The Death of the Lady (Novelist):
Wharton’s *House of Mirth*

*The lady is almost the only picturesque survival in a social order which tends less and
less to tolerate the exceptional. Her history is distinct from that of woman though
sometimes advancing by means of it, as a railway may help itself from one point to
another by leasing an independent line. At all striking periods of social development
her status has its significance. In the age-long war between men and women, she is a
hostage in the enemy’s camp. Her fortunes do not rise and fall with those of women
but with those of men.*

—Emily James Putnam, *The Lady* (1910)

*Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.*

—Sylvia Plath, “The Munich Mannequins”

**At the beginning** of Edith Wharton’s first great novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905), the heroine, Lily Bart, is twenty-nine, the dazzlingly well-preserved veteran of eleven years in the New York marriage market. By the end of the novel, she is past thirty and dead of an overdose of chloral. Like Edna Pontellier, Kate Chopin’s heroine in *The Awakening* (1899), who celebrates her twenty-ninth birthday by taking a lover, Lily Bart belongs to a genre we might call “the novel of the woman of thirty,” a genre that emerged appropriately enough in American women’s literature at the turn of the century. These novels pose the problem of female maturation in narrative terms: What can happen to the heroine as she grows up? What plots, transformations, and endings are imaginable for her? Is she capable of change at all? As the nineteenth-century feminist activist and novelist Elizabeth Oakes Smith noted in her diary, “How few women have any history after the age of thirty!”

Telling the history of women past thirty was part of the challenge Wharton faced as a writer looking to the twentieth century. The threshold of thirty established for women by nineteenth-century conventions of “girlhood” and marriageability continued in the twentieth century as a psychological observation about the formation of feminine identity. While Wharton’s ideas about personality were shaped by Darwinian rather than by Freudian determinants, she shared Freud’s pessimism about the difficulties of change for women. In his essay “Feminity,” for example, Freud lamented the way that women’s psyches and personalities became fixed by the time they were thirty. While a thirty-year-old man
“strikes us as a youthful, somewhat unformed individual, whom we expect to make powerful use of the possibilities for development opened up to him by analysis,” Freud wrote, a woman of thirty “often frightens us by her psychical rigidity and unchangeability. Her libido has taken up fixed positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others.” From Wharton’s perspective Lily Bart is locked into fixed positions that are social and economic as well as products of the libido. Her inability to exchange these positions for others constitutes an impasse in the age as well as the individual.

Wharton situates Lily Bart’s crisis of adulthood in the contexts of a larger historical shift. We meet her first in Grand Central Station, “in the act of transition between one and another of the country houses that disputed her presence at the close of the Newport season,” and indeed The House of Mirth is a pivotal text in the historical transition from one house of American women’s fiction to another, from the homosocial women’s culture and literature of the nineteenth century to the heterosexual fiction of modernism. Like Edna Pontellier, Lily is stranded between two worlds of female experience: the intense female friendships and mother-daughter bonds characteristic of nineteenth-century American women’s culture, which Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has called “the female world of love and ritual,” and the dissolution of these single-sex relationships in the interests of more intimate friendships between women and men that was part of the gender crisis of the turn of the century. Between 1880 and 1910, patterns of gender behavior and relationship were being redefined. As early as the 1880s, relationships between mothers and daughters became strained as daughters pressed for education, work, mobility, sexual autonomy, and power outside the female sphere. Heroines sought friendship from male classmates and companions as well as within their single-sex communities.

These historical and social changes in women’s roles had effects on women’s writing as well. Pre–Civil War American women’s fiction, variously described as “woman’s fiction,” “literary domesticity,” or “the sentimental novel,” celebrated female solidarity and revised patriarchal institutions, especially Christianity, in feminist and matriarchal terms. Its plots were characterized by warmth, intense sisterly feeling, and a sacramental view of motherhood. As these “bonds of womanhood,” in Nancy Cott’s term, were being dissolved by cultural pressures toward heterosexual relationships, women’s plots changed as well. In 1851, for example, Susan Warner’s best-selling novel The Wide, Wide World tearfully recounted the history of a girl painfully separated from her mother. But in 1882, in Warner’s artistically superior but less-celebrated Diana, we are given an astringent and startling modern analysis of the psychological warfare between mother and daughter and the mother’s fierce efforts to thwart her daughter’s romance. As women’s culture came under attack, so too its survivors clung desperately to the past, seeing men as the interlopers in their idyllic community. While some women
writers of this generation championed the New Woman, others of the older
generation grieved for the passing of the “lost Paradise” of women’s culture. In
their fiction, male invaders are met with hostility, and the struggle between female
generations is sometimes murderous. By the century’s end, as Josephine Donovan
explains, “the woman-centered, matriarchal world of the Victorians is in its last
throes. The preindustrial values of that world, female identified and ecologically
holistic, are going down to defeat before the imperialism of masculine technology
and patriarchal institutions.”

