

Society's effect on
relationships: sense
and sensibility and
house of mirth



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Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) is a novel of society and manners, following two sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, in their bids for love and marriage. Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905) focuses on New York's high society and the struggle of a well-born socialite, Lily Bart. Both novels explore the integral themes of women, society and marriage. Despite being written almost a century apart, the social systems explored in these novels are overwhelmingly similar, with the end-goal of both female protagonists being ultimately marriage. The authors, in this sense, provide a critical view of the societies that place limitations on women.

In both novels, wealth, rather than love, is shown to be the most significant factor in marriage. The significance of wealth as a factor in marriage Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is portrayed at the end of the novel. Austen states that in Edward and Elinor's situation, 'One question after this only remained undecided between them, one difficulty only was to be overcome... Edward had two thousand pounds, and Elinor one...and they were neither of them quite in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a year would apply them with the comforts of life.' Here, Austen suggests that despite love being a clear factor, wealth would always be seen as more important due to the reality of the societies in which these characters live. Indeed, the stability that wealth brings to relationships is presented as ultimately the most important factor, and when taking into account the context in which the novel is written (early 19th century), seems practical. Women at this period were under pressure for financial stability, as laws prevented them from owning property. In fact, British society at this time had many restrictions (perhaps one of the most obvious was not having the right to

vote) that made women dependent on men. Census data from the 19th century also presents that there were a substantial amount more of women than men, meaning finding a wealthy partner was becoming a difficult feat.

Wharton's *House of Mirth* presents a similar attitude through the protagonist, Lily Bart. Lily is a symbolic representation of the typical woman of this era, which, although is set a century later than *Sense and Sensibility*, is extremely similar. This is exemplified when Lily is at Bellomont, and the beginning of chapter three opens with Lily's thoughts on the need for her to attain wealth through marriage. As she is walking through the luxurious halls of Bellomont, Wharton describes, 'There were moments when such scenes delighted Lily, when they gratified her sense of beauty and her craving for the external finish of life; there were others when they gave a sharper edge to the meagreness of her own opportunities.' The language Wharton uses here juxtaposes the extravagance of 'the external finish of life' with her lexis choice of the noun 'meagreness', bringing connotations of inadequacy, thus portraying the importance that Lily places on wealth as a lack of wealth is immediately associated with a negative lifestyle.

Wharton goes on to express that Lily feels forced into seducing Percy Gryce, a rich and eligible (although uninteresting) bachelor, to marry her, 'She had been bored all afternoon by Percy Gryce - the mere thought seemed to waken an echo of his droning voice - but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honor of boring her for life.' Here, Wharton's repetition of 'boredom' reiterates how essentially

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uninteresting Gryce is to Lily, reflecting the hardships of women to marry for wealth rather than love at this time.

Furthermore, Wharton selects the qualities of a woman having 'fresh compliances and adaptabilities', which presents the expectations of women in this time period to impress men. This idealistic image of a woman being poised, polite and impressive is similar to the way Elinor knows she should behave in *Sense and Sensibility*. For instance, when Elinor finds out that Lucy is involved with Edward whom she is in love with, she withholds her emotions; 'she was almost overcome - her heart sunk within her, and she could hardly stand; but exertion was indispensably necessary, and she struggled so resolutely against the oppression of her feelings,' Wharton's choice of lexis here shows how absolutely Elinor struggled against her own emotions, particularly through the adverbs 'almost' and 'hardly' and by presenting the idea that this behavior was 'indispensably necessary' in which her use of adjective shows the pressure that society put on women to repress their feelings. Michal Beth Dinkler suggests that 'Austen favors Elinor's self-possession' which is an interesting viewpoint; is it arguable that Austen supported the repression of such intense female emotion that Marianne obviously does not? It is more likely that Austen used Elinor as a device to convey her criticisms of the society which encouraged the repression of emotion for male benefit. For this reason, Marianne represents the opposite of what society would have expected young ladies to behave, as she has an excess of emotion, a view supported by Dinkler; 'Marianne, the true Romantic, luxuriates in her own floridity, languishing in layer upon layer of love language and succumbing to morose and mournful melancholy.'

Overall in this section, it is clear that Wharton presents Lily as knowing that she needs to marry for financial stability, but ultimately resenting this, a position which many women would find themselves in during this time period due to their inescapable reliance on men.

