

Transaction or  
transaction: lily's  
choice at the end of  
the house of mirth



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Near the beginning of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton establishes that Lily would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich: "she was secretly ashamed of her mother's crude passion for money" (38). Lily, like the affluent world she loves, has a strange relationship with money. She needs money to buy the type of life she has been raised to live, and her relative poverty makes her situation precarious. Unfortunately, Lily has not been trained to obtain money through a wide variety of methods. Wharton's wealthy socialites do not all procure money in the same way: money can be inherited, earned working in a hat shop, won at cards, traded scandalously between married men and unmarried women, or speculated for in the stock market. For Lily, the world of monetary transactions presents formidable difficulties; she was born, in a sense, to marry into money, and she cannot seem to come to it any other way. She is incapable of mastering the world of economic transactions, to the point that a direct exchange is repulsive to her highly specialized nature. Finally, these exchanges and the obstacles they present prove to be the end of her, and Wharton's text joins naturalism's Darwinian rules to an economic world. Whether Lily's death is accidental or a suicide does not really matter in Wharton's vision, because the choice facing Lily at the end of the novel—to make a transaction or to make a transaction—necessitates her death. Near the end of the novel, Wharton's protagonist must make a choice—but both options are part of the environment in which Lily has not evolved to survive. In Lily's attempt at wage-earning and her moral dilemma regarding Rosedale's marriage proposal, she faces precisely the world of direct exchange with which she has never been trained to contend. Lily Bart has to die because she is completely incapable of adapting to this world of direct transactions, and in the end the only two paths she

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sees both lie firmly in that realm. First, a distinction must be made between direct and indirect transaction. Lily can happily live in a world where wealth circulates obliquely and freely. When Lily stays as a guest at Bellomont eating fine food at her hosts expense, she is not receiving payment for goods or services. Instead, her charm has earned her the benefits of friendship with the rich. Lily is not exactly being paid to be charming; instead, being charming attracts the generous hospitality and entertainment of wealthy friends. The distinction between this type of benefit and direct compensation is enormous. When the reader encounters Lily in Chapter Ten of Book Two, Lily has fled from the world of Norma Hatch to the milliners shop—and it was an offer of direct reward that made it necessary for Lily to escape. Wharton writes, “ The sense of being involved in a transaction she would not have cared to examine too closely had soon afterward defined itself in the light of a hint from Mr. Stancy that if she saw them through, she would have no reason to be sorry” (293-3). Lily has no qualms about living as a guest of her rich friends, but the idea of selling her charm and becoming a sort of social mercenary holds no appeal for her: “ The implication that such loyalty would meet with a direct reward had hastened her flight and flung her back, ashamed and penitent, on the broad bosom of Gertys sympathy” (293). This sentence combines the language of transactions and rewards with echoes of naturalism. The word flight suggests prey escaping from a predator or some other danger. The sentence makes Lily the object rather than the subject, suggesting the characteristics of naturalism; in biological language, an animal must obey the commands of its environment and genetic code.

Language colors Lilys actions in a way that suggests instinctive flight rather than deliberated choice. In the text’s particular wording, she does not choose

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to leave but instead finds herself acting under the direction of forces that have hastened her flight or flung her back. A tempting option is open to Lily: she can accept Rosedale's terms and marry him. Although such an arrangement would liberate her from the need to earn wages, it is just as firmly locked into the world of direct transactions that Lily cannot accept. Marriage to someone rich has always been Lily's goal, but marriage to Rosedale means conforming to his requirements and exchanging an act for an act. While trying to reason why Lily will not marry Dorset, Rosedale reveals that his entire approach to life is based on the world of direct exchanges: ". . . taking a purely business view of the question, I think you're right. In a deal like that, nobody comes out with perfectly clean hands. . . ." (267). Lily's reasons for not marrying Dorset are based more on scruples and taste, but Rosedale sees all situations and options on a cold ledger of benefits and losses. He speaks of marriage from the business point of view, describing the situation as a deal. His language is always that of a businessman, a vocabulary which Lily is never able to master. For a moment, this world has appeal for Lily: "Lily's tired mind was fascinated by this escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures" (268). But quickly its baseness repulses her as she realizes how much Rosedale mistrusts her and expects her mistrust of him: "The glimpse of his inner mind seemed to present the whole transaction in a new aspect . . ." (269). Again, Wharton uses the word transaction with negative connotations; transaction, in this case, involves blackmail and marriage to a man Lily has always found repugnant. Lily's response to this world seems powerfully instinctual; she speaks scathingly in a voice that is a surprise to her own ears (269). Her own reaction seems not completely under her