The writers and feminist thinkers of Wharton’s transitional generation, Eliz-
abeth Ammons has noted, wrote “about troubled and troubling young women
who were not always loved by their American readers.” This literature, Ammons
points out, “consistently focused on two issues: marriage and work.” Seeing
marriage as a form of work, a woman’s job, it also raises the question of work
and especially of creativity. The fiction of this transitional phase in women’s
history and women’s writing is characterized by unhappy endings, as novelists
struggled with the problem of going beyond the allowable limits and breaking
through the available histories and stories for women.

Unlike some other heroines of the fiction of this transitional phase, Lily Bart
is neither the educated, socially conscious, rebellious New Woman, nor the andro-
gynous artist who finds meaning for her life in solitude and creativity, nor the
old woman fiercely clinging to the past whom we so often see as the heroine of
the post–Civil War local colorists. Her skills and morality are those of the
Perfect Lady. In every crisis she rises magnificently to the occasion, as we see
when Bertha insults her, her aunt disinherit her, Rosedale rejects her. Lawrence
Selden, the would-be New Man to whom she turns for friendship and faith,
criticizes Lily for being “‘perfect’ to everyone”; but he demands an even further
moral perfection that she can finally only satisfy by dying. Lily’s uniqueness, the
emphasis Wharton gives to her lonely pursuit of ladylike manners in the midst
of vulgarity, boorishness, and malice, makes us feel that she is somehow the last
lady in New York, what Louis Auchincloss calls the “lone and solitary” survivor
of a bygone age.

I would argue, however, that Wharton refuses to sentimentalize Lily’s position
but rather, through associating it with her own limitations as the Perfect
Lady Novelist, makes us aware of the cramped possibilities of the lady whose
creative roles are defined and controlled by men. Lily’s plight has a parallel in
Wharton’s career as the elegant scribe of upper-class New York society, the nov-
elist of manners and decor. Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls The House of Mirth Whar-
ton’s “first Kunstlerroman,” and in important ways, I would agree, Wharton’s
House of Mirth is also a fictional house of birth for the woman artist. Wolff points
out that The House of Mirth is both a critique of the artistic representation of
women—the transformation of women into beautiful objects of male aesthetic

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appreciation—and a satiric analysis of the artistic traditions that “had evolved no conventions designed to render a woman as the maker of beauty, no language of feminine growth and mastery.” In her powerful analysis of Lily Bart’s disintegration, Wharton “could turn her fury upon a world which had enjoined women to spend their artistic inclinations entirely upon a display of self. Not the woman as productive artist, but the woman as self-creating artistic object—that is the significance of the brilliant and complex characterization of Lily Bart.” In deciding that a Lily cannot survive, that the lady must die to make way for the modern woman who will work, love, and give birth, Wharton was also signaling her own rebirth as the artist who would describe the sensual worlds of The Reef, Summer, and The Age of Innocence and who would create the language of feminine growth and mastery in her own work.

We are repeatedly reminded of the absence of this language in the world of The House of Mirth by Lily’s ladylike self-silencing, her inability to rise above the “word-play and evasion” (494) that restrict her conversations with Selden and to tell her own story. Lily’s inability to speak for herself is a muteness that Wharton associated with her own social background, a decorum of self-restraint she had to overcome in order to become a novelist. In one sense, Lily’s search for a suitable husband is an effort to be “spoken for,” to be suitably articulated and defined in the social arena. Instead, she has the opposite fate: she is “spoken of” by men, and as Lily herself observes, “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” (364). To become the object of male discourse is almost as bad as to become the victim of male lust; “It was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about,” Mrs. Peniston reflects in agitation. “However unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made” (205).

Whenever Lily defies routine, the male scandalmongers are there to recycle her for their own profit. After the tableaux vivants, her performance and her relationship with Gus Trenor are so radically described in Town Talk that Jack Stepney is perturbed, although the elderly rake Ned Van Alstyne, “stroking his mustache to hide the smile behind it,” comments that he had “heard the stories before” (254). When Bertha Dorset announces that Lily is not returning to the yacht, the scene is witnessed by Dabham, the society columnist of “Riviera Notes,” whose “little eyes,” Selden fears, “were like tentacles thrown out to catch the floating intimations with which . . . the air at moments seemed thick” (347). These men can rewrite the story of Lily’s life, as they can also enjoy the spectacle of her beauty and suffering.

