

# Labor and class in edith wharton's house of mirth



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Edith Wharton's [The House of Mirth] tells the story of Lily Bart's fall from the upper reaches of the social spectrum to the lowly depths of the working class. The characters in the novel represent all levels of society, from the urban poor to the extremely wealthy. Wealth, however, is not the sole factor in defining the characters' social status. The method of acquiring money, and most importantly, the need to do work is what defines an individual's social rank. Lily wavers between the leisure and working classes; although she is not independently wealthy, she initially scoffs at the idea of working because it is her idleness that allows her to maintain her social status. As an aristocrat, working for a living would be unthinkable; but once she is abandoned by her friends, her unwillingness and inability to do work lead to her downfall. The uppermost reaches of society are occupied by people with "old money" (such as the Trenors, the Dorsets, and the Van Osburghs). These families were born wealthy and have never needed to work to earn a living. Born into a family of rich bankers and merchants who were among the early settlers of New York, Wharton herself was a member of this leisure class, and thus writes about it with accuracy and insight (McDowell, 19). The class is distinguished by uselessness and a lack of productivity. They spend their days throwing dinner parties, vacationing in Europe, and buying useless items. Percy Gryce, for example, own a vast collection of Americana books, and he "took as much pride in his inheritance [of Americana] as though it has been his own work" (Wharton, 22). However, the fact that his collection was indeed not acquired by his own labor "underlines his position as a gentleman" (Yeazell, 716). In contrast to the old rich, the members of the nouveau riche have earned their money recently and must struggle to mount the rungs of the social ladder. In The House of Mirth, this class is represented

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by the Wellington Brys, the Gormers, and Simon Rosedale. The Wellington Brys and the Gormers are assisted in their climb by Carry Fisher and Lily, who are familiar with the delicate tastes and customs of the old rich, have connections with members of the leisure class, and, lacking their own source of wealth, can benefit from helping the newcomers. The divisions between the leisure class and the new rich are not completely insurmountable; some members of the nouveau riche win the struggle to find a place in the upper reaches of society. The Wellington Brys attempt to advance themselves in society by throwing lavish, but tasteful, parties under the supervision of Carry Fisher that aim to “ attack society collectively” (Wharton, 129). Simon Rosedale, on the other hand, seeks to make useful acquaintances, for example by giving Gus Trenor or Jack Stepney “ tips” about investing on Wall Street, or, as in Lily’s case, by “ display[ing] an inconvenient familiarity with the habits of those with whom he wished to be thought intimate” (Wharton, 17). Throughout the novel, Rosedale gradually improves his social status and decides that he wants “ a woman who’ll hold her head higher the more diamonds I put on it” (Wharton, 172). When he initially proposes to Lily, she rejects him, but once she falls from the grace of society, and no longer has the power to “ abbreviate the remaining steps of the way” for Rosedale into high society, he no longer has a use for her (Wharton, 234). Rosedale has “ gradually obtained his object in life” through “ slow unalterable persistency”, while Lily’s indecision has slowly brought about her downfall (Wharton, 234). Gerty Farish and Lawrence Selden are workers, but they maintain a connection with the members of the leisure class. Gerty was born into a wealthy family but chose a life of modesty while performing charity work. Selden is related to wealthy people, and thus still spends his leisure time

with aristocrats. Gerty is looked down upon by high society and “both Lily and, to some extent the narrative voice itself types Gerty as a different and inferior species of being” (Buell, 660). She is considered a “parasite in the moral order, living on the crumbs of other tables, and content to look through the window at the banquet spread for her friends” (Wharton, 147). Although Selden claims to “keep a kind of republic of the spirit,” as Buell points out, “his drive to remain part of the world of high fashion is hardly less strong than Lily’s” (Wharton, 68; Buell, 660). Selden, although he makes his living as a lawyer, “spends his evening...dining out with the society that he loves to ridicule” (Auchincloss, 29). Selden is “such a refined hedonist that he is never able to break away from [high society]” (McDowell, 45). While Gerty and Selden may work for a living, they remain connected with high society, and maintain their pleasure in the fine things in life. However, the fact that they work for a living separates them from their friends; Lily, although she eventually realizes that she loves Selden, will not consider the possibility of marrying him. Likewise, Gerty, since she is “the one woman of Lily’s cast who opts for an unfashionable lifestyle of do-gooding” is looked down upon for choosing a life of modesty. The only characters in the novel who are true members of the laboring masses are Nettie Struther and the charwoman. At the beginning of the novel, Lily stumbles into the charwoman on her way out of Selden’s apartment. Wharton describes the char-woman in unflattering terms: “She had a broad, sallow face, slightly pitted with small-pox” (Wharton, 15). The author paints a slightly kinder portrait of Nettie Struther. During her brief charitable phase, Lily sponsored Nettie’s trip to a sanatorium when Nettie contracted a lung illness. After recovering from her ailment, Nettie married and had a child. While Nettie is very poor, she has

