

# Female characters in the house of mirth



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The relationship between the ideal and the reality is many times pictured in black and white. The ideal can be defined as a conception of something in its perfection, whereas reality is defined as something that exists independently of ideas concerning it. In *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton blurs the relationship between ideals and reality by introducing characters that represent different ideals emphasizing womanhood and beauty, but not allowing them to be absolutely flawless. Wharton epitomizes the ideal women not as those who are “ perfect ornaments of jewel-like rareness” (94), but those who can embrace in their own imperfections and attain happiness apart from society’s expectations. By analyzing the women Wharton utilizes in the novel and focusing specifically on their imperfections and the way they present and handle them, one can understand Wharton’s notion of the “ ideal woman.” From the inception of the novel, Mr. Selden, a “ detached observer of the [high-class social] scene” (99), is caught admiring the protagonist, Lily Bart. A woman at the age of 29 and unmarried, Lily is fascinatingly beautiful and intelligent. At social gatherings, men cannot take their eyes off of her radiant beauty and vigor. Lily is manipulative of her own splendor, using her beauty as a power to win over her targets: “ Her beauty itself was not the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of permanence. She felt she could trust it to carry her through to the end” (50). Despite Lily’s flawless beauty, Selden observes that “ the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external, as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay” (30). Is it not ironic that something so perfect can be described as vulgar? In addition, Lily is

described as an object: “ she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must have been sacrificed to produce her” (3). It is evident that Wharton intentionally analogizes Lily to moldable clay, an object lacking in definite shape, but finds form by the shaping and molding of others. This analogy suits Lily perfectly in both her financial situations as well as her emotional quandaries. All of her decisions are based according to how others will perceive her. She lives a life of calculations: adding and subtracting the ideal and the reality to make herself more popular. Although Lily is delineated as a character with ideal outward beauty, she has imperfections that she attempts to hide from the New York society she aspires to join. One of Lily’s biggest flaws is her obsessive desire and lust for money. “ Lily could not recall the time when there had been money enough, and in some vague way, her father seemed always to blame for the deficiency” (29). She did not come from an affluent family, but her mother “ was famous for the unlimited effect she produced on limited means” (30). In this way, Lily is naturally proud of her mother’s aptitude and grows up to belittle dinginess. After her mother’s death, Lily strives to be an upper-class New Yorker. She indulges in gambling and speculates on Wall Street. She purchases sophisticated clothing because she believes that “ the clothes are the background, the frame, of success” (10). To her, not only will money free her from her obligations, but it will also provide her with the ability to live life however she wants. Her hopeless addiction to the pleasures of the world of luxury and grace ultimately renders her unfit for survival. When all her money vanishes and her debts consume her, Lily becomes a prisoner to her dire situation. She is chained to the impulses of those around her, bound to the demands of the upper-class circles, and enslaved in her own

helplessness to be happy without money. Like clay that can only be shaped by human hands, Lily is “ inwardly as malleable as wax” (54), as her perception of herself is based on her societal status and what society thinks of her. Her obsession with money is also the reason Lily continuously denies her emotions for Selden and is so willing to marry someone she does not love. She blatantly states to Selden in the beginning of the novel that “ I [Lily] am horribly poor - and very expensive. I must have a great deal of money” (8). Despite the fact that Selden genuinely cares for her and is the only constant throughout the novel, she refuses to marry him because he cannot provide for her financially. By listening to society’s emphasis on social stature and money, Lily acts against her real emotions for Selden. She rejects the freedom she feels when she is alone with Selden, this freedom “ from everything - from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents” (70). Her lust for money eventually leads her not only to financial ruin but expulsion from the upper-class society. She is “ reduced to the fate of that poor Silverton woman, slinking about to employment agencies and trying to sell painted blotting-pads to Women’s Exchanges” (282). Her remaining friends no longer have hope for her unless she completely detaches herself from the old associations. Knowing that she has relinquished all hopes for happiness, Lily ultimately achieves a kind of ideal status in her death. She reimburses the nine thousand dollars she owes Trenor and meets with Selden to confess of her mistake in refusing him. No longer in the bondage of her own lust for money and acceptance in an upper-class society, she admits to Selden that she is a “ coward” and finally understands that she “ can never be happy with what had contented me [her] before” (326). Lily ends her life “ on this tragic yet sweet vision of lost

