

Values of the society depicted in the house of mirth



In Edith Wharton's *The House Of Mirth*, money is the most evident and most basic value held by the characters who populate the author's turn-of-the-century New York. Essentially, money is valued for only one reason - it provides the means by which those in possession of it may do as they please. But it is valued as such in two distinct ways, by two distinct types of people: those who think about money, and those who do not. "I know there's one thing vulgar about money, and that's the thinking about it," Simon Rosedale tells Lily Bart in chapter fifteen of the first book, before adding: "My wife would never have to demean herself in that way." Rosedale is one of those people who are in such a position that they do not have to think about money; though he has climbed his way up the social ladder and has increased his wealth little-by-little, he is at a point where, financially, he does not need to keep track of every last dollar in his bank account. If he would like to wear new clothes or to display new rings on his fingers, he may purchase those items with no concern for the amount debited from his savings. Lily, on the other hand, cannot afford such luxuries. She tells Gerty Farish in chapter eight of the second book: "I always understand how people can spend much more money - never how they can spend any less!" Lily, unlike Rosedale, must constantly be wary of her money. Deeply in debt but equally deeply attracted to high society, she is in a position where she must pay strict attention to her steadily decreasing finances; indeed, this plight is the engine that drives the entire novel. But neither Rosedale nor Lily value money as money, as a simple physical object. In this society, money is valued as a means to an end: depending on the amount of money held by a particular individual, money has the power to set them free, or to bind them to a lifestyle of considerably lower standards.

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Those standards are, themselves, valued both separately and in conjunction with money. On one level, one's standards of living are representative of how much money that individual possesses, and the quality of one's standards indicates how wealthy or poor one may be. But on another level, one's standards of living are valued as a kind of 'passport' into one's preferred company. Those standards are valued, therefore, only by the individual who holds them, not by any kind of third party, for that individual is the only one who can reap the benefit of their own standards of living, which have no bearing on anyone outside of themselves. It is this pressure to maintain her high standards of living that drives Lily Bart to act as she does, for she fears that if her standards drop (as they eventually do) she will be shunned by the company of which she is a part (as she is). Lily does not so much value her standards in themselves as much as she values the company they enable her to frequent. This, then, is a society driven by appearance. A person's worth is determined by their exterior: whose company they keep, to whom they are married, the clothes they wear, the places they travel. Notice how other, interior qualities such as humor or intellect or kindness toward strangers are not valued by Wharton's characters. On the contrary, in chapter thirteen of the second book, Lily recalls how horrified she was to witness first-hand Gerty Farish's preference to spend her time and money helping poor, unfortunate people - "superfluous fragments of life destined to be swept prematurely into that social refuse heap of which Lily had so lately expressed her dread." Such qualities necessitate finding company in people whose appearance is tattered, sub-standard, low-class, perhaps undernourished. On the other hand, Carry Fisher's comments to Lily in the fifth chapter of the second book indicate how the importance of the company

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one keeps can influence one's decisions: " Though I like the Gormers best, there's more profit for me in [keeping company with] the Brys," Fisher says. " The fact is, they want to try Newport this summer, and if I can make it a success for them, they – well, they'll make it a success for me." Success itself is, likewise, a value of this society. It is, perhaps, the most essential value of all, for success is what defines the individuals in the class of which Lily is initially a part. Success can be financial wealth, or a solid marriage, a respectable inheritance or even a lucky streak at gambling. Were it not for their success and the lack of success attained by those beneath them they would have no basis for their indulgence in extravagances, nor for their air of superiority. Somewhat ironically, this notion is spelled out for us, and for Lily, by Nettie Struther, a member of those lower classes, in chapter thirteen of book two. " I've always thought of you as being so high up, where everything was just grand," Nettie tells Lily. " Sometimes, when I felt real mean and got to wondering why things were so queerly fixed in the world, I used to remember that you were having a lovely time, anyhow, and that seemed to show there was a kind of justice somewhere." It is doubtful that Lily's contemporaries would be so kind in their judgments of someone from Nettie Struther's lower classes; after all, if their money and their appearances are what allow them their social status, their success is the quality that determines their attitude within that status. That is why success is of such a high value: it allows one to behave as one pleases toward anyone who has not achieved an equal level of success. By extension, the values of appearance and of success are in turn supported by the twin values of etiquette and courtesy; etiquette being the rules established by the social class of which Lily is a part, and courtesy being certain acts of kindness, <https://assignbuster.com/values-of-the-society-depicted-in-the-house-of-mirth/>

