Reflecting Vision in *The House of Mirth*

**Roslyn Dixon**

When Edith Wharton outlines her theory on point of view in *The Writing of Fiction*, she also provides the key to the narrative structure in her novels:

> In the interest of . . . unity it is best to . . . let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousnesses persons either in close mental or moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other's parts in the drama, so that the latter, even viewed from different angles, always presents itself to the reader as a whole.  

This statement points directly to the source of ambiguity in *The House of Mirth*: the use of multiple points of view. Wharton believed that the individual exists only in relation to a complex and demanding social structure, one that allows little variance from convention. For this reason, any meaning in the protagonist's plight arises only through the interplay of characters and from the totality of the drama. Moreover, no one character embodies exemplary behavior, nor is there a central consciousness to provide a moral center or touchstone. Wharton's decision to use contrasting angles of vision marks her move away from the "great tradition" in literature and toward modernism.

This technique is an embodiment of Wharton's ideological perspective concerning the role of the individual within society specifically, and in relation to her vision of America generally. As an uncommitted member of her own community, she understood the insidious pressures put on the individual to conform; as a voracious student of the "wonderworld of nineteenth-century science" and French scholarship, she was exposed to the empirical studies emanating from the nascent social sciences in Europe. In Herbert
Spencer and Émile Durkheim, Wharton found theories to explain social phenomena and her own ambiguous response to her social role. Understanding these influences on Wharton's intellectual development clarifies many of the troubling ambiguities critics continue to see in Wharton's fiction, as does analyzing her use of narrative, for the two are closely intertwined.

In a sense, Wharton's novels are empirical studies of the workings of society, presented through contrasting angles of vision—"reflecting consciousnesses"—that amalgamate to form comprehensive, and unsentimental, sociological assessments. In The House of Mirth, turn-of-the-century New York modifies as Lily Bart moves downward, but the community always is presented as an unthinking, powerful adversary perpetuating specific standards of behavior. And like all of Wharton's protagonists, Lily is an active, albeit somewhat disconnected, participant: her expedient actions reveal her commitment to common values. At the same time, Lily has a latent personal quality that is stimulated when another uncommitted participant, Lawrence Selden, exerts sufficient influence to provide a compelling alternative. The interplay between Lily, Selden, and society at large creates the "reflecting angles of vision"; the nucleus of the novel is formed by Lily's struggle to reconcile her spiritual needs as they are embodied by Selden, with her material and social needs as they are embodied by the group.

The drama created by this interplay is based in part on Wharton's understanding of sociological theory, but she adds another dimension by evaluating the philosophical tools available to Lily within this social framework. And as becomes apparent, the moral directives are of little use, thereby revealing that society at large does not follow its supposed ethical norms; ultimately, Wharton undermines the assumption that positive moral values provide the foundation of civilized society. Hence, Wharton's subject is morality, although she tackles it in a way critics have not yet addressed.

Part of the reason for this lapse is that critics apply their own ideological or moral expectations to Wharton, and in ways not always appropriate. Moreover, many critical assumptions have unjustifiably withstood the test of time to provide unquestioned givens; critics even become the defenders of those moral assumptions which she evaluates so unsentimentally. But Wharton clearly sees the limitations for the individual who accepts the conventional beliefs of the human community, especially in relation to the struggle for personal fulfillment. She uses narrative structure to show how the parts fit into the whole, undecorated either with platitudes or with simple solutions.
Because Wharton’s purpose is to evaluate the underlying ethical and social framework of American society, she creates in Lily Bart a character on the brink of a crucial choice. Lily’s intelligence and social acumen are recognized by a society appreciative of good breeding and wit, but such qualities are less important than economic power and social viability, which she lacks. She maintains her somewhat precarious position by trading social obligations for material comforts, a role she perpetuates by capitalizing on her physical attributes: “If I were shabby no one would have me; a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. . . . Who wants a dingy woman?” She understands her value, and she knows how to sell it at the highest possible price. As an aging ingenue, however, she needs more security: “The certainty that she could marry Percy Gryce when she pleased had lifted a heavy load from her mind . . .” (p. 770). She commits herself to a marriage of convenience because that is the expedient choice, and one that fulfills her social and economic needs.