However, it is arguable that Lily's wish to marry wealthy is not purely an objective of society, but a personal one of hers. Wharton presents this through the use of third person narration, which allow the reader an oversight of Lily's true thoughts and feelings which perhaps in a first person narration, Wharton wouldn't allow Lily to admit; 'No; she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury;' which suggests that Lily could not live without the opulent lifestyle that a wealthy husband would provide her. This is reiterated by Wharton's choice of adjectives 'mean' 'shabby' 'squalid' which all present a lack of wealth as being disgusting and unfair. Indeed, Lily in the novel is shown to be entirely conscientious of her need for wealth; 'The certainty that she could marry Percy Gryce when she pleased had lifted a heavy load from her mind...She would be able to arrange her life as she pleased,' but it is clear through the language 'arrange her life as she pleased' that Lily also craves the freedoms that wealth could provide her.

In contrast, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor is presented as only seeking enough wealth to have a stable and practical lifestyle. This is shown in a conversation between Marianne and Elinor where Elinor is explaining that Marianne has grown up oblivious to the necessity of wealth in her life. 'What have wealth or grandeur to do with happiness?' 'Grandeur has but little,' <https://assignbuster.com/societys-effect-on-relationships-sense-and-sensibility-and-house-of-mirth/>

said Elinor, ' but wealth has much to do with it...' This rhetorical question followed by the declarative shows Elinor's more mature outlook on marriage and wealth in this era: it is clear that she recognizes the practical need for wealth to support their lifestyles.

Furthermore, Wharton presents wealth as a more significant factor in marriage rather than love as Lily ultimately rejects Lawrence Selden, who, from the beginning of the novel, she is shown to be in love with. Although Selden is wealthy, he is not the most wealthy man that Lily is involved with, and therefore she does not find him a suitable partner. Despite her previous upheaval at finding Percy Gryce so uninteresting, she recognizes how Selden makes her view the world differently but still does not let herself act upon her affections; ' his presence shed a new light on her surroundings.' ' That was the secret of his way of readjusting her vision. Lily...found herself scanning her little world through his retina: it was as though the pink lamps had been shut off and the dusty daylight let in.' The emphasis Wharton places upon Selden representing light and realization in Lily's life shows her true feelings for him. In contrast to Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, rather than Lily's true love, Selden, leaving her as Willoughby leaves Marianne, Lily simply chooses to not be with Selden. This highlights a difference in attitude between the two women; Lily is shown to believe that she deserves someone wealthy to support her lifestyle, but being adequately affluent herself, she is not under pressure to settle for Selden.

Another instance in which Austen puts forward the importance of wealth in marriage is through Willoughby, who marries Miss Grey just for her wealth, despite truly loving Marianne. Mrs Jennings reveals Willoughby's sudden

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engagement to Miss Grey; 'The lady then — Miss Grey I think you called her — is very rich?' 'Fifty thousand pounds, my dear. ...Fifty thousand pounds!' Within which Austen's repetition of the exclamatory phrase 'fifty thousand pounds!' places emphasis on the basis of the relationship being primarily wealth. It may, however, be argued that Willoughby is unhappy due to his decision to marry for wealth. This is suggested at the end of the novel through his intense idealization of Marianne as the perfect woman as he is said to have 'made her his secret standard of perfection in woman;' his unhappiness is further shown as 'Willoughby could not hear of her marriage with a pang;'. Here, Austen's use of a third person omniscient narrator gives a clear and detailed insight into Willoughby's thoughts and feelings, describing that although Willoughby had not 'fled from society...or died of a broken heart,' he thought of Marianne often and had effectively caused his own unhappiness by leaving her. By having Willoughby be ultimately unhappy at the end of the novel, Austen can be said to be criticizing the 19th century society in which she is writing: since Willoughby chose to follow society's regulations of marrying for wealth, he ended up with unhappiness, whereas both Marianne and Elinor reject society's traditional expectations for marriage and end up happier for it.

However, in *Sense and Sensibility*, it can be argued that Austen introduces the concept that love is often more important than wealth in regards to marriage. Austen presents this through the character of Mrs Dashwood, who, from the beginning of the novel, expresses her contentment with Edward Ferrars solely on the basis of his affections for Elinor. This is portrayed in Austen's description that, 'Some mothers might have encouraged the

intimacy from motives of interest, for Edward Ferrars was the eldest son of a man who had died very rich; ' It was enough for her that he appeared to be amiable, that he loved her daughter, and that Elinor returned the partiality.' Austen's technique of listing Edward's positive qualities here shows that Mrs Dashwood truly appreciates the favorable parts of Edward's character, showing that despite social expectations, she believes in marriage for love rather than wealth alone. Her willingness for Elinor to be with him is further re-instated as Austen presents that Edward is not particularly socially-striking, ' He was not handsome, and his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing. He was too diffident to do justice to himself; but when his natural shyness was overcome, his behaviour gave every indication of an open, affectionate heart.' The adjectives ' open' and ' affectionate' suggest that Mrs Dashwood can look beyond typically shallow qualities of an idealistic partner for Elinor (namely handsomeness and manners); instead choosing to really understand Edward as a person. This further portrays that despite wealth being an important factor in marriage in the society in which Austen writes, love is being presented as the fundamentally significant factor. This shows that Mrs Dashwood is presented as an open-minded and kind character, further presented when Austen states that Edward's ' quietness of manner...militated against all her established ideas of what a young man's address ought to be.' Which shows that society's expectations even for men (perhaps above all to be wealthy, handsome and well-mannered) can be overshadowed by love in Austen's novel.