Although Lily has a “passionate desire” to tell the truth about herself to Selden, she can only hint, can only speak in parables he is totally unable to comprehend. Even the body language of her tears, her emaciation, and her renunciatory gestures are lost on him. On her deathbed, as she is drifting into
unconsciousness, Lily is still struggling with the effort to speak: “She said to herself that there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them. She tried to repeat the word, which lingered vague and luminous on the far edge of thought. . . . If she could only remember it and say it to him, she felt that everything would be well” (522). Yet she dies with this word of self-definition on her lips, not the bride of a loving communication, but rather the still unmarried bride of quietness. After her death, Selden kneels and bends over her dead body on the bed, like Dracula or little Dabham, “draining their last moment to its lees” (as he has earlier led Gerty on, “draining her inmost thoughts”), “and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear” (533). This word, Susan Gubar argues, “is Lily's dead body; for she is now converted completely into a script for his edification, a text not unlike the letters and checks she has left behind to vindicate her life. . . . Lily’s history, then, illustrates the terrors not of the word made flesh, but of the flesh made word. In this respect, she illuminates the problems Wharton must have faced in her own efforts to create rather than be created.”

Among the issues the novel raises is the question of writing itself, both in terms of female creativity and in terms of a relationship to literary traditions. Whereas mid-nineteenth-century American women writers, unlike their English and European counterparts, had explicitly and in their writing styles rejected a male literary tradition that seemed totally alien to their culture, Wharton’s generation of women writers, who defined themselves as artists, were working out their relationship to both the male and female literary heritage. The House of Mirth revises both male and female precursors, as Wharton explores not only the changing worlds of women, but also the transformed and equally limiting worlds of men. In a number of striking respects, The House of Mirth goes back to adapt the characteristic plot of mid-nineteenth-century “woman’s fiction” and to render it ironic by situating it in the post-matriarchal city of sexual commerce. This plot, as Nina Baym has established, concerned “a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world.” Despite hardships and trials, the heroine overcomes all obstacles through her “intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage.” Although she marries, as an indication that her progress toward female maturity has been completed, marriage is not really the goal of this heroine’s ordeal, and men are less important to her emotional life than women.

Lily Bart’s story alludes to but subverts these sentimental conventions of nineteenth-century women’s literature, conventions that dozens of female best-sellers had made familiar. Lily has certainly been deprived of the financial and emotional supports she has been raised to expect and has been even more seriously deprived of the environment for the skills in which she has been trained.
First of all, Wharton puts the question of youth itself into question. At twenty-nine, Lily sees eligible “girlhood” slipping into spinsterdom and faces the impending destruction of her beauty by the physical encroachments of adulthood—not simply the aging process, but also anxiety, sexuality, and serious work. Secondly, in contrast to the emotionally intense relationships between mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends in most nineteenth-century women’s writing, women’s relationships in The House of Mirth are distant, formal, competitive, even hostile. Selden deplores “the cruelty of women to their kind” (352). Lily feels no loving ties to the women around her; in her moment of crisis “she had no heart to lean on” (240). Her mother is dead and unmourned; “Her relation with her aunt was as superficial as that of chance lodgers who pass on the stairs” (240). Her treatment of her cousin Grace Stepney is insensitive and distant, and Grace is bitterly jealous of her success. Lily sees and treats other women as her allies, rivals, or inferiors in the social competition; she is no different from the “best friends” she describes to Selden as those women who “use me or abuse me; but . . . don’t care a straw what happens to me” (13).

Whereas childbirth and maternity are the emotional and spiritual centers of the nineteenth-century female world, in The House of Mirth they have been banished to the margins. Childbirth seems to be one of the dingier attributes of the working class; the Perfect Lady cannot mar her body or betray her sexuality in giving birth. There are scarcely any children occupying the Fifth Avenue mansions and country cottages of Lily’s friends. (Judy and Gus Trenor have two teen-aged daughters, briefly glimpsed, but not in their mother’s company. Judy refers to them only once as having to be sent out of the room because of a guest’s spicy stories.)

And whereas the heroine of women’s fiction triumphs in every crisis, confounds her enemies and wins over curmudgeons and reforms rakes, Lily is continually defeated. The aunt who should come to her rescue disinherits her; Bertha Dorset, the woman friend who should shelter her, throws her out in order to protect her own reputation; the man who should have faith in her cannot trust her long enough to overcome his own emotional fastidiousness. With stark fatalism rather than with the optimism of woman’s fiction Wharton takes Lily from the heights to her death. As Edmund Wilson first noted in his 1937 essay “Justice to Edith Wharton,” Wharton “was much haunted by the myth of the Eumenides; and she had developed her own deadly version of the working of the Aeschylean necessity. . . . She was as pessimistic as Hardy or Maupassant.”15 Indeed, Lily’s relentless fall suggests the motto of Hardy’s Tess of the D’Urbervilles: “The Woman Pays.” Despite being poor, in debt, disinherited, an outsider in a world of financiers and market manipulators, speculators and collectors, Lily is the one who must pay again and again for each moment of inattention, self-indulgence, or rebellion. “Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine?” she
thinks after her ill-timed meeting with Rosedale outside Selden’s apartment. But while Tess pays with her life for a real fall, Lily pays only for the appearance of one, for her inability to explain or defend herself.