At the same time, Lily has an attraction to the romantic, embodied in Lawrence Selden, who provides an ethical perspective on Lily’s expedient decision. Selden offers Lily a more compelling alternative by defining success as personal freedom, freedom “from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit” (p. 105). Typically male, Selden finds Lily “diverting” (p. 5), “exquisite” (p. 7) but, untypically, he questions her value: “was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstances had fashioned it into a futile shape?” (p. 7). Whereas Lily unquestioningly accepts the female standard, Selden in contrast questions what merit those standards have and, in the broader sense, what purpose such standards serve. Selden establishes principles which bear no relation to Lily’s situation, then, but he does provide a valid ethical perspective on the female role and on the marriage market in this community.

Lily’s response to Selden reveals the nature of her conflict. Because she has a “faculty to adapting herself, for entering into other people’s feelings . . .” (p. 84), she begins to assess her social group by Selden’s perspective:

Lily smiled at her classification of her friends. How differently they had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining, now they stood for what she was giving up. That very afternoon, they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a
Those elements that Lily had defined as crucial to her emotional well-being become irrelevant when she perceives according to Selden's standard. Consequently, when Selden adds a dimension to Lily's life she thought not possible, she instinctually turns away from the proposed marriage. While she glories in her spiritual growth, however, her social position remains precarious: "There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears" (p. 102). She must resolve somehow the contradiction between her spiritual aspirations and her financial needs by herself, but against Selden's standard, a dilemma Lily recognizes is irreconcilable.

In a sense, Selden represents Platonic ideals, while Lily embodies sociological phenomena. Compare Lily's dilemma with Durkheim's 1893 commentary:

There are in each of us . . . two consciences: one which is common to our group in its entirety, which, consequently, is not ourself, but society living and acting within us; the other, on the contrary, represents that in us which is personal and distinct, that which makes us an individual.5

Selden thus brings to the surface what Lily kept suppressed by virtue of her involvement in the group. Selden on the other hand does not follow his own philosophy, which Lily points out, and which he rationalizes: "I have tried to remain amphibious: it's all right as long as one's lungs can work in another air" (p. 111). In his desire to assess her value, in "putting her skill to the test" (p. 4), he encourages her escape from the conventional, but he does not provide any practical assistance or emotional commitment, as Lily points out: "you're so sure of me that you can amuse yourself with experiments" (p. 116). Selden thus remains sufficiently detached from Lily to absolve himself of any responsibility. In this way, Lily's proposed marriage to Percy Gryce provides the vehicle to test social dynamics in response to Selden's objective philosophic rhetoric.

Lily and Selden provide the predominant angles of vision; the other angle of vision is provided by society at large. The momentum in this community occurs in the constant realignment of loyalties based on power struggles erupting beneath a decorous surface, only ruffled by occasional indiscretions. Judy Trenor, one of the ruling denizens, counterpoints Selden with pragmatic sensibility; she has ensured her own social and economic success through a loveless marriage (p. 129),
and she is exasperated by Lily’s rejection of Percy Gryce. Mrs. Trenor knows that luxury exchanged for marriage vows is fair value, a view Lily herself understands: “It was the voice of [Lily’s] own conscience which spoke to her through Mrs. Trenor’s reproachful accents” (p. 120).

The commitment to exchange revealed by Mrs. Trenor is echoed constantly, and provides a guideline for addressing the constantly shifting power struggles and loyalties, as Wai-Chee Demock has recently pointed out.6 And, as is apparent, this framework is a viable one; the shared, commonly accepted values relate to survival and, most importantly, to the achievement and maintenance of power. Moreover, this society seems to exist quite comfortably without an ethical standard and, in fact, seems quite oblivious to its lack. In Spencerian terms, however, this is not contradictory: “Rude superstitions initiate elaborate mythologies, theologies, cosmogonies. Opinions getting embodied in creeds, gets [sic] embodied, too, in accepted codes of ceremony and conduct, and in established social sentiment.”7 In sociological terms, any “superstitions” or “opinions” can provide a viable code of conduct, so long as these beliefs stem from commonly held assumptions and provide an identifiable standard to follow.

Wharton’s presumption that Christian values do not inform the social framework may be a reflection of her agnosticism, but more likely she is revealing her perceptions about American society. She more properly understands social dynamics in Darwinian terms,8 and she accepts the inherent contradiction between conventional moral assumptions and actual social practices. What does interest her, and what provides the central focus in the novel, is the struggle experienced by those who do not unquestioningly comply with New York’s social code. Lily’s error is not that she participates in the various exchanges, for that is the route to survival. But under Selden’s influence, she becomes hesitant and inconsistent, a parasite rather than a committed and equal participant in the game of life.

