

Exactly what the
occasion requires:
the significance of
carry fisher in the
house...



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Commonly called “a novel of manners” because of the way characters are shown thinking and speaking about how people in society ought to conduct themselves, *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton focuses chiefly on Lily Bart, a woman whose social decline and fall is read chiefly as a criticism of the habits and customs of New York’s upper class in the early 20th century. Lacking personal resources, not entirely respectable, and long past the age where women of her era were regarded as marriage material, Lily Bart nonetheless enjoys both celebrity and a lavish standard of living until her inability to adapt to social expectations pushes her farther and farther down the social ladder until she dies in poverty. Many critics describe Lily’s decline and fall as something inevitable, however the text contains powerful evidence that it is not. Most of the evidence is concentrated in the character of Mrs. Carry Fisher, a character who in many respects is a foil for Lily. Despite disadvantages far more severe than the heroine’s, Carry thrives while Lily self-destructs. This disparity refutes the popular notion that Lily Bart is a helpless creature who has no other options except to make the choices she makes. This essay will show how Carry Fisher is exactly what Lily imagines herself to be, but is not: a woman who survives and thrives because she knows how to be exactly what the occasion requires.

The House of Mirth was set in the early 1900s and published in 1905, when women could not yet vote. Although women could own assets in their own right, most money and property was controlled by men. Both Lily and Carry have a similar problem—they lack a male provider and have very little in personal resources. But their problems exist for different reasons, and the two women deal with them in radically different ways. Whereas Lily ignores

problems, relying on her good looks and her ability to lie and manipulate her way out of unpleasant situations (1), Carry prefers to deal with reality. She asserts that “ half the trouble in life is caused by pretending there isn’t any” (2), she acknowledges that she lives in a world where most people have to earn their keep, and she understands that her very survival depends on her utility to others. The fact she is willing to embrace the transactional aspect of society is one reason why she survives.

Lily and Carry are members of the upper class of New York Society at the height of the Gilded Age. They are surrounded by both material wealth and an atmosphere of social and economic upheaval. The conservative element of upper-class society, as exemplified by Percy Gryce, Julia Peniston, and Grace Stepney, struggles to maintain its increasingly tenuous grasp on social privilege. Scorning ostentatious displays of wealth, and willing to spend money but loath to waste it, the conservative members of the upper crust are the final arbiters of what is, or is not, appropriate behavior (3). Yet their hegemony is threatened by the fashionable faction, many of whom are relatively new to their wealth and inclined to flaunt it. The Trenors, the Dorsets, and the various hangers-on who attend their parties and adorn their drawing-rooms love conspicuous consumption. They compete to see who has the biggest opera-box, the largest yacht, and the most outrageous house-parties (4). In this rarified fashionable milieu, attention is a form of currency, many conventional societal norms are passé, and hospitality is a spectator sport complete with newspaper coverage. Although neither Lily nor Carry is independently wealthy or even financially independent, they begin the novel

moving chiefly in the fashionable circles of society. Whereas Lily's participation is from personal inclination, Carry participates out of necessity.

Lily is an orphan whose parents lost nearly all the family money due to years of living beyond their means. She grew up in an environment where conspicuous consumption was normal, where she was not taught the value of a dollar, and where it was considered acceptable to not pay bills or servant salaries on time. The resulting instability in the home, and the bickering between her domineering, overspending mother and her meek but hardworking father, was something she considered normal. Her father's bankruptcy and death occurred after Lily's coming-out (5) when she was nineteen years of age and an adult according to the customs of the time. Although she still has a small amount of invested capital (6), the interest from it is not enough to allow her to live independently even if she were to do as her "dingy" cousin Grace Stepney did and rent a room in a boarding-house. But Lily is supported financially by her aunt Julia Peniston, whom she despises for her frugality and lack of frivolity (7). Lily has a bedroom in the Peniston house on Fifth Avenue, is fed and clothed at her aunt's expense, and has all her ordinary expenses paid through irregular but generous gifts of cash from her aunt (8). This is why she can afford to dress splendidly, attend fancy parties, and be critical of people who do not. Lily's contempt extends even to her aunt, without whom she would be destitute. Although Lily expects to inherit enough from Aunt Julia to live comfortably, she spends the first half of the novel trying intermittently to attract a wealthy husband and to avoid negative consequences for living beyond her means. Despite her musings with Lawrence Selden about the failings of society (9), and

despite her acknowledged desire for wealth (10), Lily completely fails to accept that she is part of a transactional society and not a person with inherent value who is admired and appreciated simply because she exists. She resents any suggestion that she help others in exchange for the hospitality or gifts she receives (11), she fails to understand why people she treats poorly by failing to hold up her end of a commitment do not continue to have a positive opinion of her (12), and she believes that she can claim the privileges of adulthood while being indulged as a dependent child if she maintains enough of a wilful ignorance (13) about even the most basic aspects of the agreement she is making. In short, Lily's perspective is that of a petulant, overindulged toddler.

After surviving two divorces, Carry Fisher has no significant personal wealth. She receives a small amount of alimony from her second husband, and has what is described as a "tiny" house near the fashionable Fifth Avenue but not actually on it (14). At the beginning of the novel people make frequent reference to how Carry needs every dollar (15), but the reason why is not revealed until the second book: Carry has a young daughter she must support. Exactly who the girl's father is isn't obvious, however she must have been born before the events in *The House Of Mirth* because Carry is consistently visible throughout the first portion of the book, with no reference made to a pregnancy in progress. Unlike Lily, Carry has no wealthy aunt to support her. She earns her living by working as a special kind of social secretary to the nouveau riche. She introduces newly wealthy people to high society and helps them learn to dine, dress, and entertain according to the standards of the era (16). For this, she charges fees sizable enough to

allow her the occasional luxury (17). Sometimes she serves as a kind of employment agency, setting her wealthier peers up with household employees such as cooks or occasional workers such as musicians or decorators (18). Yet this sort of income is not steady. At times she borrows from male characters in the book, or gets them to speculate in the stock market on her behalf, and although there is never any suggestion that Carry fails to repay money that is borrowed, there are veiled suggestions that she might exchange romantic attention (if not outright sexual favors) for money. But most of her wealth in the second half of the book comes from commissions, fees, stock tips, and other income related to helping new millionaires integrate themselves with the social elite (19). As a sophisticated investor and businesswoman, Carry therefore attends fancy parties for business purposes. She knows that other people gossip about her and complain about her presence: hostesses such as Judy Trenor expect their guests to make a little stir, and Judy in particular wants Carry to placate and distract her “dull” husband whose work and investment decisions make the party possible. (20)

