“Under the Glitter of Their Opportunities:"

The American Dream in *The House of Mirth*

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the nature of the American Dream in Edith Wharton's novel, The House of Mirth. The book chronicles the demise of Lily Bart through her inability to make a series of difficult choices. The unacceptability of Lily's options becomes obvious when viewing the novel through the conflicting ideologies of American leisure class and the success ethics of the growing middle classes at the turn of the century. Throughout this story, Wharton presents the reader with varying examples of these paradigms and places Lily in untenable positions between the two. By demonstrating that the fall of Lily Bart is a result of her inability to extend the narrow experiences of her upbringing rather than the sad consequence of a cannibalistic society, this paper helps elevate the novel above the confined genre of a high society gossip journal and gives it significance to American society and culture.

The society of the leisure class revolves around the accumulation and display of wealth, and within this sphere, Lily's only acceptable occupation is that of a wife with the attendant "social" graces. The crux of her problem lies within this narrow sphere. The singular focus of aggrandizing a husband's money is unfulfilling when held to the standards of personal achievement and morality apparently possible in the larger American Dream. Lily, therefore, is asked to choose between the only lifestyle she is prepared to navigate—that of a high society wife—and an independent life for which she is unprepared and unequipped. Caught in the cross currents of class and cultural paradigms, Lily is often seen as a woman destroyed by the immutable expectations of the social class in which she was born. Wharton, however, defined her as woman brought down by a lack of opportunity and training. She distinguishes Lily from the rest of the leisure class when she sets forth Lily's estimation of the social elite. "Under the glitter of their opportunities, she saw the poverty of their achievement" (HM 17).

This quote sets the structure of this thesis and reveals the disparity between the complacency of Wharton's "society" and the often conflicting ethics of success and morality in the greater American culture. The first section will define the American Dream and outline its paradoxical nature and the role it plays in both motivating Lily's actions and choices. In section two, Lily's ultimate inability to choose and independent existence will be shown through the role and influence of Lily's mother and the fear of "dinginess" she instilled in her daughter. Section three examines Lily's marriage opportunities and the issue of commodification of women in marriage. By positing for Lily that an advantageous marriage means both bartering herself and losing or repressing much of her self-identity, one better understands why the various marriage options were ultimately untenable. The fourth section addresses the characters of Lawrence Selden and Gerty Farish and demonstrates how their philosophies and/or choices reinforce that Lily's dilemma is the result of her unique social position and conflicting social and cultural values. Section five draws conclusions about the tragedy of The House of Mirth and its relationship to the American Dream. This final section deals predominantly with notions of heroism and the ideas of "wholeness" that consume Lily before her death. The tragedy of the novel is in Lily's demise, but the story also concludes with an achievement: by never having given herself over to a marriage she could not bear, and by not demeaning her moral integrity, Lily was able to escape her life with "wholeness" and clarity.
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Preface

I first read *The House of Mirth* the summer before I enrolled at the University of Michigan. Initially I was struck by the line in the novel, “Under the glitter of their opportunities, she saw the poverty of their achievement” (HM 47). At the time, I understood the quotation as the underlying message of the story, and applied it as a caveat to myself. I was about to enter the opportunity-laden environment of a large and prestigious university, and true to the success ethic of the American Dream. I did not want to be satisfied by the happy glow of my options, but wished to solidify them with meaningful growth and accomplishment. Now, nearly four years later, my sense of Wharton’s tragedy is still epitomized by this quotation, but my experiences have encouraged me to view the novel from a broadened perspective.

Through careful study I have developed an evolving definition of “The Dream” that incorporates both the economic quest for a better life and the need to restrain this quest through moral considerations. It is this issue of ethical temperance that is most problematic for the leisure society of Wharton’s novel. As I began to consider the intense personal tension that stems from the discrepancy between culture and society, my concept of the novel’s tragedy was altered and broadened. This issue is not limited to Lily’s elite class, but is a conflict which resonates through all levels of society. Lily Bart’s inability to live up to her glittering opportunities was the result of inevitable and untenable choices brought on by conflicting ideologies.

This thesis attempts to develop a theory of the novel centered in the greater American culture. I will explore the origins of Wharton’s dilemma through places in the
novel where decisive action is taken or avoided, and those where cultural paradigms are
subjugated by the conventions of a particular group. It is at these pivotal moments that
Wharton gives us the greatest insight into the implications and anguish associated with
making the most difficult choice: Is wealth and achievement worth the sacrifice of the
moral self?
1. Edith Wharton, Lily Bart, and the Paradox of The American Dream

It was said of Edith Wharton that she and Theodore Roosevelt were self-made men, and the saying pleased her. She and the president, contemporaries and good friends, had grown up together and escaped from the kind of society that was the hardest of all to escape from: the secure, complacent haute bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century that found politics too dirty for gentleman and letters too inky for ladies.

(Auchincloss vii)

Where is there a divergence between society and culture, and what tensions are created on the boundary between the two concepts? In her 1905 novel The House of Mirth, Edith Wharton’s character of Lily Bart exists within a precarious set of circumstances which emphasize the tensions between the haute bourgeoisie society of her birth, and the larger ideals of her common culture. Lacking wealth, society for Lily is neither “secure” nor “complacent.” Unlike Wharton, she does not possess the skills necessary to become a “self made man.” These restrictions form the impetus of the novel: Are wealth and security worth the sacrifice of the moral self?

The fact that Wharton found the Roosevelt comparison flattering and is evidently proud of escaping a society of leisure betrays certain mainstays of American cultural beliefs that cross class and gender lines. The classic American creed declares that one can attain success, respect and advancement through hard work and risk-taking, and thrives on the ideals of personal achievement and initiative. However, the upperclass paradigm is one in which wealth is assumed and social ambitions therefore precede other
objectives. Despite the interest of the “elite” in creating an exclusive class, the principal
ideological conventions of social mobility and opportunity though individual ambition
remain prevalent in Wharton’s apparent values and literary aspirations.

Through her own willingness to incur the scorn of society in order to achieve her
intellectual goals, Wharton achieved distinction and notoriety. For Lily Bart, the
challenge is to transcend the conventional objective of marriage and salvage her sense of
a true self. Unlike Wharton, however, Lily is ill-equipped to contest the position for
which she has been shaped. The genius and tragedy of the novel lies in the ways in
which Wharton tantalizes Lily and her reader with opportunities to achieve either
societal or personal success. Simultaneously, she implies that each option is ultimately
dissatisfactory and falls short of manifesting the “true” American ideal.

The American Dream is, loosely, the disputed notion that in this country one can
forge a better life for oneself if one is willing to put forth a great deal of desire and effort
(Kerr 9). Robert Wuthnow expands the guiding influence of the American Dream by
arguing that it is an economic and moral framework:

It [The American Dream] supplies understandings about why one should
work hard and about the values of having money, but it does so in a way
that guards against money and work being taken as ends in themselves. It
creates mental maps that allow distinctions to be drawn between
economic behavior and other commitments. It draws deeply on implicit
understandings about family, community, and the sacred. It comes in
many varieties, reflecting different ethnic, religious, regional, and
occupational subcultures. But its core assumptions transcend these subcultures. 4

This edict is a pervading aspect of American culture, but one conspicuously out of sync with the more confined patterns of the wealthy and exclusive leisure class. Where the American Dream embraces individualism and risk-taking, the rules of “society” require conformity and adherence to social roles and patterns. Wharton’s novel centers around this divergence. In The House of Mirth Lily’s elite, leisure “society” is defined almost entirely by interactions among persons of that class. The conventions that dictate these encounters solidify the abstract “society” into a concrete and critical structure in Lily’s life. “Society” is therefore a series of formalized communications among individuals which, in many ways, maintain the cohesiveness and exclusivity of the class.

“Society” perpetuates its singularity through its separation from the larger culture. Wharton describes the leisure class as possessing the “[...] quality of making other standards non-existent by ignoring them.” She continues: “This attribute was common to most of Lily’s set; they had a force of negation which eliminated everything beyond their own range of perception” (HM. 41). Lily’s class is able to subjugate the moral restraint of the American Dream through the power of this “force of negation.” The rules and rituals that promote the commodification of interpersonal relationships ignore standards of moral restraint. “Business, in the social world,” claims Wai-Chee Dimock, “operates by what we might call the commodification of social intercourse” (376). Within high

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society, property was retained and controlled through alliances between its members
Ammons 33; Stamin 9. The construction of such partnerships requires that personal-
ties of family, marriage, and friendships become secondary to the economic preservation
of the society. So long as society is self-contained and static, tensions between cultural
and societal values are minimized; however, for individuals whose "perception" extends
beyond their narrow "society," the inconsistency of expectations and values can become
problematic.