Wharton does acknowledge, however, the presence of orthodox values in Gerty Farish and Aunt Peniston. “Good” in the Christian sense, Gerty is “a parasite on the moral order . . .” (p. 241), leading a minimal existence and capable only of vocal outrage and meaningless suggestions: “Miss Farish could see no hope for her friend but in a life completely reorganized and detached from its old associations . . .” (p. 432). Gerty reveals what life offers according to Selden’s criteria in the “republic of the spirit,” devoid of glamor and frivolity, but, ironically, Gerty also lacks the vitality that makes Lily so compelling to Selden. In Gerty, then, the limitations in Selden’s perspective become evident.
While Gerty has so sacrificed herself to become ineffectual, in contrast, Aunt Peniston's appearance of moral rectitude overshadows genuine compassion. She is dedicated to empty ritual and moral platitudes, a "looker-on at life" (p. 58), who has never tested the beliefs she advocates. Her rigorous dedication to form and her lack of charity make her a dangerous adversary; when she disinherits Lily, Mrs. Peniston embodies the belief that moral lessons are learned only through sacrifice, although she fails to consider the serious consequences for Lily, who thereby is cast completely adrift. Gerty and Aunt Peniston thus provide contrasting perspectives: Aunt Peniston is form without substance, Gerty substance without viable form. Both are, however, in their own ways as self-serving as everyone in this society.

In the same way, Selden also reveals he is a self-serving, albeit sporadic, participant. His condemnation of Lily's apparent liaison with Gus Trenor contrasts with Selden's own liaison with Mrs. Dorset; Selden's actions are condoned, however, while Lily's are condemned. By turning against Lily at this and other crucial instances, Selden reveals his duplicitous nature. He spouts ideals, but his words become empty rhetoric in the face of his own actions. Selden thereby suggests that the aesthetic ideal is subject to capriciousness and to expedient compromise. In this sense, Selden provides an example of Darwinian adaptation: he restricts his need for a philosophical framework to the abstract; he becomes variously conventional, hypocritical, and expedient as necessary, which he justifies in terms of his "amphibious" nature.

Selden has long caused problems for critics. Diana Trilling's 1947 commentary is worth considering in particular for its curious rationale. She feels there are echoes of James in Selden's moral elevation and in the inviolability with which he inhabits an insensible world. . . . Selden argues the thesis that is . . . made explicit in his choice of a manner of life, that mind and grace of spirit reach their best flower in a well-ordered society, sheltered against the rude winds that blow through a more open world.

For Trilling, Selden embodies the moral "thesis" in the novel, which she substantiates by concluding that his "passions are blocked," and that he reasonably takes Lily's actions as "gross rejection" until she ultimately proves her worth in death. Hence, Trilling shifts responsibility onto Lily to carry not only her own actions, but also Selden's inaction; Trilling thereby appoints Selden as the exemplar without demanding that he be exemplary.

Unfortunately, Trilling's rationale is typical, and is used, ironically,
to illustrate Wharton’s literary shortcomings. In 1953, Blake Nevius
suggests that “it was beyond Edith Wharton’s powers of sympathy and
imagination to create in Gerty or in Selden attractive alternatives.”11 In
fact, Nevius’ whole study is actually an insidiously biased evaluation,
reflecting a view going as far back as E. K. Brown, V. L. Parrington, and
Percy Lubbock, all of whom try to locate Wharton unsuccessfully within
the “great tradition.” One typical example from Lubbock: “There is a
curious lack of anything [in the novels] that could be disengaged as a
philosophy of life, a characteristic synthesis of belief [which] is no doubt
their weakness from one point of view.”12 In their unsuccessful search
for a moral touchstone, critics often reveal more about their own
unfulfilled expectations than about Wharton’s perspective. And their
analyses often become, ironically, self-fulfilling prophecies used to
legitimize those expectations.

While the early critics expected Wharton to comply with certain
moral standards they themselves espoused, later critics generally have
downplayed the moral implications in favor of other issues. But
Wharton’s subject clearly is morality: if Selden’s adaptable idealism
counterpoints society’s blatant opportunism, then Lily reveals the
danger in acting on Selden’s principles. Under his influence, she
becomes enmeshed in a series of irreconcilable social and spiritual
crises. She continuously loses sight of the common rules of conduct
until, finally, she is ejected from her social group; those skills which
ensured her survival become useless in a world with different rules:
“The environment in which Lily found herself was as strange to her as
its inhabitants. She was acquainted with the world of the fashionable
New York hotel” (p. 441). Her downward spiral continues until she is
left with only one option: to act on Rosedale’s advice to bargain with
Selden’s letters to reestablish her position in society.