From the perspective of the conservative set, both Lily and Carry are damaged goods. There are reasons why the attractive Lily has reached the relatively old age of twenty-nine (21) without having been married. Although her parents’ financial woes were not her fault, Lily has made her share of scandalous blunders. At the age of about twenty, while living in Europe out of reach of her mother’s creditors, Lily was engaged to be married to the Italian Prince Varigliano. But while the property agreement was being drawn up that would have provided for Lily and her family in the event of her

husband's death, the Prince's attractive stepson appeared on the scene. Lily began an unwise public flirtation with him and he broke off the engagement (22). In the late 1890's a broken engagement was not quite so scandalous as a divorce, however since then Lily has sabotaged one romantic connection after another. This, together with her basic dishonesty, her adoption of the habits and mores of the fashionable set, and her habit of treating people very poorly unless she wants something from them, has caused Lily to be "talked about" (23) in a way that is not appreciated by her conservative relatives. While among her fashionable friends, Lily smokes cigarettes, plays cards for money, and even borrows money off of Ned Van Alstyne, her elderly second cousin. For an unmarried woman of the early 1900s, these are not respectable activities. Yet whereas Lily's fashionable peers have enough money to insulate them from the otherwise predictable consequences, Lily does not.

From the perspective of the fashionable set, Lily and Carry are valuable but for different reasons. Although in previous years Lily gallivanted about as a professional houseguest due to her charming personality and good looks, at the start of the novel her charm is fading. She is no longer a novelty and is receiving fewer invitations every year. People are no longer willing to entertain her solely for the pleasure of her company. (24) Her aunt expects her to help her supervise the fall cleaning, her hostesses such as Judy Trenor expect her to take a seat at the bridge table and to help write out address cards (25), and she is revolted to find that she is now expected to find a way to contribute to the society she inhabits. Were she married, with access to a dining room and drawing room of her own, she could easily reciprocate

hospitality simply by throwing a party and inviting everyone who had entertained her in the past (26). Yet as Julia's ward, Lily has no hospitality of her own to offer (27) and therefore cannot participate in society as a full adult. Carry offers hospitality to others, however in the first part of the novel it is of the low-budget sort: Lily generally regards Carry's "small, crowded house" as being beneath her (28). But Carry's primary contribution to other people's parties is as a social lubricant. She earns her living by helping newly wealthy people such as Simon Rosedale, the Brys, and the Gormers set up their households and ease their way into the social scene (29). Carry serves her clients first by integrating them with fashionable part of society which is more accepting of newcomers. Once she establishes them with the fashionable set, she helps them expand their influence until it includes the conservative set as well. In the process, she helps provide both the fashionable and conservative sets of society with the entertainment and novelty they crave.

As physically attractive women, Lily and Carry both get a lot of male attention, but they use it differently. Lily has very advanced social skills and is capable of making another person feel as though Lily truly likes them, trusts them, and is willing to reveal her innermost secrets. This can be endearing, especially to men, but Lily uses her power of fascination chiefly to entertain herself. She makes fitful attempts to trap a wealthy husband and she manipulates Gus into pretending to speculate on her behalf in exchange for romantic attention. But as soon as she gets what she wants from people, Lily treats them like something she'd scrape off the bottom of her shoe. The way she stands up Percy Gryce repeatedly once she is prematurely sure of

his fondness for her (30), her callous treatment of Gus Trenor (31), and the way she snubs the Brys socially when she no longer needs their hospitality or support (32) are examples. Furthermore, Lily has no problem showing her contempt to people she believes she does not need, such as Mrs. Haffen (33) or her poor cousin Grace Stepney (34). The fact that the people Lily uses and discards generally notice it is evidence that Lily is not as shrewd a manipulator as she believes she is: an expert manipulator is never caught or even suspected. By contrast, Carry flirts and acts like the embodiment of “a spicy paragraph” (35). Although she occasionally uses people, especially men, she never misleads them. She is described as frank, she freely acknowledges the source of her money (36), and she admits when she’s wrong (37) instead of trying to lie her way out of a problem or pin the blame on other people the way Lily does after the Percy Gryce fiasco. She never tries to present herself as something she’s not, such as when Lily tries to pass herself off as an innocent babe in the woods early on in her courtship of Percy (36). The people Carry uses invariably benefit enough through their association with her to want to continue their friendship. Carry is also a loyal friend who does not abandon Gus Trenor, Lily Bart, or Simon Rosedale after she gets back on a solid financial footing.

Although Lily fancies herself an adept reader of people, she is not. She completely misjudges Simon Rosedale (37) and believes she can flirt with Gus Trenor to get financial help out of him but ignore him when he comes looking for repayment. She ignores the fact that her poorer cousin Grace Stepney is a potential enemy due to having been displaced by Lily as Aunt Julia’s heir-presumptive (38), and she fails to predict Bertha Dorset’s attack

in Monaco despite having already been on the receiving end of one at Bellomont (39). She misinterprets the beginning of Percy Gryce's interest in her as evidence of an attraction strong enough for her to describe it to others as a de facto engagement (40). She does not recognize Bertha Dorset's motivations (41), and she can't recognize when she's about to lose her Aunt Julia's favor, along with her only financial support, as a direct result of her increasingly scandalous behavior (42).

