success is personal freedom: freedom "from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease, and anxiety, from all material accidents. To keep a kind of 'republic of spirit'—that's what I call success." He shows an illusion of larger life to Lily whose idea of success is "to get as much as one can out of life." (68) He induces her to get into the "republic of spirit," giving up her intention of marrying someone very rich. He verbally shows a miserable future for her. Lily herself foresees dark aspects of life after marriage; therefore, she answers implicitly "often—and often" when Selden asks her "Well—have you never foreseen it [a miserable future] yourself?" (71) Selden stirs up her anxiety. Realistically Selden is disqualified for Lily's idea of a husband. Only once Lily is moved to his world, when they were talking in the open air at Bellomont. She says, "I should look hideous in dowdy clothes; but I can trim my own hat". However, Wharton ironically describes: they were "smiling at each other like adventurous children who have climbed to a forbidden height from which they discover a new world." (73) Lily soon sees the actual world and leaves him. Selden's words are empty abstractions. How can a man live, being free "from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the materialistic accidents," in reality? Katherine Joslin points out that autonomous selfhood stands at odds with relational selfhood, engagement with the social and by necessity, the material world.¹⁷ To lead a married life closed in a "republic of spirit" is impossible. Therefore, his words are not powerful enough to keep Lily at his side. He is full of pretension and is not reliable as we see in the following path of Lily's struggle. He stays away from her when she actually needs his help. He only intensifies her dilemma: Selden's verbal picture of a "republic of spirits" induces her into the illusion of a better world without dinginess.

Lily's distaste for dinginess comes from her nature which yearns for something beautiful. Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that "her moral strength is too weak, too incompletely formed, perhaps, to invent some more authentic and meaningful form of existence."¹⁸ It may be true that Lily has no moral strength to grope her way to live a more meaningful life, but to think of the actual situation for women, we cannot help sympathizing with Lily. Social structure limited women's lives: women were assumed to be dependent on men. Even Bertha, who seems to preside over society, owes her power to her husband's money. That is why she cannot leave her husband, even though it is clear she does not love him. Women, except working-class women, were brought up to be an ornament; their mentality was directed in that way; they were not given any education or training for practical purposes. Therefore, both mentally and practically their way of life was restrained. Then, where is Wharton's emphasis in characterization of Lily? It is considered that Wharton observes Lily's dilemma attentively and finds importance in Lily's hesitation in her course. Indecision may indicate moral weakness, but in the social environment where women are supposed to marry for economic dependence, to hesitate in that course is a token of resistance. Lily lives uncompromising life, and does not incorporate herself into moral disorder of the moneyed class. Wharton, who hates the tendency of the contemporary New York society, watches Lily with sympathy. Resistance of a solitary woman is easily ignored in the society which is presided over by gigantic power, but Wharton's insistence is that such small resistance should not be ignored.

In this novel Wharton reveals abhorrent moral situation of the moneyed people. Bertha is the most horrible example. Slanders, lies, adulteries, dirty tricks...all kinds of moral disorder is seen in her. She does not care how much trouble and suffering she gives to innocent Lily. Against the frivolous figure of Bertha, Lily stands as noble. When Mrs. Haffen brings Lily Bertha's love letters to Selden, she knows it is a good chance of revenge to Bertha,