possibilities, which gave her a sense of kinship with all the loving and foregoing in the world” (340). Unable to embrace her imperfections and only finding it in death, she does not represent the ideal woman. Another woman Wharton utilizes to clarify the notion of the “ ideal women” is Bertha Dorset, a character that completely contrasts Lily. It is important to note that The House of Mirth was published in 1905, right after America’s Gilded Age. This time period refers to the opulence of the post civil-war years in America. Between the 1870s and the 1890s, the rich became richer; the poor became poorer. An increasing separation is seen between the extravagantly wealthy and the struggling poor. Bertha Dorset represents the lavishly well-to-do class that Lily aspires to join. She has a secure spot in the elitist circle because she is married to a man of great wealth. Unfortunately, even with all the riches, the ornamentations, and the excess, she is not happy. Similar to many women in her social realm, she is married to a man she does not love in order to establish and protect her social standing. In searching for happiness, she becomes involved in countless extramarital affairs with other men. In addition, she is delineated as a “ nasty woman” who “ delights in making people miserable” (45). Bertha manipulates Lily into going on a voyage to distract her husband while she pursues her affair with another man. However, when Bertha feels threatened by Lily’s success with people of nobility and fears that her husband will discover her affair with another man, she decides to remove Lily from the yacht. With so much power, money, and influence in her hand, Bertha destroys Lily’s reputation, confidence, and hope in establishing herself in the elitist world of women. The House of Mirth criticizes the exclusive sphere of women like Bertha Dorset by promoting the theme that one cannot buy happiness. Despite all the wealth that is in her

hands, Bertha, like Lily, is inconsistent both with reality and with happiness. Bertha and her circle of friends conceal their “ true selves” at dinner parties and social gatherings; they conceal their blemishes and mistakes. The role of acting manifests to readers that everyone is playing a role to create a façade that influences others to esteem them more. By juxtaposing Bertha Dorset and Lily Bart, Wharton demonstrates that neither beauty nor money can bring contentment. Lily aspires to be as wealthy as Bertha, but does she know that Bertha can never achieve happiness even with all that she possesses? It is impossible to be genuinely happy if one cannot free herself from society’s expectations and accept her imperfections. The epitome of the “ ideal woman” in Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* is Selden’s cousin, Gerty Farish. Because Selden and Gerty are cousins, the two share a similar attitude towards the rich. They both have potential to move within the elite social circles, but they choose to remain detached. Instead, they view happiness and love as something to be found rather than purchased. Selden believes that one should keep a “ republic of the spirit,” free from worldly concerns and similarly, Gerty lives independently of outside worries. Although Lily disparages her in the inception of the novel because of her dinginess and simplistic lifestyle, commenting on her “ horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat” (5), she later admires her in her philanthropy work and learns what it means to truly live in poverty. Gerty is an idealized portrayal of American womanhood who is unblemished by the wealth that has consumed many others. Although she does not possess Lily’s beauty nor Bertha’s prosperity, by accepting her imperfections and her deficiencies, she finds happiness in laboring for a living and committing to charity events in her spare time. Upon discovering Selden’s love for Lily,

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Gerty “ felt the poverty, the insignificance of her surroundings; she beheld her life as it must appear to Lily. She lay face to face with the fact that she hated Lily Bart” (171). However, when she is confronted by Lily in the middle of the night, her “ compassionate instincts, responding to the swift call of habit, swept aside all her reluctances. Gerty had unconsciously adopted the soothing note of her trade; all personal feeling was merged in the sense of ministry, and experience had taught her that the bleeding must be stayed before the wound is probed” (172). Gerty is a character who symbolizes genuine kindness. Her ability to sacrifice her love for Selden by remaining loyal and steadfast in assisting Lily and her modest and independent lifestyle emphasize her noble and ideal character. Wharton ultimately shows readers that the ideal woman is not only one who can accept her imperfections, but one who is also strictly detached from the world of lavishness and overabundance. Through the protagonist, Lily Bart, one can understand that beauty alone is inconsistent with reality and happiness. Lily has indulged herself too deeply in society’s expectations of the rich and the wealthy and only in her death, does she achieve the ideal status of womanhood. Bertha Dorset, the novel’s antagonist, contrasts Lily. She represents opulence and class, but the role of acting consumes her life. By choosing to be a part of the upper-class society, Bertha chooses to live a life of constant competition with others. Therefore, the best representation of the “ ideal woman” in this novel is Gerty Farish. She is of neither beauty nor wealth, but of love and kindness. Although her simplicity and plainness are viewed as imperfect, those imperfections mark something much more valuable: her heart.