Unlike Lily, Carry is extremely perceptive. She is well read and very well educated for a woman of the era. Besides drawing analogies to natural science (43) Carry is described as having studied and adopted several different causes over the years, including Christian Science, socialism, and municipal reform (44). She is also very mindful in her interactions with others: she never talks about herself unless it's for a specific purpose, and she pays close attention to how other people think and how they react. She shows herself to be very astute, for example, in her assessment of Louisa Bry's reasoning during their falling-out in Monaco. She treats each person as an individual rather than as a representative of a class or group, and she does not rely solely on surface impressions or personal likes and dislikes when deciding whether to associate with somebody. She is willing to give people the benefit of the doubt: to Carry's way of thinking, "it didn't matter who gave the party, as long as things were well done" (45). Whereas Lily and her friends snub Simon Rosedale and describe him as socially "impossible" because he has difficulty understanding the unwritten rules of the upper class, Carry has no problem accepting Rosedale's hospitality in his opera-box and inviting him to her home as a guest when she has the means to do so

(46). This, in many respects, sets Carry up as a foil for Lily, who persists in prejudging people based on appearances alone despite having been trained not to do so (47). Carry therefore is able to deduce the real reason Lily is aboard the Sabrina, recognize the danger to Lily, and explain it in the clearest possible terms to Lawrence (48), hoping he will intercede because Lily tends to take his advice. It is Carry who recognizes a tabloid reporter on the train who notices that Lily has been seen arriving at the yacht with George Dorset. When George catches his wife Bertha returning in the wee hours of the morning with her lover, Lily is completely unaware of the danger she is in. It is Carry who recognizes how critical the situation has become. She urges Lily to leave the yacht (49) and even sets Lily up with an opportunity to withdraw gracefully by taking over Carry's position with the Bry family, income and all. (50)

Throughout the novel, Lily believes that she can smoothly adapt herself to become " exactly what the occasion requires" (51). But her social skills are actually effective only so long as the situation requires a social butterfly who can buy clothing and jewelry, trim her own hats, spend other people's money, and give instructions as to how a party " ought" to be set up. Although Simon Rosedale believes she would be a matchless hostess and social leader (52), and although she sneers privately and publicly at other people's lapses from her ideals of physical and social perfection (53), Lily never shows off any skill of her own except in the sartorial domain. She fails completely as a husband-hunter, an heiress, a professional houseguest, a social secretary, a philanthropist, and even a hatmaker's assistant.

Lily's failure in the fine art of husband-hunting is showcased and referenced throughout the book, but nowhere is it more overt than during her ludicrous attempts to trap Percy Gryce, a conservative but wealthy man somewhat younger than herself. Pretending to be a bashful, innocent young woman who has never touched tobacco or played bridge (54), Lily piles one lie on top of the next while stroking Gryce's ego in an attempt to make him fall in love with her. While at the Trenors' house party at Bellomont, Lily presents herself as a religious, conservative young woman, and goes so far as to make her hostess's adolescent daughters agree to get up to come to church with her. Although she creates a false image of herself as exactly the sort of woman Percy Gryce would want, she does not invest the effort needed to keep the image alive. She spends so much time fantasizing about how boring it would be to marry Percy that the omnibus leaves for the church without her. In Lily's absence, Percy finds out that Lily never goes to church and that the adolescent girls only agreed to accompany her this time out of friendship (55). Percy returns to find Lily in the company of Lawrence Selden, the erstwhile romantic property of a very vicious Bertha Dorset who is upset at what she interprets as Lily's interference. When Lily cancels her walk with Percy that afternoon, urging Percy to go along in a motor-car expedition to the Van Osburgh home in a nearby town and thinking that the time apart might whet his appetite for her (56), Bertha is so enraged about the way Lawrence stays behind to spend time with Lily that she retaliates by making sure Percy hears every scandalous detail about Lily's past (57). Terrified, Percy flees, leaving for home by train the next morning. Lily spends the next few weeks distracted by a variety of things while, unbeknownst to her,

Bertha sets Percy up with Evie Van Osburgh, the youngest and most

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conservative of the Van Osburgh heiresses. Evie is a perfect match for Percy in terms of character and personality. Although Lily believes she can get Percy back whenever she wishes (58), he proposes to Evie instead (59).

Lily fails as a celebrity femme fatale partly because she insists on also marketing herself as a “jeune fille à marier”, that is to say a young, marriageable girl (60). At age twenty-nine, Lily is well out of girlhood and her background and conduct make her anything but marriage material. She visits the private apartment of a single man in broad daylight and appears in a tableau dressed in scanty clothes and in a posture calculated to show off her figure. Yet she does not embrace her slightly risqué image the way Carry Fisher does. Carry succeeds socially partly because she does not go out of her way to shock people, and partly because she also never attempts to pass herself off as respectable. She is therefore free to do things such as finding out about business, learning about money management, and advancing her own interests using whatever means are available. Lily, who willingly studies subjects that might be of interest to a future husband, turns up her nose at acquiring knowledge inconsistent with her ingenue self-image. Thus she does not acquaint herself with any aspect of financial management or business. This does not deter her from deliberately entering into a pay-for-play business transaction with her best friend’s husband (61). But because she is pretending to be an innocent young girl, Lily believes she does not have to hold up her end of the tacit agreement she makes with Gus, and is very upset when he insists on his due. Instead of spending time alone with him on a drive at Bellomont the way Carry does (62), in the relative privacy of the country, Lily makes sure to only be seen with him in public, which eventually

causes their names to be linked romantically by gossips (63). Meanwhile, anyone can see that Lily is spending a lot of money (64), so eventually the news comes to Grace Stepney's and Julia Peniston's attention that Lily may be receiving money in exchange for paying attention to Gus. The gossips, in this particular case, are perfectly right. This fact, together with Lily's habits of gambling and borrowing money, disillusion Aunt Julia and damage Lily's relationship with her.

Lily does not capitalize on opportunities that come her way. The day after the Brys' winter party, Lily attends a dinner at Carry's home to learn that, while Lily has spent her windfall from Gus chiefly on clothing and trinkets (65), Carry has bought real estate, adding another apartment onto her small house. She uses this space to earn some extra money by modeling, and she hosts informal gatherings in which she introduces various new artists, musicians, and other entertaining people to wealthy friends who want to be the first to discover something new (66). These evenings make Carry indispensable to the entertainment-hungry Gwen and Jack Stepney, creating a social bond that helps Carry avoid blame when Gwen's younger brother narrowly escapes a predatory marriage (67). By ignoring all opportunities to acquire real estate and other assets that could make her independent, Lily never develops even so much as reasonable cash reserves. Despite being surrounded by people, including women, who have no problems managing their own money or paying other people to do so, Lily never develops even the slightest interest in looking after her own financial security.