but “all her instinctive resistance of taste, of training, of blind inherited scruple, rose against the other feeling.” (104) Thus, she dismisses the chance. Later again comes the chance of making use of those letters to blackmail Bertha and eventually to reconcile her. Rosedale strongly suggests Lily to do so to restore her place in society and marry him. However, Lily cannot bring herself to do so, even though the marriage to Rosedale is the only remaining hope. Her distaste for dinginess prevents her from debasing herself. She values “one of the most abstract notions of honour that might be called the conventionalities of the moral life.” (350) Here, we can see Wharton’s insistence. Her depiction of the society of “irresponsible pleasure-seekers” through a delineation of Lily’s moral choice reveals her own preference for traditional values. As an Old New Yorker, Wharton regards the changes the society undergoes in the money-oriented cadence as deplorable. R. W. B. Lewis indicates that *The House of Mirth* was recognized by contemporary literate New Yorkers as the first American novel to give an accurate, if also devastating, portrait of their society.²⁰ The emphasis in Wharton’s depiction is not so much on Bertha’s abominable conduct as on the inhuman and frivolous attitudes of the society as a whole. Lily is innocent of the charge Bertha claims on her, but as Lily says, “the truth about any girl is that once she’s talked about she’s done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks.” People tend to believe Bertha’s story than Lily’s, because “she has a big house and an opera box, and it’s convenient to be on good terms with her.” (226) The power structure is evident. Money and power is identified, and people are under its control. Carry Fisher, who manages to find a convenient place for herself at any moment, advises Lily: “It’s not a pretty place: and the only way to keep a footing in it is to fight it on its own terms—and above all, my dear, not alone!” (252) “To fight it on its terms” is far easier than to try to keep one’s own sense of values. But Lily refuses that and eventually she is pushed out of the

society. By showing Lily's solitary figure, Wharton emphasizes the inhuman nature of the society. In her letter to Dr. Morgan Dix she asserts that her intention of writing the novel was on that point:

Social conditions as they are just now in our new world, where the sudden possession of money has come without inherited obligations or any traditional sense of solidarity between the classes, is a vast & absorbing field for the novelist....²¹

She believes her job is "a criticism of life," and a good fiction (in ethical sense) might be defined as the kind which "probes deep enough to get at the relation with the eternal laws."²² She is prepared that a novelist who has this feeling is often discouraged by the comments of the critics and the readers.

IV

Through her characterization of Lily, Wharton shows how difficult it is to keep one's integrity if one steps out of the expected way even a little. The discrepancy between Lily's inner needs and the outer environment reminds us other heroines in literature. In the later part of the nineteenth century there appeared several novels, both in Europe and in America, whose heroines make resistance to complying with the social expectations of women, trying to assert one's self. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) are examples. *The House of Mirth* can be listed to follow those predecessors, although Lily seems to be a weaker character, compared with other heroines. Lily is defensive, trying to keep herself within the social demands for women. Wharton shows, however, her inner resistance is persistent, although it is not positively shown. In the opening chapter Lily's resistance is already witnessed. In the dialogue with Selden she shows her unwillingness to pursue the course she is supposed to go on, although she intends to comply with the prosaic imperative to marry.

"Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?"

She *sighed*.²³ "I suppose so. What else is there?"

"Exactly. And so why not take the plunge and have it over?" She shrugged her shoulders. "You speak as if I ought to marry the first man who came along." (9)

Obviously she is not fully convinced of her destiny to be an ornament, although she intends to follow the way. Lindberg says:

Society functions as a prison in her fiction, not because the individual, "trailing clouds of glory", has accidentally fallen into it, nor because he is being tested by exposure to its confines, but because he has been born and reared in it: he learns to perceive reality through the bars of a cage.²⁴

Wharton's depiction of Lily's hesitation stresses the greatness of the social pressure: as Lily's awareness is restrained by environment, hesitation is a form of resistance to convention. Her hesitant mental state is revealed in her unstable figure: she moves constantly. Her first appearance in the book is in the afternoon rush of the Great Central Station. She is between the trains. It is true that her state of dependency necessitates her to move from one place to another. But it also indicates that she is a woman in transition: it is supposed that she explores a larger world in social constraint.

Lily finds herself helpless when she falls from her accustomed society, as she deplors: "I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it, I found I was of no use anywhere else." (308) Working-class is a totally unknown world. She is at a loss how to adjust herself to the new situation. Although once she told Selden that she can trim her own hats (73), her ability is not professionally competitive. Her helplessness as a breadwinner indicates a woman's precarious position. A woman is hardly given an independent existence.