which are not necessarily bound by those rules, put forth by those who are also a part of that class. Consider, as an example of how the value of appearances is dependent on the value of courtesy, the twelfth chapter of the first book, in which Gerty Farish gushes over her invitation to a party: "Wasn't it dear of Lily to get me an invitation?" she exclaims. We realize that the otherwise isolated Gerty would not have been able to raise the standard of her social appearances were it not for the courtesy (as opposed to any kind of obligation) offered to her by Lily. Consider now, as an example of how the value of appearances is dependent on etiquette, the third chapter of the second book, in which Lily tries to 'save face' by forcing conversation between herself and an icy Bertha Dorset: "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." Even simple conversation is not implemented by this society as an act of luxury, or even as simple communication, but as a necessity demanded by the rules established by that society; those rules of etiquette dictate that, in terms of appearances, something as simple as silence can be deadly. The flip-side of the niceties of etiquette and courtesy is the value of resolved stoicism, yet on some level it also complements those two qualities. As with personal standards of living, the citizens of this society do not value stoicism in itself; however, what it affords them is of the utmost importance. Scandal, too, is of supremely high value, since it is the product of actions that break etiquette or defy courtesy; in turn, it results in gossip and hearsay, both of which are particularly valuable commodities, as evidenced by Mrs. Peniston's

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propensity to keep records on every attendee at every party she has ever been to (in book one, chapter nine). Similarly, the ability to remain stoic in the face of broken etiquette, to wear a facade so as not to betray one's true emotions, is supremely valuable in order to ward off scandal. Stoicism, then, is valued by those individuals who might attract gossip and scandal, while scandal itself is valued by those who wish to break through the stoicism of such individuals: scandal is valued as a weapon, while stoicism is valued as a defense. Indeed, stoicism is rampant throughout the novel, particularly on behalf of Lawrence Selden, yet it is not until the characters dispense with it that we realize how much it was a part of their lives. Consider Lily's encounter with Rosedale in chapter eleven of the second book. After countless discussions in which each of them was hidden behind a stoic veil of manners, or courtesy, or even wit and occasionally savage words, each of them finally allows that barrier to break down. "[Lily] had in truth never seen [Rosedale] shaken out of his usual glibness, and there was something almost moving to her in his inarticulate struggle with his emotions," while, moments later, "Lily's blush deepened to a glow in which humiliation and gratitude were mingled, and both sentiments revealed themselves in the unexpected gentleness of her reply." Ironically, this discussion between Lily and Rosedale has the effect of gradually "breaking down her dislike for Rosedale. The dislike, indeed, still subsisted, but it was penetrated here and there by the perception of mitigating qualities in him: of a certain gross kindness, a rather helpless fidelity of sentiment, which seemed to be struggling through the hard surface of his material ambitions." The irony here lies in the fact that the value of stoicism is intended to uphold the value of manners and of etiquette, yet it is only through the breakdown of stoicism

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that Lily and Rosedale are able to penetrate the facade and to reach a quality that exists on an altogether deeper level of value – honesty. Certainly, if the citizens of this society were to be caught in a lie it would result only in scandal, but by the same token they are forced to lie every day, as they are once again bound by the rules and the values of etiquette and courtesy: it is easier to lie to an opponent than it is to suffer the consequences of offending them. In a society where honesty is really only held up as a value if it is complimentary, there is a certain poetic justice in the truly honest emotional communication that emerges between Lily and Rosedale only after they dispense with such rules of etiquette. What, then, can we say of the ultimate value held by this society? It is, of course, security: physical, financial, spiritual, social, emotional. Take a hansom cab, don't walk the streets at night; it's not safe. Ensure your financial security before indulging in extravagances. Go to church, even if it is for social reasons rather than religious ones; one must make an appearance. Accept all invitations to parties and gatherings and vacations; it will ingrain your presence in social circles. Marry for security, not for love; love cannot save you if you begin to fall. The citizens of this society exist in a world where they want nothing to change; to fall from grace would be terrible, to rise any higher would be almost impossible. They have every luxury they need, and there is almost nothing more they desire. As such, they do not take risks. We see what they fail to notice: we understand that they are financially free, and are free from the rules that constrict the lower classes, and, if they so wished, they could lead any kind of lifestyle they choose – yet the lifestyle they have chosen is one in which they form their own rules, arguably more constrictive than those that bind the lower classes, so as to ensure that no-

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one they disapprove of may remain amongst their ranks. Safety and security are prized above all else – that is, safety both within their own ranks and from forces outside their closed-off circle. Lily falls from their company, first, because she has not found a husband and so has not established security within her society, and second, because she is forced to rely on her own finances, then discovers that she cannot, and so she finds herself indefensible against her own integration into the working-class forces of which she is clearly not a part. Had she established security within the upper class, however much to her chagrin, she might not have fallen at all and would not have had to face the challenge of the world outside her upper class group. Hers is a closed-off society, isolated by choice in one of the busiest cities in the world. In that society, such isolation makes its inhabitants secure from anyone who might threaten their position so that the only downfall that any one of them could possibly suffer must arise from a betrayal of their established rules or from gluttony towards their established values and ultimately, it must be a downfall brought about by their own hand.