The perspective provided by Rosedale is crucial, as his social rise
parallels Lily’s decline. Rosedale correctly assumes that exchange and
power politics provide the basis for all relationships. He uses Gus
Trenor as an entrance into society in exchange for assisting Trenor with
the stock market (p. 130). When marriage to Lily seems beneficial, he so
negotiates; when she no longer is useful, he arbitrarily rejects her.
Rosedale is a survivor cognizant not only of the rules, but also of the
most productive strategies. He shows Lily how to survive, thereby
echoing the sentiments Lily herself embodied when she was within and
he was without. This reversal of roles reveals how crucial is expedient
self-interest. More importantly, Rosedale’s consistency of purpose
contrasts with Lily’s inconsistency.
But for Lily to act on Rosedale's advice would compromise Selden. As genuine as Lily's affection is for Selden, more significantly, he epitomizes the ideal to which she aspires. Regardless of his culpability, crushing Selden to ensure her own survival would be tantamount to crushing the ideal. Hence, Lily's choices are reduced to absolutes: she can survive by compromising the ideal, or she can honor the ideal by sacrificing herself. In choosing to protect Selden, Lily seems to reveal inner growth: she follows the morally correct path.

Many critics maintain that Lily experiences a fortunate fall. Irving Howe suggests that "only dimly, and then after much pain and confusion, does [Lily] realize that this social fall may have positive moral consequences. . . ."\textsuperscript{3} Geoffrey Walton concludes that "it is [Lily's] steadily deepening self-awareness of social perceptiveness which, along with her fundamental moral integrity and dignity, give her ultimately her tragic stature."\textsuperscript{14} And more recently, Carol Wershoven suggests that "as the distance between Selden and Lily widens. . . . Lily develops her own moral strength. . . . She burns those letters, which are the key to her social rehabilitation."\textsuperscript{15}

But Lily, in fact, does not grow; she consistently acts according to her nature. The impulse to set herself apart from the "herd of her sex" is the same instinct that takes her imprudently to Selden's apartment: just as her physical needs require that she make herself desirable, so her spiritual needs draw her to Selden. And buying clothes when she should husband her meager resources stems from the same impulse as donating to Gerty's charities: "The satisfaction derived from this act was all that the most ardent moralist could have desired" (p. 180). Her acts of self-indulgence are as integral as her acts of charity, and stem from the same sensibility, a quality Selden clearly articulates: "your genius lies in converting impulses into intentions" (p. 107). Lily acts on equally ethical or selfish impulses, a characteristic that pointedly undermines any suggestion of moral growth.

Instead, her choice only reveals Selden's weakness. He offers empty rhetoric, harsh judgments, and a vision of life completely disconnected from the exigencies of her situation. He condemns Lily even in death for the appearance of compromise (p. 531); his final comment only points to his egocentricity: "It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction" (p. 532). He fails to understand that Lily, removed from everything that enriched her life, has, in fact, atrophied. Moreover, in death, she becomes extinct, not an exemplar of the ideal, but as a pathetic victim of useless ethics. When Selden gives to Lily's corpse "the
word which made all clear” (p. 533), she cannot hear and he does not understand, and the word becomes as meaningless as Lily’s life. And herein lies the answer to Selden’s inquiry regarding Lily’s worth.

What then are the implications? From Selden’s perspective, the experiment is a success. He establishes himself as a spectator, and he is consistent with that aim. He also is consistent as moral instructor to Lily, which allows him to test not only his theoretical beliefs, but to evaluate Lily’s worth in relation to those beliefs. And in his terms, Lily ultimately fulfills his expectations: by complying with his principles, she proves her value to him, dying as an admirable example of noble self-sacrifice.

From the perspective of society at large, everyone illustrates that social survival depends only on fair exchange for services rendered; they thereby illustrate that exemplary behavior or living by ethical ideals is not possible in actual situations. When Lily asks Rosedale whether truth alters a situation, he replies that “it does in novels, but I’m certain it don’t in real life” (p. 412). Whereas Selden fails to acknowledge that philosophical theories are potentially destructive in practice, then, Rosedale has a much more realistic perspective and, as a result, does not share Selden’s hypocrisy.