In this way, Wharton's characterization of Lily focusses on the significance of social structure in one's fate, but at the same time, her insistence is that society is not static. Through the novel Wharton reveals that the structure

of New York society is changing: "Old New York" is taken over by the new rich commercial people; in the course of time, there comes other new elements, too, as are represented not only by Rosedale but also by the Blys and Mrs. Hatch. Most conspicuous example is Rosedale. At the beginning of the story, he is presented as a person whose wish to enter society is ignored in spite of his wealth. As the story goes on, however, we witness his position is changing: people like Trenor come to necessitate his favor, even though he is Jewish. As Rosedale himself retrospectively says, he has been getting his position in society little by little. Social structure has notably changed in a year. Wharton's description of details about social events and people's reaction to them helps to give substantialities to her novelistic world. She shows that such changes in society are accompanied by moral issues. For example, a year ago, Rosedale necessitated Lily as a passport to get into society, but now that he has almost attained his position in society, he rejects scandalous Lily as harmful to him. He is ready to marry her, only if she restores her place in society: he urges Lily to use Bertha's letters to blackmail her. Wharton's depiction of Rosedale's inhuman ideas shows that moral disorder still continues, although social structure undergoes change. If an individual person is shaped by social environment, his way of life will change when there is a change in social structure, but moral issues are not so easily adjustable once they become in disorder. That is why Wharton values Lily's notion of honour, by which she saves herself from taking part in moral corruption. She struggles, but she comes to understand the importance of human fellowship through a reencounter with Nettie Struther. Once she extended a hand of help to save Nettie from misfortunes. George Struther, a simple working man, has accepted Nettie's affair with another man, and together they have built a nest "on the edge of a cliff." (320) Seeing Nettie's poor but happy state in the family, and listening to her words of thanks to Lily, Lily feels stronger and happier in spite of her own desolate

state. Lily herself has failed to secure her place anywhere, but she is deeply moved to find the continuity of life there. She understands that Nettie has reached the central truth of existence, which is human fellowship. Neither George nor Nettie depends on the other: they both cooperate, with faith in each other. Wharton shows that Lily's life is not meaningless because she comes to be convinced of the central truth of existence in another person.

Wharton's view of the individual in society is sustained by her awareness that social structure undergoes constant change: she seeks to relate it with the eternal laws.

NOTES

- 1 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (Penguin Books, 1993). All quotations from this novel are taken from this edition.
- 2 Edith Wharton, *The Letters of Edith Wharton* ed. R. W. Lewis and Nancy Leavis (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1988) 93.
- 3 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933) 56.
- 4 Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 56 – 57.
- 5 F. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York, Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1985) 34.
- 6 Lewis, *A Biography* 34.
- 7 Wharton, *The Letters* 97.
- 8 *Henry James and Edith Wharton Letters: 1900–1915* ed. Lyall H. Powers (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990) 34.
- 9 Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 207.
- 10 Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 207.
- 11 Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *An Introduction to The House of Mirth* (Penguin Books, 1985) xxv.
- 12 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York Edition Vol.3, 1908)

- 13 Wai-Chee Dimock, "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*" *PMLA* 100 (1985) 783.
- 14 Judith Fetterly comments that Jack operates from a position of power. c. f. Judith Fetterley, "The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object": "Double Standard and Double Bind in *The House of Mirth*" *Studies in American Fiction* 5 (1977) 211.
- 15 Maureen Howard, "The Bachelor and the Baby: *The House of Mirth*" *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton* ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge UP, 1995) 143.
- 16 Lily's insistence is that a woman needs to adorn herself. She says, "If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked as much for her clothes as for herself." (12).
- 17 Katherine Joslin, *Edith Wharton* (London: Macmillan, 1991) 52.
- 18 Wolff xxiii – xxiv.
- 19 Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 207.
- 20 Lewis, *A Biography* 153.
- 21 Wharton, *Letters* 99.
- 22 Wharton, *Letters* 99.
- 23 Emphasis Added.
- 24 Gary Lindberg, *Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners* (Charlottesville: UP of California, 1975) 36.