In other respects, many details of the novel allude to an American female literary tradition. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff has shown, the name “Lily” referred to a central motif of art nouveau: the representation of female purity as lilies adapted from Japanese art themes, “Easter lilies, tiger lilies, water lilies, lusciouscent calla lilies, fluttering clusters of lily-of-the-valley.” It was also a name with a special history in nineteenth-century women’s writing. Amelia Bloomer’s temperance and women’s rights journal of the 1850s was called The Lily, to represent, as the first issue announced, “sweetness and purity.” In women’s local-color fiction, “Lily” was a recurring name for sexually attractive and adventurous younger women, as opposed to women of the older generation more bound to sisterly and communal relationships. In Mary Wilkins Freeman’s most famous story, “A New England Nun,” Lily Dyer is the blooming girl to whom the cloistered Louisa Ellis thankfully yields her red-faced suitor. In Freeman’s later “Old Woman Magoun,” “Lily” represents the feminine spirit of the new century, a sexuality terrifying to the old women who guard the female sanctuaries of the past. In this stark and terrifying story, Old Woman Magoun has managed to keep her pretty fourteen-year-old granddaughter, Lily, a child within a strictly female community; but when it becomes clear that she will lose the orphaned girl both to adolescence and to the predatory sexuality of the male world, the grandmother poisons her.

Furthermore, Wharton’s pairing of Lily Bart with her nemesis, Bertha Dorset, echoes the pairing of Berthas and Lilies in an earlier feminist text: Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s Bertha and Lily (1854). Oakes Smith’s novel describes the relationship of a mother (Bertha) and her illegitimate daughter (Lily). While the erring Bertha’s life has been painful and limited, Lily’s future is presented as radiant and hopeful: “She will be an artist, an orator, a ruler... just as her faculties impel.” Lily seems to represent the possibilities of the creative buried self Oakes Smith felt in her own stifled career.

Constance Cary Harrison’s The Anglomaniacs (1890), a successful novel of the fin de siècle set in the same upper-class New York milieu as The House of Mirth, also has a heroine named Lily, a young heiress who is pressured to marry a titled Englishman she does not love in order to satisfy her mother’s social ambitions. Like Lily Bart, Lily Floyd-Curtis has the graceful figure of a “wood-nymph,” socializes with a sensitive bachelor friend who lives “in the Benedick with his violincello,” and attends a charity ball where the dinner table is set to represent a Veronese painting and she herself is dressed as a Venetian princess.

Wharton is ironically aware of the way that Lily Bart becomes the object of male myths and fantasies, like that of the wood nymph, that must be revised
from the woman’s perspective. Selden insists on seeing her as a “captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing-room,” yet the image of the dryad is as much one of these drawing-room conventions as that of the woman of fashion. Indeed, Lily, as Wharton tells us, “had no real intimacy with nature, but she had a passion for the appropriate” (19, 101). For her role in the tableaux vivants, Lily chooses to represent the figure of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s Mrs. Lloyd, in a draped gown that revealed “long dryad-like curves that swept upwards from her poised foot to her lifted arm” (217). Selden is enraptured by her performance, finding the authentic Lily in the scene; but it is rather the carefully constructed Lily of his desire that he sees. The “streak of sylvan freedom” he perceives in her is rather what he would make of her, and we are reminded that Ezra Pound at this same period was imposing the title “Dryad” on the equally plastic H. D.21

The myth of Tarpeia was another case of differing male and female interpretations. Simon Rosedale tells it in garbled form to Lily when he comes to propose to her: “There was a girl in some history book who wanted gold shields or something, and the fellows threw ’em at her, and she was crushed under ’em; they killed her” (284). Tarpeia, the Roman who betrayed her city to the Sabines by opening the Capitoline citadel in exchange for gold bracelets and was crushed by the shields of the invading Sabine army, was also the subject of Louise Guiney’s well-known poem of the 1890s that dramatized the paradox of a woman’s being condemned by her society for the mercenary and narcissistic values it has encouraged.22

Wharton’s major revision of a male text, as those critics not obsessed with her alleged apprenticeship to Henry James have noted, was with relation to Oscar Wilde’s Picture of Dorian Gray (1890). Lily’s picture is in one sense her mirror, but it is more fully her realization of the ways in which her society has deformed her. In contrast to Dorian Gray’s portrait, Lily’s monster in the mirror is not one whose perfect complexion has been marred by lines of worry, shame, or guilt, but rather a woman with a “hard, brilliant” surface (191). In the aftermath of her encounter with Gus Trenor in his empty house, Lily recognizes “two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained” (238). As she tells Gerty, this self seems like a “disfigurement,” a “hideous change” that has come to her while she slept; a moral ugliness that she cannot bear to contemplate (265).