In The House of Mirth, the characters who most clearly feel the strain of an
illuminated perspective are Lily Bart, Gerty Farish, and Lawrence Selden. Each of these
individuals lack the key component of the "society" paradigm: money. Lily's dedication
to the objects and activities of society require that she marry a wealthy man. Selden and
Gerty must work, live in small flats, and relinquish full participation in society. Their
deficiency demands that each person deliberate and carefully structure their interactions
within their group. As a result, they are always forced to consider the costs and rewards
of their actions. They cannot simply subsist on the parameters of society life without
constant evaluation and reflection.

Wharton's paradox for Lily lies in the intersection between this "society" and a
more broad concept of "culture". "Culture" is not dependant upon interactions among
individuals, but refers to abstract, yet universal and recognizable, ideals that unify a large
mass under an expansive paradigm. The culture that gave rise to the American Dream
encompassed not only the wealthy elite, but also the growing industrial and mercantile
classes of the early twentieth century (McDowell 25). A unique paradigm rose from
within this more progressive, accepting, and larger connection of people, and it promoted the pursuit of the dream of a better life. The pervasiveness of this American Dream is due in part to its adaptability and to the fact that it is generated in "culture" rather than "society;" as such, the dream is not subject to the values and regulations of a particular class, but is relevant and applicable to all incorporated within American culture.

This distinction between society and culture is critical to understanding the role of the American Dream in *The House of Mirth*. In the novel, elite society, more than any other, functions as a nearly self-contained unit, and its mechanisms revolve around the needs and traditions of its members. For example, nearly all of Mrs. Peniston's actions are determined by the expectations of her "inherited obligations" (HM 32), and Judy Trenor's role as the continual hostess defines both her reputation and her relationship to other women in her set. The fact that Bertha Dorset's false accusation has the power to destroy Lily's viability within the leisure society, yet makes little difference to Mrs. Hatch, Nettie Struthers, and others further demonstrates the group's detachment. The intensity of this society's "inherited obligations" lessens the influence of the larger culture.

Wharton highlights this point when she refers to members of society as flies trapped in a bottle (HM 47), and actors unable to see the world beyond the stage because of the brightness of the footlights (HM 60). For members of Lily's set, the adherence to specific roles and responsibilities is more important than the development of personal ambitions. In each of these metaphors society is described as a self-contained unit, capable of superseding or distorting the ideals of the larger culture.

*Lily Bart* is unique in that she operates within an undefined and therefore
precarious social position. As such she is accountable to cultural paradigms. Lily’s dissatisfaction and uncertainty is produced by her lack of a defined social role and is intensely problematic within her social group based upon its regulated codes of interaction. This sense of outsidersness results in Lily’s greater awareness of and attraction to, the individualistic and moralistic ideals of the American Dream. Rather than expanding Lily’s options, this sense of separation is the crux of her dilemma.

Robert Wuthnow describes the tension produced by conflicting goals within the American Dream:

> Yet [. . .] these economic commitments seem increasingly to get in the way of other needs that cry out from the depth of our souls: the need to cultivate intimate relationships with our families, the desire to be a part of a caring community, the quest for spirituality and truth, and, perhaps most of all, the longing to know ourselves better and grow as persons. (7)

Lily’s journey from high society to lonely impoverishment can be largely attributed to society’s inability to fulfill these desires. Within the leisure class, even the highly personal roles of wife and mother become intimately connected to the material and economic well-being of the society, and are therefore less personally and emotionally fulfilling. Lily’s inability to take decisive action to cement her role in society and her consequent removal from its inner circle can be traced directly to the confusion of, and incongruity between, the economic and moral ideals that interplay within “society” and “culture.”

Wharton recognizes the paradox this American ideology creates within society: it is a paradigm capable of bringing both hope of advancement and success, and despair
and frustration to those who do not have the skills or opportunities to make and execute
the required choices. Thorstien Veblen illuminated the nature of Lily’s difficult position
in his 1899 book, *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Through his extensive examination of
the rituals and privileges of this elite and unique group, Veblen formulates a theory that
places women in societal positions which are simultaneously essential and intellectul.
According to this theory, the function of women in the leisure class was to aggrandize
and display the superfluous wealth of their husbands:

The wife, who was at the outset the drudge and chattel of the man, both
in fact and in theory—the producer of goods for him to consume—has
become the ceremonial consumer of goods which he produces. But she
still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory; for the habitual
rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is the abiding mark of the
un-free servant. (83)

Veblen combines this assertion with a theory of “transmissible gentility”--the idea that a
woman who has, by virtue of her parentage, been “ennobled by protracted contact with
accumulated wealth or unbroken prerogative” is therefore “preferred in marriage both
for the sake of a resulting alliance with her powerful relatives and because superior worth
is felt to inhere in blood which has been associated with many goods and great power”
(55). The application of these ideas defines the elite class as an exclusive society
dependant upon rigid roles and interactions among a select community. It is a concept
Wharton reinforced in her novel and one alluded to by Gus Trenor’s dismissive remark.
“life’s too short to spend it breaking in new people” ‘HM 118’.
A basic understanding of Veblen’s theory helps address a common critique of Wharton’s writing. Literary critics are often troubled by the fact that Wharton points out many weaknesses in New York society, but gives the reader few alternatives to this flawed system. Wershoven 45. To resolve this dilemma one must consider that Wharton does not seek to change her society, but to expose its unique difficulties and pressures. Because the existence of the leisure class depends largely upon its exclusivity and narrowly defined roles for women, a broadening of female opportunities would entail radical and fundamental changes in the structure of the society—a situation Wharton would likely not have considered.

The notion of the American Dream is undeniably abstract, continually modified, and ultimately individual. For each person, class, and generation the perceived worth, viability, and goal of the dream is revised. Although it may be impossible to define a specifically universal “American Dream,” aspects of the paradigm are constant and immutable: among these are individuality, self-reliance, responsibility, and the expectation of a better life. Wharton’s story in The House of Mirth examines the frustrating, troubling, and dramatic paradox of the American Dream. As she places Lily Bart at the juncture between a society that commodifies ideas of economic and personal distinction and a culture in which such goals are highly prized, the impossibility of Lily’s position becomes lucid. If Lily attains material and economic prosperity, she must objectify herself and relinquish the introspection and personal morality of Selden’s appealing “republic of the spirit” (HM 258). At the same time, however, becoming anything other than a society wife involves a rejection of her upbringing for which Lily is
equally unprepared. While Wharton herself was able to make the decision to become an author despite being stigmatized within her society\(^2\), in her novel she creates a character too moral for the shallow existence of a society wife, yet too undereducated and entrenched within the values of her culture to spurn its priorities. The ideals of the American Dream contribute to Lily's tragedy in that they both direct and confuse her ambition while characterizing her ultimate failure.

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\(^2\) Wharton was often criticized by those in her society for her intellectualism and literary ambitions. An early engagement to Harry Stevens was broken and the Newport \textit{Daily News} attributed the breakup to "an alleged preponderance of intellectuality on the part of the intended bride. Miss Jones is an ambitious authoress, and it is said that, in the eyes of Mr. Stevens, ambition is a grievous fault." McDowell 3. Additionally, in her memoir, \textit{A Backward Glance}, Wharton refers to society's opinion of her aspirations as "a thick fog of indifference, if not tacit disapproval." Wharton 121.
2. Lily Bart’s Resistance to “Dinginess”

Born into the wealth and privilege of the leisure class, Lily Bart seemingly was not meant to be an aspirant of the American Dream. Yet, in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton composes a character with the values, interests, and dilemmas of one chasing the financial and personal distinction of the American Dream of success tempered by morality. Growing up within the narrow sphere of high society, matrimony was Lily’s intended vocation, and she was trained only in charm and beauty. The fact that the Bart family’s loss of both patriarch and financial stability occurs almost concurrently with Lily’s social debut forces her into the unusual position of female economic responsibility (Tyson 21-26). With her father dead and her fortune lost, Lily’s best chance to maintain her lifestyle and place in society is through marriage, and it is to this end that her mother instills within her the responsibilities and ideals of the American Dream of a “better life.”