From Lily’s perspective, the options available to her are so contradictory that she is forced to compromise on issues striking at the center of her emotional well-being. To suggest that Lily’s expectations are unreasonable, as critics have, is irrelevant, for Lily aspires to the common social goals. To suggest that Lily’s spiritual aspirations are worthy, however, proves equally implausible. Rather, the implications become apparent as she vacillates, drifting toward her own destruction:

That was the feeling which possessed her now—the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift on the whirling surface of existence. . . . Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence. . . . There was no center of early pieties, of grave enduring traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others. (pp. 515–16)

Lily ultimately realizes that there is neither a moral center to society, nor in herself. In this crucial insight into the genesis of her own moral weakness, Lily sees how ill-equipped everyone, herself included, is to address the moral dilemmas of life.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff disagrees: “As inhabitants of The House of Mourning, [Nettie and her baby] give a moral focus to the satire. Lily’s powerful identification with the baby gives silent testimony to the
infantilizing force of the mutilating image of women that society fosters."17 Yet Lily's suicide suggests something more: whereas Nettie survives by inhabiting The House of Mourning, Lily cannot similarly compromise; she is disconnected from those values that inform Nettie's meager existence. But neither can Lily commit herself to The House of Mirth; she is equally disconnected from society's serious frivolity. Because she is neither morally corrupt, nor morally renewed, she has no place in either House. Her identification with the baby more likely symbolizes her desire to be born again, in a new form, in a different place, a different time, with different values. Hence, Lily finally chooses to opt out. Consequently, no one provides the moral touchstone necessary to make Lily's suffering meaningful.

Although this omission usually is seen by critics as a technical or artistic flaw, Wharton in fact chooses to omit a moral center. Rather than presenting an ideal, she reveals the actual from every angle, evaluating and reevaluating it within a constantly shifting perspective. Meaning thus is formulated in the accumulation of focus and contrast, action and response, choice and consequence, a point Wharton reinforces elsewhere: "I am never interested in the misfortunes of my personages, only in their psychological evolution."18 In this way, form points to meaning: each character becomes a component in and subservient to the whole; the "whole" reveals the implications. Most significantly, this technique undermines the foundations of certain assumptions, not related specifically to women, but to the ethical framework presumed to inform society.

Wharton creates a world without moral positives because she sees in America a society without moral positives, a society lacking the kind of ethical foundation that would give meaning to Lily's struggle. In this sense, she brings a modernist perspective to her fiction. More from Durkheim:

We cannot at one and the same time develop ourselves in two opposite senses. If we have a lively desire to think and act for ourselves, we cannot be strongly inclined to think and act as others do. . . . Moreover, at the moment when this solidarity exercises its force, our personality vanishes . . . for we are no longer ourselves, but the collective life.19

Despite Lily's spiritual disconnection from New York society, as a member of that society, she is incapable of significantly modifying her behavior. In this way, Lily's tragedy is individuated, but her evolution also provides the vehicle for a sociological assessment of a society
lacking in moral foundation, one that, by its very nature, is incapable of moral growth.

Wharton’s ideological perspective suggests that she is less connected with the “Great Tradition” in literature than she is connected with the modern French tradition leading to structuralism. In the evolution of character, she conducts an empirical assessment of the “whole” by applying Durkheim’s principles; like the moderns, Wharton perceives society as devoid of values and dedicated to self-gratification. And like the moderns, Sartre for instance, Wharton perceives choice as the only avenue to selfhood, although, paradoxically, choice also leads, as in Lily Bart’s case, to self-destruction. By using “reflecting angles of vision,” Wharton creates a text, like society, lacking a moral center. And, as in society, the implications in the text ultimately must speak for themselves. That critics have for so long misunderstood Wharton illustrates how narrow the critical boundaries can become when writers fail to fulfill reader expectations or to conform with conventional techniques.

2 In A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), Cynthia Griffin Wolff points to the lack of a moral center in her discussion of The Custom of the Country (p. 232), a characteristic applicable to all of Wharton’s fiction.
3 Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (New York: Scribner’s, 1895), p. 94.
4 Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (New York: Scribner’s, 1905), pp. 17–18. All further references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
8 In “Psychological Determinism in The Age of Innocence,” James A. Robinson connects Wharton’s terminology with Darwinism and determinism [The Markham Review, V (Fall, 1975), 1–15].
9 Wolff notes Selden’s contradictory nature, but offers a feminist interpretation (A Feast of Words, p. 121).
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13 Irving Howe, "A Reading of The House of Mirth," ibid., p. 121.
16 Diana Trilling, for instance, suggests that Wharton should have provided "employment for Lily—as, say, a governess or companion" ("The House of Mirth Revisited," p. 117).
17 Wolff, A Feast of Words, p. 130.