Some feminist critics have argued that this “stranger” in Lily, this second and abhorrent self, is the female personality produced by a patriarchal society and a capitalist economy. As Elizabeth Ammons notes, “the system is designed to keep women in divisive and relentless competition” for the money and favor controlled by men. “Forbidden to aggress on each other directly, or aggress on men at all, women prey on each other—stealing reputations, opportunities, male admirers—all to parlay or retain status and financial security in a world arranged by
men to keep women suppliant and therefore subordinate.” Women employ, exploit, and cheat each other as cold-bloodedly as their Wall Street husbands carry out deals, but “by nature” women “feel no necessity to harm each other.”

Yet the nature of both men and women is in question in the novel rather than given. It is often overlooked that Wharton develops a full cast of male characters in *The House of Mirth*, whose dilemmas parallel those of the women. As historians now recognize, the period 1880–1920 redefined gender identity for American men as well as for American women. Among the characteristics of progressivism and of the masculinity crisis was the increased specialization of men as workers marginal to the family and culture: “According to the capitalistic ethos, men were expected to promote industry and commerce, which they did in abundance, often spending long hours at the office, the plant, or in the fields and forests. With their energies spent, they came home too weary and worn to devote much time and interest to family or friends.”

Wharton’s critique of the marriage system is not limited to the economic dependency of women but also extends to consider the loneliness, dehumanization, and anxiety of men. Lily’s father, a shadowy figure in the prehistory of the novel, establishes the theme of the marginal man. This “neutral-tinted father, who filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks,” is a dim and pathetic fixture of Lily’s scant childhood memories (45). “Effaced and silent,” patient and stooping, he is an exhausted witness to the stresses his society places on men. Even on vacation at Newport or Southampton, “it seemed to tire him to rest, and he would sit for hours staring at the sea-line from a quiet corner of the verandah, while the clatter of his wife’s existence went on unheeded a few feet off” (45–46). Mr. Bart does not so much die as get discarded; to his wife, once he had lost his fortune “he had become extinct,” and she sits at his deathbed “with the provisional air of a traveller who waits for a belated train to start” (51). Unable to love her father, to feel more for him than a frightened pity, or to mourn him, Lily nonetheless comes to identify with him in her own trial, recalling his sleepless nights in the midst of her own and feeling suddenly “how he must have suffered, lying alone with his thoughts” (266).

The story of Mr. Bart, who in his enigmatic solitude and marginality here strongly resembles Mr. Bartleby, lingers in our consciousness as we read *The House of Mirth*, coloring our impression of even the crudest male characters. If Gus Trenor is beefy and stupid, he is nonetheless repeatedly used by the women in the book, and there is some justice in the words, if not the tone, of his complaint to Lily: “I didn’t begin this business—kept out of the way, and left the track clear for the other chaps, till you rumbled me out and set to work to make an ass of me—and an easy job you had of it, too” (234). To Lily, we have seen earlier, Trenor is merely “a coarse dull man . . . a mere supernumerary in the costly show for which his money paid; surely, to a clever girl, it would be easy to hold him
by his vanity, and so keep the obligation on his side” (137). Lily repays her financial debt to Trenor, but never her human one.

If women in this system harm each other, they also do an extraordinary amount of harm to men. It’s hard not to feel a sympathy for shy Percy Gryce when Lily sets out to appeal to his vanity and thus to make an ass of him: “She resolved so to identify herself with her husband’s vanity that to gratify her wishes would be to him the most exquisite form of self-indulgence” (78). Despite the loss to Lily, we must feel that Gryce is better off with even the “youngest, dump-iest, dullest” of the Van Osburgh daughters (146).

Edmund Wilson described the typical masculine figure in Edith Wharton’s fiction between 1905 and 1920 as “a man set apart from his neighbours by education, intellect, and feeling, but lacking the force or the courage either to impose himself or to get away.” Selden is obviously such a figure, a man who seems initially to be much freer than Lily but who is revealed to be even more inflexible. His failed effort to define himself as the New Man parallels Lily’s futile effort to become a New Woman; “In a different way,” as Wharton points out, “he was, as much as Lily, the victim of his environment” (245). Selden’s limitations are perhaps those of the New Man in every period of gender crisis. Cautious about making a commitment, successful and energetic in his law practice, fond of travel, taking enormous pleasure in his Manhattan apartment with its “pleasantly faded Turkey rug,” its carefully chosen collectibles, and its opportunities for intimate entertaining, Selden lacks only jogging shoes and a copy of The Color Purple on his coffee table to fit into the culture of the 1980s.

