

Breaking the mold:  
gender assumptions  
in the house of mirth  
and the red badge  
of ...



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In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, protagonist Lily Bart is on a quest for happiness. In her case, happiness embodied in the image of marriage to a rich and indulgent husband and, subsequently, the ability to behave as a proper woman of society and culture should. However, when she attempts to lure this sort of husband into her traps, she is betrayed by high society and forced to reevaluate the value of herself as a woman. Similarly, in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane's character Henry Fleming is also striving to fulfill an idealized gender role – that of the courageous and valiant soldier – only to realize that the manhood the role demands is not quite of the type he had imagined. Both characters are faced with disillusionment and startling insights into the nature of their society on their respective paths of self-realization. The reader is introduced to Lily in the midst of her pursuit of a husband. She bemoans her advancing age, noting that “[y]ounger and plainer girls had been married off by dozens, and she was nine-and-twenty, and still Miss Bart” (Wharton). Lily blames her failure to procure a husband on her inability to emulate society's idealized woman. She questions herself: Had she shown an undue eagerness for victory? Had she lacked patience, pliancy and dissimulation? Whether she charged herself with these faults or absolved herself from them, made no difference in the sum-total of her failure (Wharton). Lily at no point in this self reproach pauses to consider that perhaps it is society's expectations of her place and not her own flaws that are to blame for her present discontentment. Her eagerness to procure a place in it prevents her from forming any sort of negative critique of the society which expects her to be content with a life of marriage, parties, and gossip. In fact, for a woman of Lily's moderate means, the demands of keeping up appearances in her desired circle pushes her into a world of

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financial and emotional uncertainty. By borrowing money from a rich man, Lily inadvertently invites societal gossip as to the motivation behind his generosity and realizes “[...] for the first time that a woman’s dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage; and that the maintenance of a moral attribute should be dependent on dollars and cents, made the world appear a more sordid place than she had conceived it” (Wharton). She slowly becomes more cynical towards her social environment, but it is the only world in which she knows how to function and as such, is difficult to abandon in entirety. Lily does have occasional impulses to remove herself from such a demanding social system. At one point “[s]he 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 even these small resistances come to no use, for after them Lily still resists breaking with her established lifestyle, and rejects her whimsical notion of an independent life in asking herself unhappily, “[b]ut what manner of life would it be?” (Wharton). Lily’s inability to align her impulses toward independence and freedom with the social concept that all a woman should desire is to be married to, and to be provided for by, a man of means, eventually land her in the depths of humiliation and poverty. In a conversation with Lawrence Selden she reveals that after speaking with him of personal freedom, she “ saw [she] could never be happy with what had contented [her] before” (Wharton). She finally realizes the futility of attempting to mold herself to the desires of society. Lily makes a final speech to Selden in an attempt to redeem herself in his eyes. She says: 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

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I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? (Wharton). By living her entire life trying to fulfill the society's expectations of the female sex, Lily has lost any other individual abilities which may have enabled her to break out of the pigeonhole in which her social environment has placed her. As a male character, Henry Fleming has worked to achieve a very different set of assumptions and expectations. However, Henry's ambition is, like Lily's, motivated by a desire to attain the attention and approval of his society by himself emulating an idealized man - the strong, brave, and honorable soldier. Henry's lack of manhood is emphasized by the way the narrator constantly refers to Henry as "the youth" (Crane). Henry dreams of the glory that the battlefield may bring and is intoxicated with the concept: He had burned several times to enlist. Tales of great movements shook the land. They might not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them. He had read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds (Crane). Legends of wartime heroism, courage, and nerve have penetrated deep into Henry's mind and he sees the possibility of claiming his manhood by crusading bravely on his country's behalf. In war heroes, Henry sees all of the qualities of the era's ideal male - strength, valor, stoicism, cunning - all of which contribute to the mystique of military life and convince Henry to finally enlist. When Henry first sees battle, all his romantic notions are shattered. He fights well, but is shocked by the sheer visceral intensity of the commotion. He "conceded it to be impossible that he should ever become a hero. He was a craven loon. Those pictures of glory were piteous things. He groaned from his heart and went staggering off"

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(Crane). This disillusionment shatters Henry's spirit at the time but at the end of his story, it is the relinquishment of his former ideals which most cement his manhood. He has been humbled by war and death and has realized that the ideal is not always as idyllic as it appears. Henry's moment of epiphany comes as he "found that he could look back upon the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels and see them truly. He was gleeful when he discovered that he now despised them" (Crane). Both Lily and Henry begin their stories by aspiring to societally idealized gender roles and in the end realize the futility of attempting to attain a romanticized version of gender perfection. The journey to self-realization often, it appears, must begin with knowledge that there exists an actual self in separation from the role that society dictates.