

# Main ideas of house of mirth novel

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



## **House of Mirth by Edith Wharton**

Lily Bart is introduced to the audience as an attractive woman who longs for a loving marriage, albeit to the right husband-one who will have the money and social standing to support Lily's own standing. It's a general trait among a number of "traditional" female characters, at least for the prospect of finding true love. Though Lily has several chances to marry a man of high standing, she is often her own biggest obstacle. Wealth is a primary goal, but her flirtatious attitudes hinder her efforts as well. Then as the novel progresses and one fruitless attempt at romance after another comes and goes, she loses grip on the wealth and status she already had. She has riches at the start of the story and is left with not much more than rags by the end. In that sense, it's the antithesis of a Horatio Alger narrative.

In the middle of the Gilded Age, Alger was known for penning stories about people who would start with little, go through various trials and tribulations, but emerge triumphant in the end with success in nearly every facet of their life. Perhaps it was his depiction of the American Dream. Then in 1905, Edith Wharton presents her story of a woman who has the opposite happen to her. Alger had penned stories of a woman's rise to success and love, but what did Wharton have to gain by presenting the story she did?

Consider the social ladder in America, namely two parts of the three class structure. Middle class citizens, where Lily eventually ends up, had a moderate amount of success but often had more work as a result. With upper class, people were admired and were likely entrepreneurs or was related to one to retain large amounts of money and a high social standing.

One could say that the only place where a person could be truly content and free was in the upper class, where Lily fell from as a result of many social shortcomings. A dinner party goes particularly awry and Lily is left with nowhere to go. Her downward spiral continues through the rest of the novel until she reaches what is perhaps the only other stage where one can have true peace: death.

Women were often at the mercy of men in past decades, either being labeled a daughter, sister, or wife before an individual. With no such position for her, Lily faces oppression and increasing debts. Salvation is coming, though not immediately. Yet when it arrives, it does not propel Lily forward with a new sense of freedom. Instead, it brings on a sense of relief in paying off all the debts but with her death close after. Lily's death is ambiguous, and it is not told exactly if it was a suicide or accident. Regardless, Lily's journey from riches to rags is complete.

Though in a bit of a sour twist in the penultimate chapter of the novel, Nettie Struther is introduced. It is told that Lily helped her with charity work in the past that was not shown in the novel. Nettie tells Lily how she rose from rags to riches in the form of a loving family life. In that sense, Nettie was introduced to be a foil for Lily; Nettie embodies what Lily could have been if she had not died. Lily helped someone who would rise to riches from rags but could not do the same. Another piece of the ironic puzzle of the narrative.

So what did Edith Wharton want to present? It could be a way of showing that a woman might be truly dependent on a man if she is to survive and be

happy. There are, unfortunately, many unhappy marriages and a man is not the one complete answer for a woman's happiness. Money is necessary for living, but too much of it can corrupt while too little can leave a person lacking in basic amenities. Maybe it's meant to say that pride is not an enviable quality, that too much of it can cost you more than you expect to pay. Maybe Lily Bart is meant to be a tragic hero, one who wanted to contribute something good to society but was swallowed up in doing so. Wealth and death appear to be the opposite ends of a journey that have the same reward. What a person ends up with will depend on their character and determination, something that perhaps Lily Bart could not develop enough of in her stay in the middle class. In that sense, it could be a cautionary tale. Great literature should not only enthrall and entertain, but leave the reader with something to think about afterward, and this is a very solid example.