Women in both novels are shown to be living in a male-dominated society.

On top of a woman's pressure to marry somebody wealthy in order to sustain

their lifestyle, various other social pressures determined from the patriarchal societies of both contexts are shown to effect the women's lives. Lily expresses from the first chapter of *The House of Mirth* the advantages men have over women. When she goes to Selden's apartment for tea, she expresses her amazement at the freedoms of men to own property; 'How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman!' In which Wharton's use of repeated exclamatories shows Lily's desperation for freedoms of her own. Selden expresses that women can too own flats, but Lily explains that no respectable woman would: 'Oh, governesses - or widows. But not girls - not poor, miserable, marriageable girls!' in which Austen's use of the triplet of adjectives shows her true irritation in the society that depicts what women can and can't do, and creates the idea that their behavior must present them, above all else, as marriageable. This shows society's expectations of women constantly resulting in their ultimate lack of freedom. When the two then discuss the only woman they know who lives in a flat, Gerty Farish, Lily says she is not a marriageable woman, reflected by her living status. Lily's pre-occupation with a woman's status as 'marriageable' or not also reveals the pressure she feels herself. By having this section of the novel be predominantly dialogue between Selden and Lily, Wharton allows the reader to see an insight into the interactions between men and women and their opinions of others in society at this time, predominantly focusing on the restrictions that women faced. When Wharton does use narration in this section, it is often to reinforce the underlying message of Selden and Lily's conversation, for instance that Lily 'was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her,' which portrays Wharton analyzing Lily's judgmental attitude

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as being due to her being conditioned by the patriarchal society of this time, rather than a personal flaw of hers.

The male dominated society in *The House of Mirth* is shown further by Lily's own awareness of it. She explains to Selden from the first chapter how men objectify women, and how their worth is exemplified by their looks. When Lily suggests to Selden that he could marry for wealth ('But do you mind enough - to marry to get out of it?') and Selden effectively conveys that he would never ('God forbid!'), she plainly tells him the social expectations of women in contrast to men. 'Ah, there's the difference - a girl must, a man may if he chooses.' in which Wharton's lexis choices of the modal verb 'may' compared to the imperative 'must' reiterates the lack of choices and freedoms a woman has in this society. Wharton goes on to have Lily explain, 'Your coat's a little shabby - but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it.' This long speech containing many complex sentences portrays Lily's train of thought, giving a female viewpoint of her standing in society. She describes the objectification of women that is evident in this society. It seems almost every man Lily comes into contact with views her primarily as an object, including Selden. In fact, the first line of the novel, 'Selden paused in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart' portrays this, predominantly through the lexis choice of 'refreshed' which gives connotations of Lily being a material object rather than a person. Wharton, by placing this at the

forefront of the novel, sets the tone for the patriarchy that is shown to rule society throughout. Lily, rather than being a victim to her own society, is presented to be self-aware, realizing early in the novel that she is 'no more account among [her social circle] than an expensive toy in the hands of a spoiled child.' in fact, when at Bellomont, she speaks of being aware of having to earn her stay there; 'For in the last year she had found that her hostesses expected her to take a place at the card-table. It was one of the taxes she had to pay for their prolonged hospitality.' This clearly shows that in every social situation, women in this society were viewed primarily as objects for others to observe and enjoy.

It can be said that despite women being restricted by a patriarchy that reduces them to objects, Lily allows this to an extent. Literary critic Cynthia Wolff states, 'The House of Mirth is about the disintegration of Lily Bart, about the psychological disfigurement of any women who chooses to accept society's definition of her as a beautiful object and nothing more' she goes on to point out: 'Lily has adopted her society's images of women narrowly and literally. She has long practiced the art of making herself an exquisite decorative object.' This idea can be clearly shown in the novel, for instance in Lily's performance at the Welly Brys' tableaux vivant, where Lily dressed up and displayed herself as a living imitation of art. Lily enjoyed the 'exhilaration of displaying her own beauty under a new aspect: of showing that her loveliness was no mere fixed quality, but an element shaping all emotions to fresh forms of grace', thus showing that Wharton presents Lily Bart as enjoying being 'such a wonderful spectacle' (as Selden describes her), and objectified by others. In this way, it can certainly be argued that

Wharton is presenting female characters of this era to further their own objectification and somewhat support the clear patriarchal and restrictive society they have been born into. An alternative viewpoint, however, presented by Debbie Lelekis, is that this performance creates an 'inversion of gender roles' as 'Through her display of beauty, Lily manipulates the audience and temporarily seizes power.' This perception is interesting when considering Wharton as a feminist writer, allowing the audience to question if Lily is a product of her society, or subtly questioning the ruling patriarchy through her behavior.