Another example of Lily's failure to capitalize on opportunity is the way she spurns Julia Peniston's company, avoiding her during the fall cleaning and <https://assignbuster.com/exactly-what-the-occasion-requires-the-significance-of-carry-fisher-in-the-house-of-mirth/>

resenting her lack of willingness to spend money redecorating or entertaining. To Lily, nothing is worse than being voluntary dingy, frumpy, or miserly. So instead of showing her aunt the slightest consideration, and instead of being aware of people who could potentially take her place as Aunt Julia's favorite, Lily avoids her aunt's company, engaging in the kind of gambling, borrowing, and scandalous behavior she knows her aunt would despise. She gratuitously snubs the poor, middle-aged Grace Stepney who was her aunt's former favorite, arranging for Grace to be disinvited from one of the occasional family dinner-parties that were Grace's primary social activity. Throughout the book, Lily's self-absorption and sense of her own superiority is so intense that she truly does not notice the people she hurts. Lily thinks that no matter how outrageous her behavior appears or how badly she treats "dingy" people, they will love her, forgive her, and find the most positive possible explanation for her conduct like the dowdy philanthropist Gerty Farish does. When the people Lily offends retaliate, it always comes as a surprise. Until the moment her aunt's will is read, she genuinely believes she will inherit a substantial amount of money while avoiding any form of reckoning or negative consequences for acts that brought shame on Aunt Julia and her family. (68)

Whereas Lily constantly shifts her image in an attempt to be "exactly what the occasion requires", and failing miserably either through her own incompetence or her lack of attention to details or follow-through (69), Carry Fisher is the same person all the time. She never pretends to be anything except what she is, and she has a talent for looking at the big picture. At the start of the novel she is enjoying a fling with young Ned Silverton, but when

he shifts his attention to Bertha Dorset Carry does not treat him poorly. When things are going well for Carry, she does not snub the people who helped her when she was in difficulty. Shrewd and pragmatic, Carry may indeed be a “battered wire-puller” (70), and she is not shy about extracting maximum value from the people who can afford to pay for her social midwifery, but she also either repays the money she borrows or provides some kind of favor in kind. The fact that Judy Trenor, who is fully aware of her husband’s financial dealings (71), never stays angry at Carry the way she does at Lily despite the fact that both women use her husband financially is not evidence that Carry has a special dispensation of some kind, but that she has found some way to repay what she borrows either in money or in some other form of social currency.

While Lily is quick to shun unfashionable people and resents being teased about “her friends the Wellington Brys” (72), Carry does not select her companions based on other people’s opinions. She is also honest and sometimes more frank than other people would like, but she is also one of the only people willing to interact with Lily during her fall from social favor. When she treats Lily poorly in a restaurant because she is surrounded by other people whose support she needs, Carry regrets her part in the scene. She apologizes to Lily at the first possible opportunity (72), and sets her up with several ways by which she might earn a living (73). Indeed, the only people who remain friendly to Lily toward the end of the book are the people who choose their friends without regard to the opinions of others. Carry, Lawrence, Gerty, and Simon are the only ones who do this.

“ I wish she’d give me some of her discarded opportunities” (74), says Carry, when speaking to Lawrence about his beloved Lily. Unlike Lily, Carry very seldom overlooks an opportunity. Known for her social promiscuity and willingness to attend any good party, no matter who hosts it, Carry has friends in low and upwardly-mobile places (75) as well as among the elite. That’s how she finds the aspiring social climbers who employ her to help them gain entry to high society. Carry therefore cultivates and socializes with people from multiple social classes. She is also not too proud to monetize such advantages as she has. In this respect, Carry is Lily’s opposite.

Over the course of the two books that make up the novel, Carry tries several times to set Lily up with opportunities to earn money. She introduces her to her clients the Brys, first as a way for Lily to escape from some of her problems over the Thanksgiving holiday after the wedding and later as an opportunity to take over Carry’s duties and earn money by providing useful services. But after the holidays are over, Lily not only ignores the Brys while vacationing on the French Riviera but helps Bertha Dorset sabotage Louisa Bry’s much-anticipated dinner with the Duchess of Beltshire. She does this not out of a sense of enmity toward Louisa, but simply for fun (76). When Carry and the Brys part company and the field is clear for Lily, Lily makes some of the appropriate mouth noises to Louisa but immediately loses her ability to provide social advancement: she loses her place on the Dorsets’ yacht and is suddenly in need of help herself. Instead of attaching herself to the Brys or getting to New York as quickly as possible to ensure that her side of the story is heard first, Lily makes a leisurely progress back to London by

way of Paris, arriving in New York at least four weeks after the incident (77) and possibly longer depending on whether the news came from the travelers themselves after a voyage of several days, or instantaneously by transatlantic cable. So despite having impressed Louisa Bry well enough to get her to fire Carry, Lily does not capitalize on her gain and take Carry's place as Louisa's social secretary. Louisa Bry recognizes her mistake almost immediately and retains Carry again. Accordingly, while Lily languishes in a hotel in New York, Carry can afford to rent out a house in Tuxedo for the fall months.

Carry is careful to understand who her friends and enemies are, and she is careful to never allow her enemies to be in a position of power over her. Not so with Lily. Serving as a social secretary requires a solid social position of some kind and strong social connections among the upper class. But while serving as the Gormers' social secretary Lily fails to consolidate her social position: she allows Bertha to remain her enemy. Despite having proof of Bertha's affairs, Lily never neutralizes her by either convincing George to divorce her or by blackmailing Bertha into compliance, which would have paved the way for Lily to marry Simon Rosedale if she so chose. Lily's indecision creates an opportunity for Bertha to cut Lily out of the Gormers' social network, particularly since Lily never displays the ability to do anything socially for the Gormers that they aren't able to do for themselves, nor does she create enough gain for Mattie Gormer to justify the social disadvantages of keeping her around (78). Thus Lily never succeeds in doing as Carry does: she never gets her living expenses paid in exchange for providing introductions or social advice. Indeed, as soon as Bertha Dorset

appears on the scene with her impeccable upper-class credentials, Mattie Gormer discards Lily quite willingly.

Lily is aware that she can make transactions and exchanges with others, but unlike Carry she does not choose transactions that are beneficial to her. Instead of making sure to cultivate her aging, ailing Aunt Julia, Lily notices that she can be useful to Bertha Dorset as a way to distract her husband George while Bertha pursues an affair with Ned Silverton (79). This, to most of the other characters in the book, is penny-wise but pound-foolish. Instead of repairing the relationship with her aunt, which was damaged due to what Lily describes as her sizable gambling debts, Lily takes off on a last-minute transatlantic cruise. This is a critical decision: although Julia Peniston has supported Lily financially for eight years, and although Lily has displaced the dowdy Grace Stepney as Julia's heir-presumptive, Lily's inheritance has never been explicitly promised and is not in fact guaranteed. When Lily further disgraces herself overseas and word reaches New York, Aunt Julia changes her will (80). In one stroke, the money that would have allowed Lily to live comfortably the rest of her life (if not as extravagantly as her fashionable friends) disappears.

Lily and Carry differ in terms of their work ethic. When the occasion requires a woman willing to set aside her self-image long enough to inform herself of the basics of business or take action in her own interests, it is Carry who steps forward. When her upper-class friends need cooks, musicians, and other professionals, Carry is ready with contacts and referrals. She willingly spends time with what Judy Trenor calls "dull" people such as her husband Gus, even when she doesn't need the money. Her willingness to do so even

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with no profit motive is one of the things that makes Carry indispensable to Judy in a way that Lily is not.

One of the reasons Lily initially refuses to work or to take advantage of the opportunities before her is because she truly believes she is superior to others. Lily believes that she possesses a mystical “knack” that allows herself to do whatever she wants socially by making commitments on other people’s connections and resources (81). She and Louisa Bry both believe that Lily could make a living as a social secretary and architect of upper-class connections the way Carry does. However, Carry launches people into society primarily through deliberate exchange of favors and other forms of social capital and by helping to mold her protégées into the most socially adept versions of themselves. When that fails, she and other social engineers employ other fixes—the Brys eventually gain access to the Duchess by offering a stock tip (82). Lily truly believes that all she has to do is to show up and express a preference, and her “knack” will ensure that she gets what she wants. That just isn’t so.

In reality, Lily’s only “knack” is good looks and a charming personality that allow her to be a social success (83). Causing someone else to become a social success, which is how Carry earns her living, is vastly different from being a social success oneself. To succeed as a social engineer, Lily would have to do something besides be the center of attention: she would have to voluntarily step into the background and deliberately make somebody else the center of attention. She would also have to treat people decently even if she doesn’t need them, maintain contact with all classes of people

throughout Europe and America, socialize with all sorts of people regardless

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of how it might appear to others, and to subordinate her own social ambitions or agendas to her client's interests. Although Lily is capable of doing these things when it suits her interests, she does not choose to consistently employ those talents in the service of others.

Lily is given three opportunities to succeed as a social secretary: first with the Brys, whom Lily ignores even after the disaster on the French Riviera, second with the Sam Gormer family where she fails to understand the relationship between her own social rehabilitation and her utility to her employers, and finally with Mrs. Norma Hatch when she fails to recognize a con artist when she meets one. After the Hatch incident, she no longer has enough credibility with the upper class to be useful as a social secretary and must find some other way to work for a living. This poses a problem: despite being in dire financial straits, Lily still believes she is too good to do as Carry and others do. Throughout the second half of the book Lily refuses to monetize either of the assets she has left, which are her beauty and her celebrity. Carry offers suggestion after suggestion, but Lily turns up her nose at each one. She refuses to earn money by modeling the way Carry does, and she refuses to be painted by Paul Morpeth or any of the other prominent portrait artists. She is unwilling to room with Gerty Fisher and team up with her in philanthropic work by lending her famous name to good causes. She is even unwilling to take advantage of her celebrity status by working in the front of a hat shop showing off the wares to customers (84). Instead, she insists on working with the women who trim the hats. She gets the job only because of Carry's influence, and loses it a few months later due to her own incompetence and lack of training. She simply never succeeds in providing

anybody with something they cannot do without or cannot get any other way.

Another characteristic that sets Carry apart from Lily, and that helps guarantee Carry's survival, is Carry's basic regard for other people. Throughout the book, she goes out of her way to help others. This doesn't necessarily involve material aid. Sometimes she matching people up with opportunities without regard to personal reward. Other times she provides advice. Lily, by contrast, never exerts herself on behalf of another human being except for a fitful experiment with philanthropy during a brief period of prosperity. In contrast to Carry, who mindfully acts with full awareness of the impact of her words and actions on others, Lily seldom thinks of anyone besides herself long enough to consider doing a good deed to benefit someone else except as a form of entertainment. This self-absorption, however, is not an inherent trait like eye color or circumstances of birth. It is completely voluntary.

The last critical difference between Lily and Carry is that Lily is unwilling to compromise or to accept anything less than perfection. Things Carry takes for granted, such as the need to delay gratification or the need to provide useful service to others, are foreign to Lily. Staying home with Aunt Julia and quietly inheriting her wealth instead of gallivanting all over the state and playing high-stakes bridge, marrying Lawrence Selden and enjoying opulence only as the guest of a wealthier friend or as Aunt Julia's heir, marrying for money and having affairs like Bertha Dorset does, or teaming up with the philanthropist Gerty Farish are all unacceptable to Lily because they don't provide her with a hundred percent of what she wants,
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immediately. Carry speculates that Lily may in fact despise the very things she purports to work toward (85), and in a way it's perfectly true: Lily refuses to tolerate anything short of perfection, believing—as her mother did—that the only options that exist are either the most lavish and perfect possible option or “living like a pig” (86). In Lily's mind, there is no difference between something that is almost perfect or ideal and something that is utterly terrible. Many times throughout the book, Lily refuses to consider a middle path because she asserts that her “only” possible option, compared to something completely disgusting or unacceptable, is the one that costs the most money. Carry, however, understands that a middle ground exists. She is willing to live in a small house, sacrifice time with her daughter in order to travel and earn a living, and associate with unsavory people if necessary. By accepting temporary hardship and delaying gratification, Carry is able to prosper.

Carry survives because she understands and accepts the transactional nature of the economy and society she lives in. Opportunities always exist although some of them involve compromise or delayed gratification. Because Lily is prepared to accept neither, and because she is unwilling to pursue any of the opportunities set before her to provide herself with a secure future, she voluntarily paints herself into a corner by rejecting every possible viable option. Although Lily is often presented as having “no” choice because of the strict rules of the social environment in which she operates, this essay has shown that Lily is not in fact predestined for her fate. The simple fact that other characters are shown making different decisions when faced with similar challenges contradicts the notion that there is anything inevitable

about Lily's decline and fall. Although the character makes many mistakes and dies tragically as a result, the root cause of the tragedy is Lily's refusal to be what the occasion requires. Her fate is in no way preordained. The piquancy of Lily's death is due to the fact that she has every possible opportunity to save herself but elects not to do so.

End Notes 1-86: Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. Project Gutenberg version, EBook #284. 2008. Online.

(1) Book 2, Chapter 2: "Moral complications existed for her only in the environment that had produced them; she did not mean to slight or ignore them, but they lost their reality when they changed their background."

(2) Book 2, Chapter 5

(3) Book 1, Chapter 15: "I consider that you ARE disgraced, Lily: disgraced by your conduct far more than by its results. You say your friends have persuaded you to play cards with them; well, they may as well learn a lesson too. They can probably afford to lose a little money—and at any rate, I am not going to waste any of mine in paying them."

(4) Book 1, Chapter 4: "... and she knew no more personal emotion than that of hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house-parties than herself."

(5) Book 1, Chapter 3: "Lily was nineteen when circumstances caused her to revise her view of the universe. The previous year she had made a dazzling debut fringed by a heavy thunder-cloud of bills. The light of the debut still lingered on the horizon, but the cloud had thickened; and suddenly it broke."
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(6) Book 1, Chapter 7: “ I have a tiny income of my own, but I’m afraid it’s badly invested, for it seems to bring in less every year, and I am so ignorant of money matters that I don’t know if my aunt’s agent, who looks after it, is a good adviser.”

(7) Book 1, Chapter 3: “ and there Lily at once became the centre of a family council composed of the wealthy relatives whom she had been taught to despise for living like pigs.”

(8) Book 1, Chapter 3: “ Lily, who was intensely practical, would have preferred a fixed allowance; but Mrs. Peniston liked the periodical recurrence of gratitude evoked by unexpected cheques, and was perhaps shrewd enough to perceive that such a method of giving kept alive in her niece a salutary sense of dependence.”

(9) Book 1, Chapter 6: “...the people who find fault with society are too apt to regard it as an end and not a means, just as the people who despise money speak as if its only use were to be kept in bags and gloated over?

(10) Book 1, Chapter 14: “ I am bad through and through—I want admiration, I want excitement, I want money—”

(11) Book 1, Chapter 4: “ Mrs. Trenor’s summons, however, suddenly recalled her state of dependence, and she rose and dressed in a mood of irritability that she was usually too prudent to indulge.”

(12) Book 2, Chapter 2: “ The sight filled Lily with such surprise that she felt that Bertha, at least, must read its meaning in her look, and she was proportionately disconcerted by the blankness of the look returned.”

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(13) Book 1, Chapter 7: “ She was too genuinely ignorant of the manipulations of the stock-market to understand his technical explanations, or even perhaps to perceive that certain points in them were slurred; the haziness enveloping the transaction served as a veil for her embarrassment, and through the general blur her hopes dilated like lamps in a fog.”

(14) Book 1, Chapter 14: “...he strode on, opening his lungs to the reverberating coldness of the night. At the corner of Fifth Avenue Van Alstyne hailed him with an offer of company.”

(15) Book 1, Chapter 4: “ And poor Carry has to consider every dollar.”

(16) Book 1, Chapter 11: “ Mrs. Fisher was of immense service to him at this period. She had set off so many newcomers on the social stage that she was like one of those pieces of stock scenery which tell the experienced spectator exactly what is going to take place.”

(17) Book 2, Chapter 6: “ Carry Fisher, on the strength, as she frankly owned, of the Brys’ Newport success, had taken for the autumn months a small house at Tuxedo...”

(18) Book 1, Chapter 11: “ and she was much more likely to know where Carry Fisher had found the Welly Brys’ CHEF for them...”

(19) Book 2, Chapter 2: “ I shan’t stay over—the Gormers have paid for my salon-lit...”

(20) Book 1, Chapter 4: “ Besides, Carry is the only person who can keep Gus in a good humour when we have bores in the house.”

(21) Book 1, Chapter 1: “ Was it really eleven years, Selden found himself wondering, and had she indeed reached the nine-and-twentieth birthday with which her rivals credited her?”

(22) Book 2, Chapter 1: “ An Italian Prince, rich and the real thing, wanted to marry her; but just at the critical moment a good-looking step-son turned up, and Lily was silly enough to flirt with him while her marriage-settlements with the step-father were being drawn up.”

(23) Book 1, Chapter 11: “ It was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made.”

(24) Book 1, Chapter 9: “ She had so long been accustomed to pass from one country-house to another, till the close of the holidays brought her friends to town, that the unfilled gaps of time confronting her produced a sharp sense of waning popularity.”

(25) Book 1, Chapter 4: “ It was understood that Miss Bart should fill the gap in such emergencies, and she usually recognized the obligation without a murmur.”

(26) Book 1, Chapter 9: “ They would welcome her in a new character, but as Miss Bart they knew her by heart.”

(27) Book 1, Chapter 10: “ it would have been easy to find me any afternoon at my aunt’s—in fact, I rather expected you to look me up there.”

(28) Book 1, Chapter 13: “ Mrs. Fisher, despairing of the republic, had taken up modelling, and annexed to her small crowded house a spacious apartment, which, whatever its uses in her hours of plastic inspiration, served at other times for the exercise of an indefatigable hospitality.”