In directing her efforts toward a financially beneficial marriage for Lily, Mrs. Bart cultivates within her daughter a fear of “dinginess” (HM 41), an excessive concern for appearances, and an extreme emphasis on exploiting opportunities. In so doing, Mrs. Bart effectively limits her daughter’s realm of possibilities and narrows her definition of success by centering it entirely within the realm of marriage. Although Mrs. Bart’s concerns may have been cultivated within the traditions of the upperclass, her goals and admonitions to Lily betray many American cultural ideals. Prevailing among them is the notion that personal dedication to a goal can result in its attainment.

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily’s dilemma is intensified because the dream in question is inelastic and predetermined. Lacking the imagination and desire to relinquish
the aesthetics of a wealthy lifestyle, and without the skills to approach its attainment on her own, Lily’s future hopes never seriously stray from her mother’s insistence upon a beneficial marriage. The staunch power of Lily’s learned values diminishes the possibility that she will ever be able to accept a more “ordinary” existence:

She was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself. But what manner of life would it be? [. . .] none of the desultory interests which she dignified with the name of tastes was pronounced enough to enable her to live contentedly in obscurity. Ah no- she was too intelligent not to be honest with herself. She knew that she hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch. (HM 45)

In this instance Lily is deliberating between two notions of the American dream. Her mother has set her on the archetypal path of an upper class woman--to marry well and increase her social influence through her husband’s money. This goal is quite limiting. It forces Lily to be dependent upon the physical and social characteristics which make her appealing to men. Under such pressures she is not free to explore the emotional and intellectual aspects of her person. As a result, Lily experiences “fits of angry rebellion” and longs to chase after what appears to be a more gratifying aspiration of personal distinction or fulfillment. As Lily admits, however, such a life is unacceptable in that it is
prone to “dinginess,” a term Mrs. Bart often uses to describe the ordinary or unspectacular.

Lily’s aversion to “dinginess” and its connotations of failure increases her dependence upon high society because it is only in “society” that she is exceptional. Outside of the closed world of wealth and charm and manipulation, Lily has no skills to make her line or distinctive; she herself, not simply her surroundings, become “dingy.” In Lily’s unsuccessful attempt to support herself by working in the millinery, the other workers afford her no special treatment because of her previous stature, and Lily senses an undercurrent of resentment toward her lack of skill. Within the millinery, Lily recognizes that her lack of training and competence inspires the disinterest of the other workers because she had so clearly fallen short of their paradigm of success. Wharton writes, “She had fallen, she had “gone under,” and true to the ideal of their race, they were awed only by the gross, tangible image of material achievement” (HM 212).

Although Wharton here makes a clear distinction between Lily and the workers, referring to them as members of different “races,” it is clear that the cultural criterions of the milliners are not dramatically different than those to which Lily subscribes; both equate success in society with extravagance and brilliance. Despite holding a similar standard for societal success, Lily and the workers differ in their estimation of her shortcomings. While Lily seems to judge herself because she has not attained status and significance within “society,” the workers judge her more harshly by her inefficiency and absence of skill than by her fall from the glamor of high society. They are disinterested because Lily lacks “tangible” wealth, and disdainful of her lack of talent.
This distinction highlights the conflicting standards to which Lily feels she much adhere. In society, she must be decorative. In the working world, she must be useful. The notion of the American Dream that success can be achieved through hard work further adds to Lily's confusion and lack of direction. The multiplicity of dilemmas Lily faces—her relative poverty, rootlessness, and seeming inability to be decisive, as well as her vacillation between superficiality and deep introspection—can be viewed through the lens of the success standard, adding insight to the character of Lily Bart and the tragedy of *The House of Mirth*. This perspective draws out the apparently unresolvable paradox created by the conflicts of Lily's upbringing, her reality, and the pressures and expectation of an undefinable existence between culture and society.

Lily is unusual in that she evaluates her actions according to these standards and expectations of success. Mrs. Bart, on the other hand, though accepting the standards of social and economic enhancement espoused by the American Dream, is someone for whom the dream is impersonal and removed. Like other women of her class, Mrs. Bart is entirely dependent upon her husband for economic support, and her social triumphs are accomplished to a certain extent, because he agrees to underwrite her various excursions, dresses, and parties. To Lily, her father is a distant, undistinguished figure, and his death only affects her in that it coincides with the loss of their fortune and a significant lifestyle change. Of the two events, Wharton makes clear that it is the financial ruination of the family that is the most profound. She writes: "that awful fact overshadowed even her father's slow and difficult dying. To his wife he no longer counted. He had become extinct when he no longer filled his purpose" (HM 28). This
chilling revelation demonstrates the extent to which Lily is taught to devalue personal relationships. Mr. Bart becomes inconsequential when he ceases to fill his designated place in society, and with his withdrawal the Bart women are left without the needed financial backing for their social position. In this situation, Lily’s relationship with her mother is altered. Because Lily has the charm and beauty to make an advantageous marriage her mother begins to direct her daughter’s “career” with a sense of urgency and ownership.

In a state Wharton describes as “furious apathy” and “inert anger,” (HM 29), Mrs. Bart becomes consumed with the idea of Lily as her financial redeemer. The phrases chosen by Wharton illuminate the frustration of Mrs. Bart’s position. By losing her place in society, Mrs. Bart has also lost any illusion of prerogative. Her experience has not led her to think of herself as economically capable (and, in fact she is not), and her hopes begin to rest solely on the cultivation of Lily’s charm and beauty and the prospect of an advantageous marriage for her daughter. She possessively describes Lily’s physical characteristics as the “last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt.” (HM 29). Lily is thus turned into Mrs. Bart’s commodity in the marriage market. Her mother intensely decries love marriages and impresses upon her daughter the unique advantages and significance of her beauty.

According to Mrs. Bart, any failure of Lily’s to marry well would be the result of stupidity or willful ignorance. This idea is important to the role Lily will play as a wealthy wife and the bearer of the burden of the American Dream. First, in order to marry well, she must successfully display those characteristics which make her beneficial to a husband
for a profitable acquisition', and secondly, she must understand the edict that she is responsible for her ability or inability to garner a prosperous husband. In this manner, Lily learns to abhor "dinginess," and to view herself as an asset to be marketed and used for economic gain, a process Lois Tyson described as the "commodification of women" (Tyson 19). This manner of viewing and conducting personal relationships is a recognized convention of Lily's society. At the Van Osburgh wedding, "society" marriages are referred to as "ugly and prosaic arrangements" (HM 81), and Bertha Dorset dismisses the value of her husband's company at Bellomont saying, "You don't count, George, one doesn't have to talk to one's husband." (HM 66).

Lily, too, initially accepted her designated role almost without question. She is inspired by the idea of her "opportunities" and views them as the means by which she can escape the frustration of her current state (HM 30). Unlike Mrs. Bart, however, Lily dreams of using her promise to attain more than monetary and social gains: "She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste" (HM 30). Although the "diffusion of refinement and good taste" are somewhat questionable "powers for good," the fact that Lily is already beginning to attempt to rationalize her actions betrays a level of discomfort with her position as a commodity. Lily can accept seeking a marriage partner on the basis of economic stability only because she imagines it will furnish her with more admirable options.

This justification ultimately fails Lily in part because she finds no examples of similar benevolence in her "society." After Mrs. Bart dies, Lily's elderly aunt, Mrs.
Peniston, agrees to take Lily:

[ . . . ] she had the kind of moral *mauvaise honte* which makes the public display of selfishness difficult, though it does not interfere with its private indulgence. It would have been impossible for Mrs. Peniston to be heroic on a desert island, but with the eyes of her little world upon her she took a certain pleasure in the act.  

HM 31.

Like Mrs. Bart, Mrs. Peniston's chief concern is the estimation of the outside world. Her decision to help Lily is not made with regard for her late brother, Lily's father, nor out of a sense of personal duty, but rather from a need to present a public semblance of goodness and familial responsibility. Unlike Mrs. Bart, however, Mrs. Peniston has no desire to distinguish herself in "her little world." This important distinction is one which Lily finds frustrating, for it lends itself to "dinginess" and requires a more passive lifestyle. Lily perceives many opportunities are squandered through Mrs. Peniston's apathy (HM 33), and her inert displeasure with her situation raises concerns about the managerial role of the mother within high society.