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found happiness in the love of her family. However, her life “ had the frail, audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built on the edge of a cliff—a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss” (Wharton, 311). While Lily is grateful for the shelter that Nettie offers, Nettie is still described as if she is of a different species than the members of the upper class. Wharton describes her prettiness as “ common”, and she has an almost childish admiration for Lily, watching for her name in the papers. Despite having a fulfilling life, Nettie is still depicted as an inferior being, as are all the workers in the novel. The workers envy the glamorous lives of the upper classes, and faithfully follow their lives in the gossip column of the newspaper. Wharton describes the women working in the milliner’s shop as an “ underworld of toilers who lived on their vanity and self-indulgence” (Wharton, 278). Nettie Struther tells Lily that she wishes her child would grow up to be just like her. While the workers in the novel may be happier than those who do not work, Wharton depicts them as simpler, more primitive creatures who think of the wealthy as living better lives than themselves. Lily represents a unique case in that, at the start of the novel, she is a popular member of the upper class, and at its finish, she has fallen into the class of the working poor. Lily was born into a wealthy family who fell into financial ruin. Because of her beauty and grace, however, she remains popular with the upper tier of society. She hopes to use her charms to marry a wealthy man, but whenever she comes close to success, she cannot make the commitment. Through her dubious dealings with Gus Trenor and Bertha Dorset’s accusations of adultery, Lily’s popularity rapidly dissipates. She soon finds herself associating with the nouveau riche, and later, acting as secretary to the wealthy divorcée Norma Hatch. Accused

of being involved in a scandal with Mrs. Hatch, Lily soon become an outcast from wealthy society. Forced to work for a living, Lily attempts to learn to be a milliner and moves into a boardinghouse. Ultimately her lonely and impoverished lifestyle leads her to her death by chloral overdose. Lily's upbringing ingrained in her a hate of poverty and a love of luxury; " her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only atmosphere she could breathe it" (Wharton, 27). Lily mother's " last adjuration to her daughter was to escape from dinginess if she could" (Wharton, 36). Lily has a contemptuous pity for the people who were not able to live as [the upper class] lived" (Wharton, 51). Despite this contempt, however, she cannot bring herself to marry a man for whom she has no love simply because he is wealthy. With no one to support her but her aunt, Lily acknowledges the possibility of living a life like Gerty's but " recoils in disgust at the prospect of committing herself to it" (Buell, 660). She realizes that she has the option "[t]o be herself, or a Gerty Farish" (Wharton, 27). Her indecision is ultimately the cause of her downfall. While the need to do work is important in defining the social class of the characters, it is not the only factor. Money, adherence to social standards, and acquaintances also factor into the distinction between high society and the newly wealthy. After being abandoned by her old friends, Lily realizes that the world of the nouveau riche is not much different from her old world and that " money is the common denominator of all these worlds" (Auchincloss, 28). While the members of the leisure class may lead the most glamorous lives, they are not necessarily the happiest. Nettie Struther has found a contented existence in the love of her family, while the wealthy marry for social status. Because she cannot choose between love and wealth, Lily is doomed. When

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she becomes a working woman, Lily realizes the importance of love in one's life, but it is too late to secure her happiness. Works Cited Auchincloss, Louis. *Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965. Buell, Lawrence. "Downwardly Mobile for Conscience's Sake: Voluntary Simplicity from Thoreau to Lily Bart." *American Literary History* 17 (2005): 652-665. McDowell, Margaret B. *Edith Wharton*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976. Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. Yeazell, Ruth Bernard. "The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart." *ELH* 59 (1992): 713-734.