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control; the world represented by Rosedale's proposal is not the world in which she has evolved to survive, and she instinctively draws away from it. But after she escapes Mrs. Hatch, Lily's attempt to become an independent milliner meet with disaster. The failure reflects Lilys general inability to make her own way as a wage-earner. Lily escapes one form of transaction to find herself contending with another. Employers and employees represent one of the basic transactions in the world of direct exchanges: work exchanged for money. But this is not her preferred world, where who a woman is—her charm, intelligence, style, and beauty—can indirectly win for her moneyed friends and a rich husband. Instead, this worker's world only gives credit to what a woman does. In the former world, Lily is not easily equaled. In the latter world, she is utterly maladapted. With good reason, Mrs. Regina originally wishes to give Lily a place in the show-room (294), a place where Lily's beauty and charm might be useful. Lilys biological strategy, in a manner of speaking, is ornamentation. The show-room more closely coincides with the world of fashion and charming conversations in which Lily can thrive, but Lily wants to learn a trade. By insisting on her need to learn the real work of millinery, Lily plunges herself into a hostile environment to which she cannot adapt: “. . . after two months of drudgery she still betrayed her lack of early training” (295). Conditioning has not trained Lily for such work, and apparently it is too late for Lily to begin learning the art. In the day of work that the reader sees, physical conditions seem to take agency away from Lily once again: What made her so much more clumsy than usual? Was it a growing distaste for her task, or actual physical disability? (296). In addition to referring to the specific task of sewing, the question posited in the second sentence might ask more generally about Lily as a working

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woman. She is out of the old affluent world where her taste or distaste mattered, and in this new world of transactions and wage-earning her own body's physical limitations bar her way. Wharton summarizes the problem: "Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast?" (311). It is not only that Lily cannot sew; she would encounter tremendous difficulty in any kind of work she might attempt.

Losing her job at the milliners does not open any new opportunities.

Rosedale's outburst is warranted: "The idea of your having to work; it's preposterous (309). Lily's attempts have the absurdity of an animal trying to do a job for which it has not evolved, like an eagle trying to swim or a monkey trying to fly. In her original conception of what work might be, Lily reveals just how unsuitable she is for the world of direct economic transactions: Here was, after all, something that her charming listless hands could really do; she had no doubt of their capacity for knotting a ribbon or placing a flower to advantage. And of course only these finishing touches would be expected of her; subordinate fingers, blunt, gray, needle-pricked fingers, would prepare the shapes and stitch the linings, while she presided over the charming little front shop—a shop all white panels, mirrors, and moss-green hangings—where her finished creations, hats wreaths, aigrettes, and the rest, perched on their stands like birds just poising for flight. (293)

The passage reveals the immense difficulties Lily is bound to have. First of all, she does not grasp basic economic realities. In the world of transaction, only money will get her a shop, and while Lily's fantasies are all about the <https://assignbuster.com/transaction-or-transaction-lilys-choice-at-the-end-of-the-house-of-mirth/>

accumulation of wealth, the mechanics of transaction have no place in her thought processes. Her dreams have the shop materialize instantly, in a form that is very much part of her native environment of beauty and ornamentation. Her vision of what her work will be involves two concrete objects of beauty: a bow and a flower, the arrangement of which she hopes will earn her a living. Although her hopes are to make money, the language of the passage is not the language of economics but the language of ornamentation. Her hands are not evaluated in terms of skill or dexterity but in terms of charm; the shop itself seems less about business than display. Mirrors, objects of pure display, are mentioned as an integral part of the shop, while the hats and accessories perch like birds just poising for flight. The dream does not compare the hats to birds as they appear in reality, in the context of survival and extinction, but instead gives the reader birds frozen at a specific moment in time when their beauty is at its greatest. The alien world of the workers is only hinted out; in describing the employees, the text does not even spare a pronoun. They are fingers and nothing more, hailing from an environment so hostile that Lily can barely conceptualize it. But their world is precisely the world that Lily must try to survive in once her dream vision proves groundless. Lily Bart has to die because she is completely incapable of adapting to the world of direct transactions, and in the end the only two paths she sees both lie firmly in that realm. In the Darwinian worldview of the novel, a failure to adapt has unavoidable and tragic results. Naturalism's influence on the text brings us to the final scene, in which Lily, without agency, overdoses on her medicine. Caught in an unsuitable environment, the woman faces two unsurvivable options and dies.

Her first encounters with this world of transaction may be traced to her <https://assignbuster.com/transaction-or-transaction-lilys-choice-at-the-end-of-the-house-of-mirth/>

disastrous money dealings with Gus Trenor. From that point on, no direct transaction does any good for Lily. She cannot live outside a world of beauty and ornamentation, but in her society that world of beauty is hopelessly intertwined with economics. Monetary transactions serve as the stitching and framework of Lily's society, while beauty and ornamentation often feel like finishing touches. Lily can make pretty finishing touches on her hats, but she cannot do the stitching or detailed craftsmanship that put the hat together. In the same way, Lily's total and elegantly specialized command of grace and beauty cannot cover her vulnerabilities—her poverty, her inability to understand or live in the world of transactions—and her greatest strengths can do nothing to prevent her death. Works Cited