Upon learning of the likely engagement of Percy Gryce and Evie Van Osburgh, Lily regrets losing the controlling influence of her own mother. Lily thinks:

Ah, lucky girls who grow up in the shelter of a mother's love, a mother who knows how to contrive opportunities without conceding favors, how to take advantage of propinquity without allowing appetite to be dulled by habit! The cleverest girl may miscalculate where her own interests are concerned, may yield too much at one moment and withdraw too far at
the next: it takes a mother’s unerring vigilance and foresight to land her
daughters safely in the arms of wealth and suitability. HM 78-79

Lily considers her aborted engagement to Percy Gryce to be “the worst mistake in her
career” HM 75; one which would, presumably, have been avoided under the watchful
eye of Mrs. Bart. Such insinuations demonstrate the pervasiveness of society’s customs: a
woman’s vocation is to marry, and the ultimate duty of a mother is to secure such a
match for her children. The mother-daughter relationship is one in which maternal love
is ironically linked with the perpetuation of a social order that reduces the closest of
human relationships to their economic purpose and potential.

Lawrence Chenoweth writes of the American Dream: “the dream of success
[...]] while partially successful in directing the energies of the American people, has
significantly failed to give meaning to the full range of our personal and social
experience”(2). The goals of the American Dream help motivate Lily’s quest for a
beneficial marriage that would sustain a lifestyle without financial concerns. However,
her singular path is inconsistent with other aspects of life, including desire, leisure,
humanity, and morality. The tensions created by these conflicting ideals are clearly
visible in Lily’s often inconsistent actions. Bound by her mother’s charge to aspire to
financial prosperity and social prominence, Lily spends the greater part of her life looking
for opportunities (i.e. marriages to wealthy bachelors) to achieve these goals. Because she
cannot find evidence of a higher intention in this pursuit, however, Lily is continually
hesitant to commit to commodifying herself. Mrs. Bart’s charge to her daughter cannot
give meaning to Lily’s life, and therefore Lily is disinclined to sacrifice her primary asset
her availability for marriage for a place in society that offers public approval, but personal disengagement, loneliness, and emptiness.

While Lily's "hesitating between corrupt society and moral idealism" (Lyde 134) leads to her downfall, her lack of commitment to either societal goals or personal aspirations gives her insight into the unfulfilled desires of others. Much of Lily's success in manipulating situations stems from her understanding of the emotional void of human intimacy which exists within her social class. As Lily prompts Gus Trenor to speculate money for her she evokes his willing assent by deceptively intimating a confidence in him, and thereby stroking a vanity often ignored by his wife and others close to him. By falsely allowing Trenor to feel that they have a unique understanding, Lily "appealed to his highest sympathies" (HM 72) with characteristically effective skill:

Twenty-four hours earlier, if his wife had consulted him on the subject of Miss Bart's future, he would have said that a girl [...] had better marry the first rich man she could get; but with the subject of discussion on his side, turning to him for sympathy, making him feel he understood her better than her dearest friends, and confirming the assurance by the appeal of her exquisite nearness, he was ready to swear that such a marriage was a desecration. (HM 72)

Lily succeeds in gaining Trenor's financial help by capitalizing upon the neglected realm of personal intimacy. Trenor's assent is thus in itself a transgression of social boundaries: by making this financial deal with Gus Trenor Lily is afforded the freedom to delay marriage, "an action that not only makes her useless to the society Wharton portrays, but
also [...] threatening". Ammons 30.

The persistent effects of inherited social class obligations and expectations developed Lily into a highly specialized product of society incapable of living independently of its framework. It also, however, exposed the emptiness and lack of intimacy which inundated the structure of the leisurely society. Lily is caught between a community with the power of "eliminating everything beyond their own range of perception" (HM +1) and a culture whose "pursuit of work and money is restrained by moral commitments deeply ingrained in its character" (Wuthnow +). In this crux Lily is presented with the dilemma of making distasteful personal sacrifices in order to attain a foothold in society. The necessity of these choices is made more repugnant by Lily’s stalwart condescension and perceived moral superiority. The next section will assess the untenability of this choice and the accompanying problems of commodification in marriage.
3. Lily Bart and the Dilemma of Marriage

The fact that Lily is ultimately unable to choose to marry for money or to pursue an independent existence exacts a harsh penalty upon her personal happiness. Lily dies a lonely woman who feels rootless and devoid of meaningful human relationships. She lives as a what Carol Wershoven calls the “female intruder.” “This intruder may be defined as the woman who is in some way outside her society; she is different from other women, whether because of her background or lack of social status or because she has violated some social taboo” (14). In Lily’s case, her outsider status makes her more vulnerable to the whims of others. At no time is she able to transcend her lack of a definite social status. Bertha Dorset views Lily as expendable when it satisfies her purpose, and many of her society friends follow suit because it is easier to dispose of Lily than to reject Bertha’s social status and buying power (Wershoven 57). Wives in Wharton’s society, as Elizabeth Ammons indicates, are the link between social and financial power, and Lily’s lack of a husband resulted in a precariously undefined, expendable, and ultimately powerless social position.

Ammons goes further to define women within the social and economic framework. She writes:

Her [Lily’s] utility within class is clearly spelled out by Wharton. Men go out into the commercial world to accumulate money, but unless the rich man also accumulates a woman, all his money and property and power do not extend beyond the narrow mercantile world into the social realm, into the society at large. Therefore to a rich man, ownership of a woman is
not a luxury, but a necessity. 

While evidence supportive of this idea can be found in *The House of Mirth*, the statement must be qualified in order to be accurate. The marital needs of a wealthy man of leisure are distinct from those of the rich man of business. Though both arguably seek a wife for social gain, the leisurely gentleman such as Percy Gryce seeks to elevate his secure social position, while a social outsider and man of business, such as Sim Rosedale, wants a wife who will help him achieve social legitimacy. For Gryce, Lily aims to “be to him what his Americana had been, the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it.” (HM 42) She intends to show him how fulfilling her wishes for expensive clothes, jewels, elaborate parties, and trips could increase his social worth and infuse him with a the taste, pleasure, and energy he has lacked hereto. Lily’s beauty, lineage, and charm qualify her to fulfill the duties of a wife of the leisure class—that is, to demonstrate her husband’s superior affluence and status through the display and consumption of superfluous wealth (Veblen 83). By doing her “job” well, i.e., “so identifying herself with her husband’s vanity that to gratify her wishes would be for him the most exquisite form of self-indulgence” (HM 42), Lily would gain relief from her economic concerns and a solid social position grounded in the monetary wealth at her disposal.

Life as the wife of Mr. Rosedale would be based upon a separate system of exchange. Because Rosedale is “new money” and Jewish, he is an outsider who has great difficulty achieving acceptance in high society. His desire to enter this group is evidence of his continued pursuit of the American Dream. Beyond his accumulation of wealth,
Rosedale has traversed the societies of Mrs. Hatch and the newly rich. His attempt to ascend into the leisure class is the next extension of his dream of success. As his wife Lily would be expected to play a different role than as the wife of a man of leisure, and her rewards would vary accordingly. Proposing to Lily, Rosedale states:

I wanted money, and I've got more than I know how to invest; and now the money doesn't seem to be of any account unless I can spend it on the right woman. That's what I want to do with it. I want a wife to make all the other women feel small. /HM 149/

Like Mrs. Bart, Rosedale seems to have pinned the hopes of the success of his American Dream on Lily. Rosedale needs Lily because she is a woman who can reveal his money to its greatest advantage and ensure his social legitimacy: she has the connections and ability to create attention and inspire awe in men and jealousy in women. Ironically, her beauty and social cunning are again to be used almost as a tool for vengeance, and as Lily later laments, she is reduced to the “crowning blossom of her beauty” and her options for success hold little personal advantages beyond financial stability.

This overt capitalization on Lily’s beauty is too blatant for Lily to accept. To become a wife whose primary purpose is to exact revenge upon her society is not the “power for good” Lily had formerly envisioned. When her beauty was to be used for her mother’s vengeful purposes and the renewal of their family wealth, Lily could not relinquish her idealized vision of opportunities. Each time she reached the brink of an advantageous marriage, Lily would resist the narrow path she would be expected, if not forced, to walk. She thinks: “They [her society friends] had symbolized what she was
gaining, now they stood for what she was giving up” (HM 61). In exchange for a significant place in society and economic stability, Lily must give up her detachment from her frivolous set. If she were to marry well, to effectively join society and to commodify herself according to its demands, Lily would lose the personal freedom and ability (otherwise unique to Selden) to objectively view and change her world. Wharton writes of this exchange:

How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged; it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom. (HM 64)

Understanding this irreversible exchange, Lily is more hesitant to enter into a society marriage because the transaction is spiritually confining. Having irrevocably committed herself to the marital bargain, Lily knows she will not be able to extricate herself from petty concerns.

