

Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* has been the topic of many discussions regarding Wharton's view of society and the role that people play within that society. But other important matters need to be looked into as well, ones that take a much closer look at the characters and what Wharton is trying to show the reader with them. One of the major questions that has pervaded literature is, what price would someone really be willing to pay to be accepted? The novel makes an interesting comment on human nature and why people do the things they do. Wharton looks into the idea that people will generally set themselves up to do whatever it takes to get what they want, but then end up ruining the opportunities they have made for themselves. Why would someone do this? If someone has already taken serious risk, like losing friends and happiness, why would they personally sabotage their attempts? Is this true of everyone? This paper will try to answer these questions in relation to Wharton's characters by doing a serious analysis of them. This analysis will include looking into how the characters relate to one another within the plot, what they give up to attain what they feel is the epitome of happiness, and the personal struggles involved with their quest.

The novel opens by introducing some of the most important characters of the books, including the protagonist Lily Bart. Lily is a twenty-nine year old unmarried woman in a very precarious time of life as Jennifer Fleissner points out in her article "The Biological Clock: Edith Wharton, Naturalism, and the Temporality of Womanhood." She states: "...the novel concerns the temporal location of being situated on the cusp between marriageability and terminal spinsterhood" (528). The threat of becoming a spinster is also mentioned in Martha Banta's "Wharton's Women: In Fashion, In History, Out of Time": "Wharton's women are also caught within confined lives they figure as old maids" (71). But fear of spinsterhood is not Lily's only drive for wanting a husband; she has other motives as well. When the reader is first introduced to the heroine of the novel, it is immediately clear that she is very beautiful to the other characters in the novel and that she has a very calculated plan for how to use this

beauty. “Why don't you say it, Judy? I have the reputation for being on the hunt for a rich husband.” (Wharton, 47). Not only does Lily have a plan, but everyone knows about it. She wants to be able to live comfortably for the rest of her life and a rich man is the means to reach that end. Carol Miller brings this concept up in her article “Natural Magic: Irony as Unifying Strategy in 'The House of Mirth'”: “In Lily's cosmology, happiness depends upon wealth. Wealth for a woman who is not born into it requires an expedient marriage, and though she chafes against the abridging of her personal freedom that expediency demands, Lily believes she has no option except to marry for money” (85). Miller notes that Lily realizes that she must marry Percy, or any man with money, to make sure that she is able to live up to what the other people in the wealthy set are doing. Lily gets her first chance to win over a suitor in the first chapter when she boards a train to visit friends. She notices that Percy Gryce is also aboard, “She began to cut the pages of a novel, tranquilly studying her prey through downcast lashes while she organized a method of attack” (Wharton, 18). Percy is precisely what Lily is looking for considering that he is wealthy, young, and popular with the right people. So it makes a great deal of sense that she would choose him for a possible husband.

The reader learns in the next chapter that Lily only wishes to win over Percy Gryce to get her hands on his money and the security it would provide her. Lily is willing to give up her own happiness and freedom all in the name of money and status.

She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce—the mere thought seemed to wake 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 honour of boring her for life. (Wharton, 27).

In “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*,” Wai-Chee Dimock discusses Lily's plan to get a husband and how she acts throughout the novel: “Of all the characters Lily Bart has the most

puzzling relation to the marketplace. A self-acknowledged 'human merchandise' (256), she is busy marketing herself throughout most of the book, worried only about the price she would fetch" (783). When Lily first meets Percy on the train she makes herself seem domestic in an attempt to mirror what Gryce's mother taught him. She even agrees to go to church with him to show him how nice she could look while reading a prayer book: "She had an idea that the sight of her in a grey gown of devotional cut, with her famous lashes drooped above a prayer-book, would put the finishing touch to Mr. Gryce's subjugation" (Wharton, 55). Each moment of her life at this point of the plot is driven towards making Percy Gryce see her as a possible wife and a valuable accessory to all of his doings. Rather than searching for a man that she is *willing* to be with and make sacrifices for, