

# The "truths" of wolf larsen, lily bart, and reverend hartman

Literature



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In "The Book of the Grotesques," Sherwood Anderson suggests that when a person "takes a certain truth to himself, calls it his truth, and tries to live his life by it, he becomes a grotesque and the truth he embraces a falsehood" (Anderson 2). This "truth," once it is taken a material form, suppresses the individual from expressing his wish to love and confines him to a prison of the soul. Three characters that embody this notion of the "grotesque" disfigured by his or her guiding truth are: Wolf Larsen from *The Sea-Wolf*, Lily Bart from *The House of Mirth*, and Reverend Curtis Hartman from *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Though Wolf Larsen is unable to unbind himself from the "truths" that have dictated his whole life, Lily Bart and Reverend Hartman are able to release some of their guiding "truths." In Lily's case, however, liberation from the confining beliefs that suppress her comes too late, and along with Wolf Larsen, her story can only be described as "scenes of wasted life, wasted love (Howe 1)." It is only the Reverend Curtis Hartman that is able to successfully release himself from the confines of his truth and restore his spirit to become a more actualized individual.

In *The Sea-Wolf*, Wolf Larsen is the embodiment of all aspects of super-materialism. He adheres to its truths so strongly that it mars his very spirit and transforms him into a beast whose brutality is unsurpassable. Larsen takes the concept of "survival of the fittest" to a whole new level. His declaration that "might is right and that is all there is to it" is meant to be the basis of a concept, not the embodiment of a man (London 51). It is how Anderson describes in "The Book of the Grotesque" of a truth that is

intrinsically beautiful, but once a man comes along and "snatches up" the truth, it transforms into a grotesque (Anderson 2).

By Wolf Larsen personifying and embodying the concept of "survival of the fittest," he gives something life that should never have been interfered with in the first place. Wolf Larsen states that, "weakness is wrong" because it is painful and there is no profit to be gained by pain, yet beneath his savage front lays a constant and profound sadness equivalent to any pain. The truths that he so fiercely adheres to give him no pleasure because though they satisfy his mind, they leave his heart lonely and unfulfilled.

Humphrey, Wolf's idealistic antagonist, states that this sadness that is as "deep-reaching as the roots of the race" usually finds its escape through religion and a faith in God but Wolf's "brutal materialism" will not allow such forms of release or expression and therefore "when his blue moods come on, nothing remains for him but to be devilish" (London 62). Humphrey describes Wolf as a "magnificent atavism, a man so purely primitive that he was of the type that came into the world before the development of a moral nature.

He was not immoral, but merely unmoral" (London 64). Wolf is perhaps savage and primitive by nature, but to survive one must be able to adapt to his present environment and Wolf is not able to adapt to a world beyond ruthless savagery and therefore never able to attain happiness. In the end, it is Humphrey who triumphs because he is able to adapt and persevere in the harsh, new environment he is thrown into. Wolf's inability to release his

guiding "truths" results in a meaningless life which ultimately gives way to a bleak and miserable death.

Lily Bart, from *The House of Mirth*, is another example of a character whose inner spirit is disfigured by adhering too closely to a belief. In Lily's case, the "truth" that consumed her was attaining wealth and prosperity. Nothing was more repulsive to her than "dinginess" and she would rather have Percy Gryce "bore her" for the rest of her life than live a simple but comfortable life like Gerty Farish. Lily's mother engraved in her the necessity of her escaping from a life of dinginess; "to Miss Bart, as to her mother, acquiescence in dinginess was evidence of stupidity" (Wharton 92).

Therefore, Lily always felt a sense of superiority over women like Gerty Farish, finding it impossible that life could be as pleasurable for Gerty as for a wealthy society woman like Gwen Van Osburgh. However, though Lily is devoted to the values instilled in her by her mother, she experiences much inner conflict, knowing that a life of wealth and prosperity will not go unaccompanied by a certain degree of misery. The affluent crowd that Lily associates herself with, she describes as "dreary and trivial" and she realizes "the vacuous routine of the life she has chosen," because of the "truths" that she clings so dearly to (Wharton 56-7).

As the story progresses, Lily's inner struggle between a life of happiness and a life of insurmountable wealth escalates, especially due to her growing love for Lawrence Selden. Yet Selden is not a part of her truth so she rejects him and denies herself the chance to be truly happy. However, Lily also passes many opportunities to marry a rich man who will fulfill her materialistic

desires, which reveals her inner turmoil. The misfortunes that befall Lily actually lead to her attaining a higher moral stance in that she does not acquiesce to the " truths" that formerly possessed her.

She knows regaining her status in society would come at the price of hurting Selden and she is released from her truth in that ultimately she would rather resort to " dinginess" than hurt the man that she loved. In the end, Lily deserves respect for her virtuous choices, yet it is too late for to restore her spirit as she succumbs to the only tranquility she ever experienced in life through her death. Reverend Curtis Hartman, in " The Strength of God," is yet another grotesque who like Lily, masks his inner desires in order to adhere to a guiding truth.

His truth is maintaining an image of complete austerity in order to prove his utter devotion to God. Yet in being possessed by this truth, he loses a sense of sincerity in his devotion. The Reverend has many longings that he would not reveal because he clung so dearly to his truth. He longed to go " crying the word of God in the highways and byways... and dreamed of a day when a strong sweet new current of power would come like a great wind into his voice and his soul and the people would tremble before the spirit of God mad manifest in him" (Anderson 1 ).

Though the Reverend believed that this could only occur by him adhering to his truth, in reality it was when he began to release some of his truth that he was able to give a truly powerful sermon. The Reverend also secretly desired for Kate Swift, the schoolteacher that he sees smoking through the window of his church. Reverend Hartman, like Lily, had in him awaken an " inner

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struggle" between wanting to save Kate Swift, as was his job, and wanting to experience her passion, as was his desire.

The Reverend found his lustful thoughts of her to be truly sinful and prayed to God to save him and keep him from giving in to temptation. The Reverend is able to dispossess himself of his truth when he finally accepts his human desires to be just a part of his nature and not something that he can fight off. He states in a moment of realization that, " Man has a right to expect living passion and beauty in a woman. He has no right to forget that he is an animal and in me there is something that is Greek... if I am a creature of carnal lusts I will live then for my lusts" (Anderson 4).

When the Reverend accepts the animalistic nature inside himself and all men is when he releases his truth and allows for his emotions to be exposed, if not to Kate Swift then at least to himself. Kate Swift aroused in the Reverend a new, " more beautiful fervor of the spirit" and he describes her to George Willard as, " an instrument of God, bearing the message of truth" because through his yearnings for her did the real man in him awaken. What he longed for the most, for the " strength of God" to possess him, finally occurs because he is able to release his truth and become a more complete individual.