Real change, Wharton shows us in the novel, must come from outside the dominant class-structures. Thus the figure of Simon Rosedale, the Jewish financier making it big on Wall Street, takes on increasing importance as the novel develops. He plays one of the main roles in the triangle with Lily and Selden, and while Selden asserts too late that he has faith in Lily, Rosedale demonstrates his faith by coming to see her in her dingy exile and by offering her money to start again. Rosedale’s style is certainly not that of the Perfect Gentleman, and even to the last Lily’s ladyhood cannot quite accept him: “Little by little, circumstances were breaking down her dislike for Rosedale. The dislike, indeed, still subsisted; but it was penetrated here and there by the perception of mitigating qualities in him: of a certain gross kindliness, a rather helpless fidelity of sentiment, which seemed to be struggling through the surface of his material ambitions” (485). In order to break out of the social cage, Lily must make compromises with elegance, compromises that ultimately are beyond her scope. But Rosedale, the only man in the novel who likes children (we see him through Lily’s eyes “kneeling domestically on the drawing room hearth” with Caryl Fisher’s little girl [401]), offers the hope of continuity, rootedness, and relatedness that Lily finally comes to see as the central meaning of life.
Lily's changing perceptions of Rosedale are a parallel to the most radical theme in the novel: her growing awareness and finally her merger with a community of working women. With each step downward, each removal to a smaller room, Lily's life becomes more enmeshed with this community, and she sees it in more positive terms. We see her first as an exceptional figure, silhouetted against a backdrop of anonymous female drones in Grand Central Station, "sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans" (5). For the observant Selden, the contrast to "the herd" only brings out Lily's high gloss: "The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how specialized she was" (6).

The crudest of these women is the charwoman, Mrs. Haffen, whose appearance frames the first part of the novel as that of the typist Nettie Struther frames the end. Leaving Selden's apartment, Lily encounters this woman scrubbing the stairs, stout, with "clenched red fists . . . a broad, sallow face, slightly pitted with smallpox, and the straw-coloured hair through which her scalp shone unpleasantly" (20). In her hardness, ugliness, poverty, and age, Mrs. Haffen is the monstrous specter of everything Lily most dreads, the very heart of dinginess. Trying to make money out of Bertha Dorset's love letters, she also embodies the moral corruption Lily has come to fear in herself, the willingness to sacrifice all sense of value to the need to survive.

Lily's gradual and painful realization that her status as a lady does not exempt her from the sufferings of womanhood is conveyed through her perceptions of her own body as its exquisite ornamentality begins to decline. Her luxuriant hair begins to thin, as Carry Fisher notices (404); her radiant complexion too will become "dull and colourless" in the millinery workshop (455). In the beginning, she is one of the lilies of the field, who neither toils nor spins, nor, certainly, scrubs; her hands are not the "clenched red fists" of anger, labor, rebellion, but art objects "polished as a bit of old ivory" (10). Yet in her confrontation with Gus Trenor, Lily is suddenly aware that these lovely hands are also "helpless" and "useless" (237). Lily has had fantasies of her hands as creative and artistic, dreaming of a fashionable shop in which "subordinate fingers, blunt, grey, needle-pricked fingers" would do all the hard work, while her delicate fingers added the distinctive finishing touch (456–57). In reality, she learns, her "untutored fingers" are blundering and clumsy; like the hands of the working women, her hands too have "been formed from childhood for their special work," the work of decoration and display, and they can never compete in the workaday world (477). When Selden sees her for the last time in his apartment, noting "how thin her hands looked" against the fire, it is as if they are fading and disappearing, vestigial appendages useless to her solitary existence (501).

At the center of Lily's awakening to her kinship with other women is Gerty Farish's Working Girls' Club. Gerty works with a charitable association trying "to
provide comfortable lodgings, with a reading-room and other modest distractions, where young women of the class employed in down-town offices might find a home when out of work, or in need of a rest” (179). Visiting this club as Lady Bountiful, Lily nonetheless makes the first imaginative identification between herself and the working girls, “young girls, like herself, some perhaps pretty, some not without a trace of her finer sensibilities. She pictured herself leading such a life as theirs—a life in which achievement seemed as squalid as failure—and the vision made her shudder sympathetically” (179).

Yet when she “joins the working classes,” Lily also sees “the fragmentary and distorted image of the world she had lived in, reflected in the mirror of the working-girls’ minds” (461). They idealize the society women whose hats they trim. Lily Bart herself has become a kind of romantic heroine for Nettie Struther, the working girl she meets in Bryant Park on her return from Selden’s apartment. Nettie has followed Lily’s social career in the newspapers, reading about her dresses, thinking of her as “being so high up, where everything was just grand” (505). She has named her baby daughter “Marry Ant'nette” because an actress playing the queen reminded her of Lily. Their encounter is the strongest moment of female kinship in the novel, as Lily also sees herself mirrored in Nettie and her baby, and recognizes that Nettie’s achievement is far beyond any she has previously conceived for herself.