(29) Book 2, Chapter 1: “ The Brys, intoxicated by their first success, already thirsted for new kingdoms, and Mrs. Fisher, viewing the Riviera as an easy introduction to London society, had guided their course thither.”

(30) Book 1, Chapter 6: “ I have broken two engagements for you today.”

(31) Book 1, Chapter 10: “ I’m in town three or four days in the week, and you know a line to the club will always find me, but you don’t seem to remember my existence nowadays unless you want to get a tip out of me.”

(32) Book 2, Chapter 1: “‘The worst of it is, she snubs the Brys now,’ he heard irrelevantly flung after him.”

(33) Book 1, Chapter 9: “‘Don’t you see that I wish to go by? Please move your pail,’ she said sharply.”

(34) Book 1, Chapter 11: “ Even such scant civilities as Lily accorded to Mr. Rosedale would have made Miss Stepney her friend for life; but how could she foresee that such a friend was worth cultivating?”

(35) Book 1, Chapter 5

(36) Book 2, Chapter 6: “ Carry Fisher, on the strength, as she frankly owned, of the Brys’ Newport success”

(37) Book 2, Chapter 5: “ The truth is I was HORRID, Lily, and I’ve wanted to tell you so ever since.”

(38) Book 1, Chapter 2: “ Why, don’t you smoke? Since when have you given it up? What—you never—And you don’t either, Mr. Gryce? Ah, of course—how stupid of me—I understand.”

(39) Book 1, Chapter 7: “ Even Bertha kept her hands off—I will say that—till Lawrence came down and you dragged him away from her. After that she had a right to retaliate—why on earth did you interfere with her?”

(40) Book 1, Chapter 9: “ Cornelia Van Alstyne was so surprised: she had heard that you were to marry young Gryce. She saw the Wetheralls just after they had stopped with you at Bellomont, and Alice Wetherall was quite sure there was an engagement.”

(41) Book 2, Chapter 3: “ As she tried to fan the weak flicker of talk, to build up, again and again, the crumbling structure of ‘ appearances,’ her own attention was perpetually distracted by the question: ‘ What on earth can she be driving at?’ There was something positively exasperating in Bertha’s attitude of isolated defiance.”

(42) Book 2, Chapter 4: “ Mrs. Peniston had vehemently opposed her niece’s departure with the Dorsets, and had marked her continued disapproval by not writing during Lily’s absence.”

(43) Book 2, Chapter 6: “ I’ve no doubt the rabbit always believes it is fascinating the anaconda.”

(44) Book 1, Chapter 4: “ Mrs. Fisher’s latest hobby was municipal reform. It had been preceded by an equal zeal for socialism, which had in turn replaced an energetic advocacy of Christian Science.”

(45) Book 1, Chapter 10

(46) Book 2, Chapter 6: “ and it was hardly with surprise that she found, instead, Mr. Rosedale kneeling domestically on the drawing-room hearth before his hostess’s little girl.”

(47) Book 1, Chapter 2: “ But some intuitive repugnance, getting the better of years of social discipline, had made her push Mr. Rosedale into his oubliette without a trial.”

(48) Book 2, Chapter 1: “ Well, what’s the use of mincing matters? We all know that’s what Bertha brought her abroad for. When Bertha wants to have a good time she has to provide occupation for George.”

(49) Book 2, Chapter 2: “ and with a last hand-clasp and a last look, she added: ‘ Remember, I leave her to you; she’s hovering now, ready to take you in.’”

(50) Book 2, Chapter 2: “ But before I go I want to make my last will and testament—I want to leave you the Brys.”

(51) Book 1, Chapter 8

(52) Book 1, Chapter 15: “ What I want is a woman who’ll hold her head higher the more diamonds I put on it.”

(53) Book 1, Chapter 8: “ Certainly no one need have confessed such acquiescence in her lot as was revealed in the “ useful” colour of Gerty Farish’s gown and the subdued lines of her hat: it is almost as stupid to let your clothes betray that you know you are ugly as to have them proclaim that you think you are beautiful.”

(54) Book 1, Chapter 5: “ This tallied with the assurance, also confidentially imparted, that, never having played bridge before, she had been ‘ dragged into it’ on the night of her arrival, and had lost an appalling amount of money in consequence of her ignorance of the game and of the rules of betting.”

(55) Book 1, Chapter 5: “ They had promised Lily to go to church with her, they declared, and Lily was such a dear old duck that they didn’t mind doing it to please her, though they couldn’t fancy what had put the idea in her head, and though for their own part they would much rather have played lawn tennis with Jack and Gwen, if she hadn’t told them she was coming.”

(56) Book 1, Chapter 6: “ Well, she would not be too eager in this case; she would give her suitor a longer taste of suspense.”

(57) Book 1, Chapter 7: “ Don’t ask me—horrors! She seemed to have raked up everything.”

(58) Book 1, Chapter 8: “ In fact, when she looked at the other women about her, and recalled the image she had brought away from her own glass, it did not seem as though any special skill would be needed to repair her blunder and bring him once more to her feet.”

(59) Book 1, Chapter 8: “ The engagement is not to be announced till next week—but you are such a friend of Mr. Gryce’s that they both wished you to be the first to know of their happiness.”

(60) Book 1, Chapter 6: “ Yes—but it is not considered becoming in a jeune fille à marier, and at the present moment I am a jeune fille à marier.”

(61) Book 1, Chapter 7: “ Even the immediate one of letting Trenor, as they drove homeward, lean a little nearer and rest his hand reassuringly on hers, cost her only a momentary shiver of reluctance.”

(62) Book 1, Chapter 5: “ Carry Fisher had doubtless carried off her host for a drive...”

(63) Book 1, Chapter 11: “ People always say unpleasant things—and certainly they’re a great deal together. A friend of mine met them the other afternoon in the Park—quite late, after the lamps were lit. It’s a pity Lily makes herself so conspicuous.”

(64) Book 1, Chapter 11: “ Evie Van Osburgh was at Celeste’s ordering her trousseau the other day—yes, the marriage takes place next month—and she told me that Celeste showed her the most exquisite things she was just sending home to Lily.”