Although Lily never determines to marry, the ways in which she considers her opportunities gives insight into her inner conflict between security, morality, expectations, and desires. Since her upbringing has trained her to be a society wife, Percy Gryce the most attractive option. In the same way her mother found a certain amount of pride and distinction in her ability to “manage,” so could Lily set herself apart through her clever manipulation of Gryce and his considerable assets. It is only after she has been expelled from her own society that Lily begins to seriously consider Rosedale as a viable husband. Rosedale has made substantial social advancements since his initial
proposal and Lily is forced to admit, “Much as she disliked Rosedale, she no longer absolutely despised him. For he was gradually attaining his object in life, and that, to Lily, was always less despicable than to miss it.” (HM 204). This improvement in Lily’s estimation is inherently linked to the American paradigm of success. Sim Rosedale, though impeded by his vulgarity, his religion, and a fortune earned rather than inherited, has so dedicated himself to the goal of social acceptance that his efforts are gradually being rewarded.

With her social powers significantly reduced by Bertha Dorset’s treachery, Lily is no longer faced with the prospect of having to commodify her social position and discernment in order to gain a husband. Lily wonders, “What if she made him [Rosedale] marry her for love, now that he had no other reason for marrying her?” (HM 204). For perhaps the first time in her life, Lily considers the tempting thought she may be of interest to men for reasons other than her sex appeal and ability to unite social and financial domains of power. She finds, however, that her assets of charm and beauty are insignificant when removed from her “wifely” social skills. The same moral superiority which prevented her from securing a marital transaction in the past would need to be sacrificed if she is to regain her marriageability.

Lily is susceptible to Bertha Dorset’s false accusations because she has neglected to commodify, display, and consume wealth. Her resulting lack of utility makes her dispensable within the community (Wershoven, 53). Once outside the group, Lily’s only leverage is in the possession of Bertha Dorset’s incriminating love letters to Selden. Through these letters Lily may blackmail Bertha Dorset into accepting her back into
society and devoting her social clout and resources to the same goal. It is only after such a reconciliation is complete that Lily will again be able to re-enter the marriage market. Lily’s keen sense of the aesthetic is offended by the underhanded nature of this option. In the same way that Lily’s abstaining from marriage signals her dissatisfaction with the values of her set, this repugnance toward blackmail is indicative of her “moral integrity that hampers the person in society” (McDowell 23).

“Society” is voluntarily exiled from the larger American culture in which the demands of personal and moral obligations serve to restrain the quest for success and prosperity (Wuthnow 4; Kerr 24). Lily is ostracized because her actions betray a critical deviation from the standard. Maureen Howard writes of Wharton’s intentions: “Wharton did not accept the Social Darwinism of the naturalists, but found, in writing this novel, a Darwinian view that supported her belief in individual adaptation” (138).

Under the theory of Social Darwinism, Lily’s inability to adapt to the values of her circle is a mortal weakness, and in the same way that her refinement makes her useless in the working class, the influence of the cultural standard of moral restraint makes her unfit within society.

Before considering how Lily’s moral superiority affects her marital decisions, it is important to acknowledge the inconsistency of her adherence to these morals. Lily refuses Rosedale’s offer to lend her the money to repay Trenor despite being unemployed and destitute. Her resolve in that situation is ironic when one considers that the initial loan from Trenor occurred just after she had rejected financial security in the person of Percy Gryce. Her request was motivated at its core by Lily’s conformist
desire to resume playing cards and purchase new clothes. Again, when Selden professes his love to Lily after her success at the Brys' tableaux, Lily easily evades his advancements. Yet, when she passes his flat on her way to blackmail Bertha Dorset, she cannot resist the temptation to enter. The detour effectively activates her moral compulsions and derails her purpose. Throughout her life, Lily inconsistently applies herself to the pursuit of society and the search for truth through principle. This inconsistency can be explained in part by her complex relationship to the American Dream: Lily aspires to success within society, but cannot accept its personal price—a price not justified by the larger cultural paradigm. It is not coincidental that Lily's moments of greatest moral resolve occur when she is least involved in society, and her times of weakness correspond with her most precarious moments of social involvement.

The incongruity of Lily's goals and values is the center of literary critic Marilyn Jones Lyde's theory of The House of Mirth. She contrasts "the social flaw [. . . ] of superior moral sensitivity, which incurs the anger of society: [with] the moral flaw of social ambition, which makes Lily susceptible, [. . . ] to the judgement society levies" (131).³ Lily's social flaw (her habit of not conforming to the expectations of her society), combined with her moral flaw (her thinly veiled ambitions within that same society) lead to her tragedy. The marriage opportunities Lily encounters are situations which demand that she choose between these conflicting aspects of her personality. True to her personal motto, Beyond!, Lily hopes to make a marriage which can bridge the gap between

³Though it is counterintuitive, it is important to distinguish that the "social flaw" equals moral superiority, and the "moral flaw" refers to social ambition.
her social ambitions and moral sensitivities. She asks Selden, “But isn’t it possible that if I had the opportunities of these people, I might make better use of them? Money stands for all kinds of things; its purchasing quality isn’t limited to diamonds and motor-cars” (HM 61). This hope that access to wealth and influence will afford increased occasions for benevolence and personal growth is the end by which Lily hopes to justify the means. Lily’s problem, however, is that her marriage opportunities cannot fulfill this promise.

Wharton first presents Lily with the dull, yet appealing prospect of Percy Gryce. Gryce is a young and handsome millionaire who is possibly Lily’s best option: he could offer Lily security and a prominent role in society. Lily’s rather sudden decision to disdain Percy Gryce in favor of a walk with Selden seems like a perplexing submission to impulse, but it is not without its reasons. Beyond his wealth, Gryce offers Lily little stimulation. Her greatest challenge is to manipulate his generosity, but Lily finds him quite malleable beneath her skillful orchestrations:

She had been bored all afternoon by Percy Gryce—the mere thought seemed to waken an echo of his droning voice—but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliance and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honor of boring her for life. (HM 22)

By demonstrating the extent to which a marriage to Gryce would strand Lily in an intellectual desert and increase her feelings of loneliness, Wharton intimates that Percy’s “rest from worry” (HM 24) is not worth the personal emptiness such a marriage would
entail. Knowing this, Lily’s actions are more calculating and purposeful than they first appear. Just as her card playing is a function of social intercourse rather than personal risk-taking, Lily’s conscious avoidance of marriage is hidden under a semblance of caprice—a whim that serves to mask Lily’s social flaw of moral superiority and to delay and/or abate the harsh judgement of her critics.

Lily’s ability to maintain an acceptable facade at once attracted the enterprising Rosedale and condemned the marriage for Lily as morally flawed by being centered on the social ambitions of both Lily and Rosedale. Lily’s aesthetic sensibilities are also offended by his physical unattractiveness and the cognizance that while her exquisite beauty and social skills make her appealing as a potential wife, her poverty and shady reputation make her approachable. This is an embarrassing distinction for Lily.

Compounding these impediments to their match is the overt moral debasement required of Lily if the marriage is to take place. By requiring that she first relinquish the moral superiority that had previously defined her elevation and perspective over society, Rosedale is demanding her complete submission to its values. Such capitulation traps Lily within the illusion and pursuit of social advancement and virtually eliminates any possibility of accomplishing meaningful achievement through marriage.

The goal of transcendence through marriage is the only one to which Lily is fully committed. While her other pursuits are disrupted by conflicting emotions and ideals, Lily never accepts a marriage that cannot fulfill her personal expectations. This point is most powerfully made during her final visit with Selden. Drawn into Selden’s apartment by the memory of his professed love, Lily intends to use Bertha’s letters to Selden to
effect her re-entry into society. She is distressed by Selden’s connection to her plan: “the fact that, to attain her end, she must trade on his name, and profit by a secret of his past, chilled her blood with shame” (HM 257). In her desperation, Lily is conceding to the demands of society by participating in its moral debasement. It is a powerful relinquishment of the self, and of the dream of a personally meaningful marriage.