It is clear that a male dominated society also prevails within *Sense and Sensibility*, and this is established from the beginning of the novel. It's important to recognize, however, that although women owning property was simply frowned upon in the context of *The House of Mirth*, it was legally impossible in *Sense and Sensibility*, prior to the Married Women's Property Act 1882. This is one of the subtle differences in context in terms of a woman's place in society in the 19th century compared to the 20th century. Indeed, Austen's novel takes place in a society where there are limited roles and opportunities for women, including that the female characters cannot inherit property or have careers. Their future lifestyles depend almost completely on the men they marry, which explains why there are so many social expectations of women to make them attractive to potential husbands. This is reiterated from the opening of the novel when, because of the death of the family patriarch, the women were forced to resign their land and possessions to John Dashwood. Thus, the female characters had to abruptly move out of their home: 'No sooner was his father's funeral over, than Mrs

John Dashwood, without sending any notice...arrived.' Additionally, notably, the next house they move into had to be offered to them by a male relative: 'the offer of a small house...belonging to a relation...a gentleman of consequence and property in Devonshire.' further reiterating the reliance of women in this male dominated society.

In summation, it is clear that despite the subtle differences that can be seen in Austen and Wharton's works due to the century between each being written, women's positions in society changed little. Marianne, Elinor and Lily all reflect the struggles and expectations of women, and the ultimate expectation of them: to marry. Austen's novel ultimately shows society's victory in Marianne's case: by the end of the novel she is no longer the hopeless romantic type, and has settled for stability and wealth. This idea is presented by critic Diane Shubinsky, who points out that Marianne learns 'the errors of her ways and acknowledge(s) the greater suitability of the older and more stable man' despite the truth that 'she knew and had more in common with the rake than she did with her future husband.' Despite this, it is arguable that Marianne had become practical in her pursuits, rather than the initial representation of her as the ultimate 'sensitivity' and therefore impetuous and immature in her ideals of love. Elinor, on the contrary, can be seen as rising above the social conventions that force women into marrying purely for wealth, as she ends up with Edward Ferrars who she is shown to truly love (For instance, as she describes early in the novel that her understanding of him leads her to see him as handsome: 'At present, I know him so well, that I think him really handsome.')

The House of Mirth's ending contrasts greatly with Sense and Sensibility, as rather than Lily ending up married and happy, she ends up committing suicide. This suitably tragic end for a character that has openly struggled with society's plans for her can be seen as Wharton's criticism of a patriarchy that leaves women without options. Indeed, a possible explanation of Lily's death is simply that she couldn't bear to be poor and unmarried with age setting in fast, as is suggested in the penultimate chapter of the novel through Wharton's third person narration which recounts Lily's emotions before she overdoses: 'It was indeed miserable to be poor - to look forward to a shabby, anxious middle age,' To add to this tragic ending, Selden realizes his true love for Lily only after her death, possibly another portrayal from Wharton of the unjust society that Lily had lived in. Debbie Lelekis argues this case, giving the explanation that 'Lily does not give in and marry someone rich, and she pays the consequences of her actions.' The final chapters of the novel show that Lily and Selden deeply loved each-other, both coming to the realization that they had something left to say. In Lily's case, as she was falling asleep it is revealed that 'she said to herself that there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them.' Selden's realization comes the following morning: 'He only knew that he must see Lily Bart at once - he had found the word he meant to say to her,' and more pointedly, the final sentence of the novel, 'He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear.' This ending may be seen as ambiguous, but it is largely suspected that this 'word' was a declaration of love. Wharton's decision to end the novel in this way portrays the ultimate struggle of Lily in

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the novel: a lack of wealth and love, essentially leading to her social downfall and eventual demise. The contrast in the endings of both novels highlights a clear difference in the society's in which the authors are writing in. Austen was undoubtedly pushed to create a 'happy' ending for her characters as a struggling female author in an era of romanticism, whereas Wharton, almost a century later, could depict the final fate of her characters how she desired.