(65) Book 1, Chapter 10: “ It was a keen satisfaction to feel that, for a few months at least, she would be independent of her friends’ bounty, that she could show herself abroad without wondering whether some penetrating eye would detect in her dress the traces of Judy Trenor’s refurbished splendour.”

(66) Book 1, Chapter 13: “ There was to be plantation music in the studio after dinner—for Mrs. Fisher, despairing of the republic, had taken up modelling, and annexed to her small crowded house a spacious apartment, which, whatever its uses in her hours of plastic inspiration, served at other times for the exercise of an indefatigable hospitality.”

(67) Book 2, Chapter 10: “ Carry did not put her own case so brutally, but she allowed it to be thus put for her by her latest bosom friend, Mrs. Jack Stepney: Mrs. Stepney, trembling over the narrowness of her only brother’s escape, but eager to vindicate Mrs. Fisher, at whose house she could count on the “ jolly parties” which had become a necessity to her since marriage had emancipated her from the Van Osburgh point of view.”

(68) Book 2, Chapter 4: “ The certainty that she had heard of the rupture with the Dorsets made the prospect of the meeting more formidable; and how should Lily have repressed a quick sense of relief at the thought that, instead of undergoing the anticipated ordeal, she had only to enter gracefully on a long-assured inheritance?”

(69) Book 2, Chapter 1: “ That’s Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic.”

(70) Book 1, Chapter 7: “...not battered wire-pullers like Mrs. Fisher, but a girl that most men would have given their boots to get such a look from.”

(71) Book 2, Chapter 4: “ In a flash she remembered Mrs. Trenor’s complaints of Carry Fisher’s rapacity, and saw that they denoted an unexpected acquaintance with her husband’s private affairs.”

(72) Book 1, Chapter 12: “ An occasional caustic allusion to ‘ your friends the Wellington Brys,’ or to ‘ the little Jew who has bought the Greiner house—some one told us you knew him, Miss Bart,’—showed Lily that she was in disfavour with that portion of society which, while contributing least to its amusement, has assumed the right to decide what forms that amusement shall take.”

(73) Book 2, Chapter 8: “ Mrs. Fisher was full of indirect expedients for enabling her friends to earn a living, and could conscientiously assert that she had put several opportunities of this kind before Lily...”

(74) Book 2, Chapter 1

(75) Book 2, Chapter 9: “ Mrs. Fisher had not specified the line her friend was to take; she owned herself unacquainted with Mrs. Hatch, whom she “ knew about” through Melville Stancy, a lawyer in his leisure moments, and the Falstaff of a certain section of festive dub life.”

(76) Book 2, Chapter 1: “ Miss Bart, glowing with the haste of a precipitate descent upon the train, headed a group composed of the Dorsets, young Silverton and Lord Hubert Dacey, who had barely time to spring into the carriage, and envelop Selden in ejaculations of surprise and welcome, before the whistle of departure sounded. The party, it appeared, were hastening to Nice in response to a sudden summons to dine with the Duchess of Beltshire

and to see the water-fete in the bay; a plan evidently improvised—in spite of Lord Hubert's protesting ' Oh, I say, you know,'—for the express purpose of defeating Mrs. Bry's endeavour to capture the Duchess."

(77) Book 2, Chapter 4: " It was the first time that she had faced her family since her return from Europe, two weeks earlier" ... " Gerty, be honest: this will was made only six weeks ago. She had heard of my break with the Dorsets?"

(78) Book 2, Chapter 8: " It was inevitable that Lily herself should constitute the first sacrifice to this new ideal, and she knew that, once the Gormers were established in town, the whole drift of fashionable life would facilitate Mattie's detachment from her. She had, in short, failed to make herself indispensable; or rather, her attempt to do so had been thwarted by an influence stronger than any she could exert."

(79) Book 1, Chapter 12: " Lily's visit to the Dorsets had resulted, for both, in the discovery that they could be of use to each other; and the civilized instinct finds a subtler pleasure in making use of its antagonist than in confounding him. Mrs. Dorset was, in fact, engaged in a new sentimental experiment, of which Mrs. Fisher's late property, Ned Silverton, was the rosy victim; and at such moments, as Judy Trenor had once remarked, she felt a peculiar need of distracting her husband's attention."

(80) Book 2, Chapter 4: " She heard some one ask a question about the date of the will; she caught a fragment of the lawyer's answer—something about a sudden summons, and an ' earlier instrument.'"

(81) Book 2, Chapter 2: “ She had accomplished, before leaving, the first step toward her reinstatement in Mrs. Bry’s good graces. An affable advance—a vague murmur that they must see more of each other—an allusive glance to a near future that was felt to include the Duchess as well as the Sabrina—how easily it was all done, if one possessed the knack of doing it!”

(82) Book 2, Chapter 2: “ and the Duchess added, with her noble candour: ‘ Mr. Bry has promised him a tip, and he says if we go he’ll pass it onto us.’”

(83) Book 2, Chapter 1: “ I could see Louisa thought that if she’d had Lily in tow instead of me she would have been hob-nobbing with all the royalties by this time. She doesn’t realize that it’s Lily’s beauty that does it: Lord Hubert tells me Lily is thought even handsomer than when he knew her at Aix ten years ago.”

(84) Book 2, Chapter 10: “ She had been willing from the first to employ Lily in the show-room: as a displayer of hats, a fashionable beauty might be a valuable asset. But to this suggestion Miss Bart opposed a negative which Gerty emphatically supported, while Mrs. Fisher, inwardly unconvinced, but resigned to this latest proof of Lily’s unreason, agreed that perhaps in the end it would be more useful that she should learn the trade.”

(85) Book 2, Chapter 1: “ sometimes I think it’s because, at heart, she despises the things she’s trying for.”

(86) Book 1, Chapter 3: “ It was a hateful fate—but how escape from it? What choice had she? To be herself, or a Gerty Farish.” ... “ There was a little money left, but to Mrs. Bart it seemed worse than nothing—the mere

mockery of what she was entitled to. What was the use of living if one had to live like a pig?"