Ultimately, however, it is a sacrifice Lily is unable to make. After telling Selden that she had come to say good-bye to “the Lily Bart you knew”, Lily asserts that “one must go on living. Good-bye” (HM 262). In the instant between this good-bye and her actual leaving, Lily’s resolve melts. In a fit of passion in which Lily recognizes her love for Selden, she realizes that she cannot live independently of her dream of transcendence:

In its [her love’s] light, everything else dwindled and fell away from her.

She understood now that she could not go forth and leave her old self with him; that self must indeed live on in his presence, but it must still continue to be hers. (HM 262)

Lily burns the letters immediately after this epiphany, definitively closing her entrance back into society. This uncharacteristically decisive action, following a moment of extrinsic self-understanding and clarity, highlights the extent to which Lily defined herself by her marriage. Her dream of personal and social enhancement was contingent upon a successful match, and her self-esteem was connected to her success in attaining one. Lily defined a successful marriage as one that would take her not simply Beyond! worry and dept, but Beyond! the petty concerns and limitations of society. Her inability to imagine
an existence without this hope is the impetus of Lily’s marriage dilemma.

A thorough examination of Lily’s values and the perceived price of each proposal or option of marriage, creates a better understanding of her ultimate failure to take a husband. Lily was immobilized by her dilemma and inability to achieve “transcendence.” Marriage would be at once financially (i.e. socially) liberating and spiritually constraining. While her choices were made more difficult, the specialization that led to Lily’s inability to survive can be illuminated through a review of the roles played by Gerty Farish and Lawrence Selden. The next section will examine the interesting parallels these characters present through their simultaneous proximity to, and detachment from, Lily’s lifestyle and choices.
4. Lawrence Selden, Gerty Farish, and the Cost of the American Dream.

Spouting metaphysical ideals of personal freedom, Selden touts his ‘republic of the spirit’ and denounces the monetary goals to which Lily has so far aspired. His exhortations serve to make Lily dissatisfied with her options and support her rejection of Percy Gryce. In reality, however, Selden offers Lily no effective alternative or her problem. A man of modest means, Selden’s attempts to make Lily consider more ethereal desires present her with a set of opportunities nearly opposite to those presented by Gryce and Rosedale. For Lily, the biases of her youth are strong; to abandon her quest for financial redemption is not only to betray what her mother had deemed stupidity and ignorance, but also to cast off the only vocation for which she has been properly trained— that of a wealthy wife. In this respect, not marrying for money would be nearly as great a rejection of herself as would the acceptance of a marriage without the hope of transcendence through opportunity.

Selden serves to bring attention to the complexity of Lily’s problem. While all others in her set resent her continual deferral of marriage, Selden ridicules her quest for money and social significance. He exhorts her to be true to her “real self,” yet at the same time holds her to the standard of the same society he is urging her to disregard. When Lily takes employment with the shadowy figure of Mrs. Hatch, Selden pays her a visit to express concern for her reputation and character. Even while he is advocating that Lily adopt a more realistic view of her society, he is also holding her to its traditions and limitations. Lily later defends herself to Selden:

I have tried hard, but life is difficult and I am a very useless person. I can
hardly be said to have an independent existence. 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. What can one do when one finds
that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown
into the rubbish heap, and you don’t know what it’s like in the rubbish
heap. (HM 261)

Lily has been enchanted by Selden’s promises of individual fulfillment outside a wealthy
marriage, but she has also come to the realization that she is unfit for any other life. A
life with Selden would require her to live by her society’s rules, but without it’s
advantages; and although he may grant her the intimacy and humanity she lacks, he
could not provide her with the material power she has been cultivated to need. Theirs
would likely have been an unhappy match. Selden had minimal economic power and his
social viability lay primarily in his uniqueness and interest to married women. Without
financial backing, Lily’s position would not improve greatly and her inability to control
her expenditures and her longing for social prominence would be incompatible with
Selden’s values. Such a union would result in the failure of Lily’s dream and in Selden’s
disillusionment with his spiritual freedom. His greatest moments of interest in Lily occur
when he feels he can “save her,” but once she has been saved, or proves herself unwilling
to be rescued, the insincerity of Selden’s concern is evidenced in his evaporating interest.

According to Linda Wagner-Martin, Wharton never intends for the reader
seriously to consider Selden as an appropriate suitor for Lily: “Wharton makes her
intentions about Selden’s character clear by never showing him to be sincerely, or
seriously, interested in Lily or her welfare” (64). While it can be argued that Selden is indeed earnestly interested in Lily; it is true that his interest never grows into a sense of responsibility for Lily’s well-being. Unlike Rosedale, Carry Fisher, or Gerty Farish, Selden never attempts to assist Lily in an active way. He tells her, “The only way I can help you is by loving you” (HM 117). In loving Lily, Selden want to lift her above the “ugliness, pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul” (Mirth 130) he associates with society life, but his quest is limited by his own actions. By continuing to hold Lily to the standards and expectations of society, Selden demonstrates that he is more involved with the leisurely set than he likes to imagine. In this manner Lily’s usefulness for Selden is little different than the appeal she holds for Gryce and Rosedale. He is most attracted to her when she is an object of societal art. At times such as the Brys’ tableaux entertainment, Selden becomes intrigued by her beauty and social shrewdness, and feels a pleasant superiority in his command of both the inner society and the reality beyond. Like Lily’s other suitors, Selden is interested in what she can offer; he is only different in that Lily perceives that he has something more meaningful to offer her.

An essential characteristic of the American Dream—and one evidently troubling to Selden—seems to be that in order be fulfilled, whether the goal be financial success or individual achievement, Lily must be willing to surrender some aspect of herself. Whether this be in her personal relationships, philosophy, or moral principles, almost universally, some facet of the self is lost in the pursuit of a particular dream. While these costs have already been examined, the important issue is that this required relinquishment demands that the dream aspired to be worth the subsequent loss. In
Lily’s case, this equivalence is never achieved. Throughout the novel she berates Selden for belittling her marriage and financial aspirations, saying, “Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me if you have nothing to give me instead?” [HM 61].

This quotation indicates that Lily and Selden were hesitant to question the futility of a marriage between them. The intimacy of Lily and Selden’s relationship is possible in part because of this aspect of her underlying dilemma.

While Lily’s love for Selden is eventually the defining aspect of her life, Selden’s feelings for Lily are tempered by society’s estimation of her. His own appraisals of her character fade when he is not with her, and this habit may explain his extended absences from her life. While she was a beautiful woman who could reach higher pinnacles of self-understanding and spiritual freedom while trimming her own hats as his wife, Selden enjoyed entertaining non-committal fantasies about their union. It is not until he sees the full extent of her social cunning and ornamental value during the Brys’ tableaux entertainment that Selden seems to seriously consider marrying Lily. Selden is impressed by the simplicity of the painting Lily chooses to portray, and her effect produces a sort of epiphany. He thinks, “For the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part.” [HM 114] For Selden, the “real Lily Bart” is a beauty not cheapened by society, and she holds power for him only when she is elevated above her element.

There is a great deal of hypocrisy in Selden’s treatment of Lily. He is infatuated with the Lily of the tableaux because she shows promise of transcending society, yet the
change of perspective the scene generates is one based in the system of commodification in society. Selden is not an extravagantly wealthy man, and his lack of money is the primary impediment between himself and Lily. When Lily creates a stir and excites admiration through the simplicity of her tableaux, Selden sees a woman capable of aggrandizing even his limited resources. He imagines her to be the "real Lily Bart" who aspires to the Republic of the Spirit, trims her own hats, and who, once she had been shown the light, could renounce all of the "cheapening" material cares of her society.

Selden's "real Lily Bart" is not unlike the "real Lily Bart" Lily attempts to leave in his flat before her death. In this case, the "real Lily Bart," too, was above her society in that she tried to manage without participating in its corruption. It is fitting that she wants to leave her detached self to exist quietly with Selden, rather like a painting, since it is while impersonating a work of art that Selden first gains insight into her authentic soul. Selden finds truth in the substance of Lily's beauty, and his delight is transferred into the desire to possess Lily and mold her into the essential being he has discovered. Like Lily, Selden lacks financial means, but because he has the resources of an education and a profession, and therefore a marketable skill, his existence is less dependant upon his society. In the exaggerated unreality of Lily's tableaux, Selden sees a truth through which he believes he and Lily can be together, but his plan is quickly abandoned because of the impropriety he assumes in Lily's late night parting from Trenor. Such prejudices demonstrate that though Selden's survival is less vitally chained to society, he is a much a prisoner of its values and prejudices as Lily.