Nettie is a typist who has had an unhappy affair with a man from a higher social class, a man who promised to marry her but deserted her. (Margaret McDowell, one of Wharton’s critics, leaps to the false conclusion that Nettie has been a prostitute.) Although Nettie felt that her life was over, she was given the chance to begin again by a man who had known her from childhood, knew that she had been seduced, and loved her enough to marry her anyway. There is even an ambiguity about the paternity of the child; Nettie may have been pregnant when George married her. This testament of male faith and female courage stands in sharp contrast to Selden’s caution and Lily’s despair.

The scene between the two women is unique in The House of Mirth for its intimacy and openness (Lily too tells Nettie that she is unhappy and in trouble), for its setting in the warm kitchen (the ritual center of much nineteenth-century woman’s fiction), for the presence of the baby, and for its acknowledgment of physical needs. In holding Nettie’s baby, the untouchable Lily gives in at last to her longing for touch. Holding the baby, she is also being held, expressing her own hunger for physical bonding: “As she continued to hold it the weight increased, sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became a part of herself” (510).

Some feminist critics, however, have tended to see the images of the mother and child in this scene, and in Lily’s deathbed hallucination of holding the infant, as sentimental and regressive. Patricia M. Spacks, for example, criticizes Lily’s
“escapist fantasy of motherhood.” Cynthia Griffin Wolff maintains that the scene with Nettie “gives poignant evidence of Lily’s inability to conceive of herself in any other way than as the object of aesthetic attention,” that she is once again self-consciously arranging herself in a tableau vivant for Nettie’s admiration. Wolff also argues that in her death Lily is relinquishing her “difficult pretenses to adulthood.” Thus in Wolff’s view the extraordinary passage in which Lily, as she is succumbing to the drug, feels “Nettie Struther’s child . . . lying on her arm . . . felt the pressure of its little head against her shoulder” is a sign of Lily’s own retreat into the safety of infantilization.

It seems to me, however, that this hallucination speaks rather for Lily’s awakened sense of loving solidarity and community, for the vision she has had of Nettie’s life as representing “the central truth of existence” (517). That Nettie should be the last person to see Lily alive and that Gerty should be the first to discover her death suggests that Lily’s death is an acknowledgment of their greater strength. Doing justice to Lily Bart requires that we see how far she has come even in her death. Unlike the infantilized Edna Pontellier, who never awakens to the dimensions of her social world, who never sees how the labor of the mulatto and black women around her makes her narcissistic existence possible, Lily is a genuinely awakened woman, who fully recognizes her own position in the community of women workers. Whereas Edna’s awakening is early, easy, incomplete, and brings a warm liquid sense of satisfaction, Lily’s enlightenment is gradual and agonizing: “It was as though a great blaze of electric light had been turned on in her head. . . . She had not imagined that such a multiplication of wakefulness was possible; her whole past was re-enacting itself at a hundred different points of consciousness” (520). Although her awakening proves unendurable, she really tries to overcome rejection, failure, and the knowledge of her own shortcomings. The House of Mirth ends not only with a death, but with the vision of a new world of female solidarity, a world in which women like Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther will struggle hopefully and courageously. Lily dies—the lady dies—so that these women may live and grow. As Elizabeth Ammons observes, “In the arms of the ornamental, leisure-class Lily lies the working-class infant female, whose vitality succors the dying woman. In that union of the leisure and working classes lies a new hope—the New Woman that Wharton would bring to mature life in her next novel.”

For Edith Wharton as novelist, then, The House of Mirth also marked a transition to a new kind of fiction. Like Lily Bart, Wharton had retreated from touch, from community, from awakenings to her own sexuality and anger. While the standard pattern for nineteenth-century American women writers was a strong allegiance to the maternal line and the female community, Wharton belonged to the more troubled and more gifted countertradition of women writers who were torn between the literary world of their fathers and the wordless sensual world.
of their mothers. These two lines of inheritance are generally represented in the literary history of American women writers by the spatial images of the father's library and the mother's garden. Like Margaret Fuller, Edith Wharton felt that “the kingdom of her father’s library” was the intellectual center of her development. But unlike Fuller, she did not have the childhood alternative of her mother’s garden—a space of sensuality, warmth, and openness. Instead Lucretia Wharton was a chilly woman who censored her daughter’s reading, denied her writing paper (as a child Wharton was “driven to begging for the wrappings of the parcels delivered at the house”), withheld physical affection, and met her literary efforts with “icy disapproval.”

Nonetheless in her literary memoir, A Backward Glance, Wharton called her writing a “secret garden,” echoing the title of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s popular novel for girls. The connection with maternal space (in Burnett’s novel it is the dead mother’s garden, lost and overgrown) may have come from her sense of writing as a forbidden joy. From childhood Wharton was possessed with what she called the “ecstasy” of “making up,” almost a form of illicit sexual indulgence: “The call came regularly and imperiously and . . . I would struggle against it conscientiously.”