Selden is appealing to Lily because of his perspective. He, like Lily, lacks the
important resource (money) that would allow him to independently maintain himself as a member of society. Unlike the ingrained wealthy members of this group, he observes its many flaws and is reflective. He presents the ideals of the "Republic of the Spirit" as viable and worthy of being sought. Within leisure "society" Selden is the only person who supports these aspirations whom Lily does not characterize as "dingy." As such Selden helps reinforce notions of the American Dream that call for personal success and distinction in the quest for a better life. Within a culture fortified by the power of negating ideas, Selden retains both his position and his disinterest. While such unity is possible for Selden because he does not seek a defined or important role in "society," the narrowness of a respectable or accepted role for unmarried women in society is not conducive to such aberrant thought. Selden's relationship to the American Dream and pressures of society make him a dangerous influence on Lily because he first encourages her to value standards that endanger her position in society and then discounts her because she fails to uphold the morals of a society he has prompted her to critically view.

The complexities of Selden and Lily's relationship can be partly deciphered through Gerty Farish, the only other character to recognize Lily's "true self." A cousin to Selden and a friend to Lily, Gerty is also reflective and seems to unite the two when their own communications falter. It is Gerty whom Selden visits when he wants to learn about Lily, and Lily too turns to Gerty when worried about Selden's ability to forgive her faults. Like Lily, Gerty suffers from a lack of money, but unlike her friend she is content to live a quiet life in her own small apartment. Lily sees her as "fatally poor and dingy" (HM 76) and is often irritated as her blatant lack of ambitions:
It was wise of Gerty to have taken up philanthropy and symphony concerts; but there was something irritating in her assumption that existence yielded no higher pleasures and that one might get as much interest and excitement out of life in cramped flat as in the splendors of the Van Osburgh establishment. (HM 76)

Her estimation of Gerty demonstrates Lily’s adherence to the cultural paradigm that insists upon an individual’s unrelenting desire for betterment. Her insistence that this improvement take the form of social ambition betrays her belief that “society” has a monopoly upon the “better life.” This viewpoint is extremely individualistic; it leads to Lily’s worries over the insufficiencies of her own glittering lifestyle. Gerty, on the other hand, embraces moral integrity and works to bring assistance and greater opportunities to poor working girls.

Gerty’s dinginess and goodness are her defining characteristics. She is set apart from other women of Lily’s acquaintance because she is selfless, reflective and idealistic. This idealism colors Gerty’s perceptions of people and she rarely detects a fault in those she admires until it is proven. During a disturbing night when both Lily and Selden reveal their mutual affection to Gerty’s confidences, Gerty does not let the bitterness of her feelings taint her answers to their questions. Much of Gerty’s truthfulness that night is due more to her elevation of Selden’s character than to a moral compulsion to tell the truth (Goodman 57). This distinction does not effect the worthiness of Gerty’s response. In a community in which women are competing for the same opportunities (men), true friendship between women is rare (Stange, 57). In her decision to give her friend hope
and offer help, even as such assistance dashes her own chances with Selden. Gerty's selflessness sets her apart. In the end, she is the only female friend who does not turn on Lily, and her loyalty remains despite the fact that "every fiber in her body shrank from Lily's nearness." (HM 142).

The juxtaposition of Gerty's spiritual aversion to Lily's closeness with her physical nearness reveals Gerty's difficult and unique sacrifice. According to critic Susan Goodman, "The moving picture of Gerty holding Lily belies stereotyped images of both the scorned and the beloved woman[. . .] the image of the embracing women is the novel's moral and emotional heart" (Goodman 57). The fact that Gerty is able to transcend her jealousy toward Lily and offer her comfort and security is indicative of her larger perspective. Unlike other characters in the novel, Gerty is concerned with the lives and fates of those who live outside the realm of wealth and comfort; and her interactions give her introspection that others lack. She understands that Lily's social position is in decline, and that her definitions of success lie in wealth and social status (and both objectives are to be attained through marriage). She knows too that Lily has sought to preserve her "true self" throughout her quest for success and achievement. It is through this perspective that Gerty is able show Lily pity because she sees the desperation and loneliness of Lily's true state.

Selden and Gerty, the only other people able to appreciate the "real Lily Bart." are peripheral actors in society. They too reflect upon and struggle with the unique demands of a life on the edge of "society" and the more inclusive culture, but they can endure because they are not so specialized as Lily. In the hours before her death, Lily
analyzes the ways in which her past has contributed to her current desperate state. Poor and lonely, the material values she once cherished now seem foreign and unreal, yet a look at some of her old possessions reminds her of her former lifestyle:

She was startled to find how the atmosphere of her old life enveloped her. But, after all, it was the life she had been made for: every dawning tendency in her had been carefully directed toward it, all her interests and activities had been taught to center around it. She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty. (HM 269)

This intense specialization inhibits Lily's ability to be decisive. It creates a situation in which the "atmosphere of her old life" is as real and important to Lily as the cruel and meager situation of her reality. From childhood, she had been raised to be ornamental (Yagley v); she is not expected to excel except in charm and beauty, and the "buds" of education, individuality, and personal relationships have been "nipped" to ensure that Lily fulfills her determined destiny.

With a more practical bouquet of talents and expectations, Selden and Gerty are able to permeate the boundary of society and culture with greater ease than Lily. Their experiences and perspectives play different roles, however, in shaping Lily's relationship to the American Dream. For selfish reasons, Selden encourages Lily to adopt his disdainful view of society and thereby lessens her ability to make the necessary sacrifices to fit in her group. His interest in her, however, is not as consistent as his criticism, and when Lily falls, Selden does little to help her regain her perspective. Gerty, on the other
hand, is Lily’s safeguard. Her life’s work is spent buffeting young women from the
harshness of independence, and she understands better than Selden that Lily is ill-
equipped for such a world. With this insight, Gerty directs her efforts toward supporting
Lily through her financial and personal difficulties. She does not offer (and perhaps does
not have) any solutions to Lily’s dissatisfaction with the meaning and morality of society
life. Lily’s path to defeat is littered with such conflicting ideologies. The final section will
examine how the ideals of heroism in the American Dream led to the gradual elimination
of Lily’s options.
5. The Tragedy and Heroism of the American Dream

In writing about the connection between the American Dream and American Literature, Frederic Carpenter discusses the prevalent attitudes toward the American Dream among early twentieth century authors. Wharton seems to represent the values of those writers Carpenter deems the “traditionalists” who “declared the dream unrealizable, and its effects evil, but they sympathized deeply with it even while they emphasized its delusions and denied its possible realization” (8). Lily was raised to be a society wife, and beyond the duties and talents expected of her position, she has few assets or abilities that will allow her other options. The intensity of Lily’s singular preparation for her inherited vocation leads to her inability to achieve her American Dream. It is impossible for Lily to concede to commodify herself and marry for wealth, but it is equally futile for her to abandon or reform her dream. She attempts to console herself with the expectation that greater economic resources could lead to more humanitarian efforts, but finds little support for this hope in her interactions with wealthy society. She attempts to live an independent existence, but instead begins a downward spiral of loneliness and poverty. Because Lily exists on the brink of society, she is better able to judge it by the moral standards of American culture. Under the cultural edict that the quest for success should be restrained by ethical considerations, Lily is unable to sacrifice her moral superiority for her social ambitions. Wharton leads to Lily’s death by eliminating all other options.

With Lily’s death Wharton demonstrates the extent to which Lily is bound by the moral bridle of the American Dream. Within a society absent of moral considerations,
the very adherence to such directives guarantees that her dream of success cannot be fulfilled. In her last hours, Lily is tortured by the expanse of her loneliness and finds both comfort and desolation in a serendipitous meeting with Nettie Struthers, a working girl whom Lily had once assisted. During her visit to the woman’s home, Lily has her first meaningful encounter with the comfort and shelter of family and domesticity. She is amazed by Nettie’s happiness, her confidence in her husband, and most importantly, the miracle of her motherhood. Nettie seems to have found true happiness and hope in meager settings. Unlike Mrs. Trenor who (one hopes sarcastically) suggests the birth of a baby is less momentous than her weekend party, Nettie finds her greatest joy and expression in motherhood. To Lily, whose family relations had been impersonalized by their foundations in the framework and exchange of society, this was a momentous revelation that added to her sense of loss.

Returning to her apartment after witnessing this domestic haven, Lily is confronted with a new and more harrowing perspective of her deprivation:

It was not longer, however, from the vision of material poverty that she turned with the greatest shrinking. She had a sense of deeper impoverishment, of an inner destitution compared to which outward conditions dwindled into insignificance [. . .] it was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of years [. . .] she looked back and saw that there had never been a time when she had any real relation to life. (HM 270)

Lily Bart’s quest for security and position within society has usurped all other aspects of
her living. Throughout her life, relationships were cultivated and maintained almost exclusively on the basis of their social value or for the presentation to the outside world. Consistently, Lily has forgone opportunities to establish meaningful relationships in favor of financial and social gain. Wharton’s systematic reduction of Lily’s options asserts the erroneous nature of such decisions. Their result is the essential loneliness and superficiality of existence Lily feels at her death.

After contrasting the permanence of Nettie’s family life with the transient nature of her own, Lily acknowledges her limited future:

Yes, it was happiness she still wanted, and the glimpse she had caught of it made everything else of no account. One by one she had detached herself from the baser possibilities, and she saw that nothing now remained to her but the emptiness of renunciation. (HM 271)

Lily recognizes she could not find personal happiness in her previous course of action and direction, and in her current state the loss of Selden’s love makes the possibility of such future happiness unlikely. It is no longer the power and position of money that motivates Lily, but a longing for human intimacy and kinship. In following her dream of social advancement, one made particularly difficult by the narrow roles allowed for her gender, Lily has been led to a shallow existence. At the end of her life Lily has chosen physical destitution over the moral impoverishment of a society life. The result of her decision is the prospect of a life of drudgery and “dinginess.”

Surprisingly, Lily finds peace and clarity despite such barrenness. With the renunciation of her previous ambitions that necessarily accompanied her destruction of
Bertha Dorset's letters, Lily is finally able to take decisive action. By writing Trenor's check, Lily further signifies her determination to live in poverty, but without guilt. Just before her death, she imagines holding Nettie Struthers' child and the pain of loneliness fades with the illusion of human contact. The loss of personal relationships is perhaps the most tragic consequence of Lily's failed pursuit of wealth and society. Because she is unwilling to deny her sentiments of greater self-worth in order to achieve monetary gain, Lily becomes a tragic figure of the American Dream.

Thomas Kerr argues that the hero of the American Dream is "someone who makes an important decision and follows through" (11). Under this standard, Lily falls short as an American heroine, consistently balking at critical points in her life. She avoids an engagement to Percy Gryce by spending an afternoon with Selden; she later eludes, but does not eliminate the possibility of a relationship with Selden ("I can easily put him off when tomorrow comes" (HM 119)); and abruptly leaves the country after being confronted with Gus Trenor's demands. In these and many other situations Lily delays decisive action, a trait that expedites her downfall. Lily does not display the resolve of a heroine until the end of the novel when she burns Bertha Dorset's letters, writes a check to Gus Trenor, and has virtually eliminated the possibility of returning to society.

Others have also pointed to this moment of decisiveness as one of "heroism." Margaret McDowell describes it as "a silent and lonely victory, and her heroism will never be recognized or praised" (23). She goes on to assert that in her death, Lily "achieved a selfless humanity" (23). The fact that McDowell sees Lily's choice as a moral
victory supports the assertion that her commitment to the humanity of the “real Lily Bart” transforms her into a hero of the American Dream. Although Lily’s society cannot “recognize or praise” the significance of Lily’s sacrifice, Wharton accentuates its importance to her reader by placing it in the finality of Lily’s death. This figurative connection between the American Dream and tragedy adheres to Carpenter’s definition of the “traditionalist” literary opinion. Lily’s muddled pursuit of the American Dream is complicated by both its aberrant form in “society” and its overarching goals of personal distinction and moral restraint. Lily must die to become the hero of the American Dream, and her dim prospects and barren victory indicate that Wharton, “sympathized deeply” with the American Dream even as she denied its possible realization” (Carpenter 8).

In his study of tragedy in society, Geoffrey Walton also reads Lily’s decision to burn Bertha Dorset’s love letters and repay Trenor as a moment of defining heroism. He contends: “[...] it is one of the occasions when Lily Bart emerges from her social setting as a tragic heroine” (64). Walton, too, realizes that heroism and tragedy are inextricably linked within Wharton’s novel and estimation. It is not by coincidence that in order to reach heroic status, Lily must “emerge from her social setting.” There is little to suggest Lily would reach this status, or even be an interesting character, but for the loss of the sustaining resource of money. Within society, the “force of negation” so alters the American Dream that the realization of its lofty principles can only occur outside its sphere of influence. The paradox, however, is that Lily is so specialized to fill the mold of society that she cannot survive without its structure. The cruelty of Wharton’s artistry
is in the way she shaped Lily’s options so that death is the only bridge between “heroism,” “humanity,” and achievement.

“The House of Mirth,” Amy Kaplan writes, “represents high society as a predominantly female realm, whose relation to the hidden male arena of business and equally shadowy world of working women must be charted by the narrative, with Lily deployed as a scout” (89). As a scout, Lily is asked to use her own ingenuity and individuality to build bridges between the status-directed values of her society and those of her culture. But Lily is never able to convince herself that marriage will bring her the freedom she desires. Unable to resign herself to the dinginess of the life of a working girl, Lily’s attempt to chart the treacherous middle ground is predestined for failure. Early in the novel Lily observes members of the Trenor set and remarks, “Under the glitter of their opportunities, she saw the poverty of their achievement” (HM 47). By the end of the novel, Lily’s achievement is that she has not given up any aspect of herself. She has only contemplated the surrender of her most closely held values. Even though she has failed in her social ambitions, she herself remains whole. Throughout all her troubles, she never surrendered the “real Lily Bart.” Before her death Lily visits Selden because, “she felt she could not leave him without trying to make him understand that she had saved herself whole from the seeming ruin of her life” (HM 256). The House of Mirth is clearly a tragedy, but it is also a sort of triumph. It is tragic that Lily is asked to make unmanageable decisions to succeed in her America, but it is to Lily’s credit that she traverses her complicated life without losing herself.

When Wharton followed her literary ambitions, she incurred the veiled scorn and
occasional outright rejection of her leisure class society. She did, however, become a hero of the American Dream by following through with her decision to pursue intellectualism. Her literary success makes problematic the assertion of Wharton’s "traditionalism." Wharton's writing indicates she did not believe the American Dream was attainable, but she herself took pride in becoming "a self-made man." This thesis posits the assertion that Lily, Gerty and Selden were able to see the weakness of society because they lacked a critical and necessary component (money), yet it was the wealthy Wharton who composed their thoughts and dilemmas. Louis Auchincloss helps resolve this discrepancy by noting the error of considering Wharton to be a member of society. "Little is made of the fact that she developed herself by tireless industry into precisely the kind of woman who would have been most out of place in the New York of her early days" (Auchincloss vii). It is only because she stands outside the circle of her society that she is able to analyze and recognize the problems that would not be evident to those within. Wharton's perspective was established by her disinclination towards the status centered motivation of her community. Her traditionalist perspective of the American Dream may be explained by her tacit refusal to hold herself to the standards of her culture or society.

The House of Mirth is often evaluated according to its presentation of issues of morality and the nature of elite society. By analyzing this novel according to the disparity between the ideal of the American Dream as a moral framework and the reality of a "society" bereft of room for personal growth, one is able to bridge the two schools of thought and center the novel within American culture. Lily's dilemma is not unique to
the leisure class. The tension between the lifestyle Americans are cultured to believe they can attain, and the actual skills and values they possess, is problematic and limiting at every level of society. In understanding this, it becomes clear that Lily’s tragedy is not simply a moral dilemma, and not merely the failing of her “society,” but rather the most agonizing result of clashing social and cultural paradigms. This work is perhaps best ended with a thought from Wharton’s memoir: “Saddest of all is, as the years pass, to see the premature ending of lives which seemed meant to widen into usefulness and beauty” (Wharton 375.)
Works Consulted