The House of Mirth marks the point at which Wharton found herself able to give in to her creative jouissance, to assert her creative power as a woman artist, and to merge the male and female sides of her lineage into a mature fiction that could deal seriously with the sexual relationships of men and women in a modern society. Writing The House of Mirth had important professional, literary, and psychological consequences for Wharton’s career, and it is clear that she herself thought of it as a turning point in her life as a writer. In her autobiography, Wharton described the process of writing The House of Mirth as a serial for Scribner’s Magazine as one that taught her the work of writing, that transformed her “from a drifting amateur into a professional.” Because she had agreed to complete the book within five months, Wharton was forced to exchange the leisurely rhythms of the lady novelist’s routine, with its manifold “distractions of a busy and hospitable life, full of friends and travel, reading and gardening” for the “discipline of the daily task.” The necessity for “systematic daily effort” also redefined and excused the pleasures of “making up” as part of her process of gaining “mastery over my tools.”

Under the pressures of the deadline, Wharton also made tough choices about her narrative, choices that reflected her own transition to a more serious artistic professionalism, craftsmanship, and control. In choosing to have Lily die, Wharton was judging and rejecting the infantile aspects of her own self, the part that lacked confidence as a working writer, that longed for the escapism of the lady’s world and feared the sexual consequences of creating rather than becoming art. Secondly, Wharton mastered her emotional conflicts as material for art, learning
through the process that anger and other strong emotions, including sexual desire, could be safely expressed. The death of the lady is thus also the death of the lady novelist, the dutiful daughter who struggles to subdue her most powerful imaginative impulses. If Lily Bart, unable to change, gives way to the presence of a new generation of women, Edith Wharton survives the crisis of maturation at the turn of the century and becomes one of our American precursors of a literary history of female mastery and growth.

Notes

3. The House of Mirth (New York, 1905), 3. All further references to this work will be included parenthetically in the text.
5. The breakdown in women’s culture at the turn of the century has been the subject of extensive recent study by feminist social historians. In a symposium on the problem of “women’s culture,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg noted that by the 1870s and 1880s, “as role options expanded for daughters . . . mothers and other older women frequently acted to thwart their daughters’ new role aspirations.” The period 1890 to 1920, she argues, “saw a concerted male attack upon the legitimacy of this world of female identification and solidarity, an attack abetted by economic and demographic changes which undermined female institutional structures.” See “Politics and Culture in Women’s History: A Symposium,” Feminist Studies 6 (1980), 59, 63. Other important work on this period of gender crisis includes Nancy Sahli, “Smashing: Women’s Relationships before the Fall,” Chrysalis 8 (1979): 17–27; Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York, 1981); and Martha Vicinus, “Sexuality and Power: A Review of Current Work on the History of Sexuality,” Feminist Studies 8 (1982), 133–56.

9. Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America* (Athens, Ga., 1980), 27. Ammons sees this literature as influenced by such contemporary studies of the economics of marriage as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics* (1898) and Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).


16. See Wolff, *A Feast of Words*, 114–15. Wolff also notes that Wharton herself was called “Lily” as a girl (110).

17. On *The Lily*, see D. C. Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer* (Boston, 1895), 41–43.

18. Mary Wilkins Freeman repeatedly used the name “Lily” for the younger woman in a generational transition from women’s culture to New Womanhood; see also Lily Almy and Aunt Fidelia in “A Patient Waif.” The best recent collection of Freeman’s work is *Selected Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Marjorie Pryse (New York, 1983).


26. Elizabeth Ammons points out that Wharton’s contemporary readers would have been familiar with the institution of the Working Girls’ Club; Wharton’s sister-in-law Mary Cadwallader Jones had even written about these clubs in *The Woman’s Book* (1894). See *Edith Wharton’s Quarrel with America*, 40–41. A book published the same year as *The House of Mirth*, Dorothy Richardson’s *The Long Day: The Story of a New York Working
Girl (1905; reprinted in Women at Work, ed. William O'Neill [Chicago, 1972], 3–303), discusses the relationships between factory girls and the leisured ladies who offered them charity and also became the subjects of their fantasies. According to Richardson, working girls even adopted the names of society heroines from the newspapers and from romantic novels.

27. Margaret McDowell, Edith Wharton (Boston, 1976), 44–45.
29. Wolff, A Feast of Words, 130–31. Wolff maintains that Lily’s feelings are primarily narcissistic, whereas I read the conclusion of the novel as a demonstration of her reawakened emotional capacities.
30. Ammons, Edith Wharton’s Quarrel with America, 43.
31. See Wolff, A Feast of Words, 31, 46–47.
33. Wharton, A Backward Glance, 35.
34. Ibid., 207–9.
35. See Wolff, A Feast of Words, 134–38. Wolff calls The House of Mirth a “momentous novel.”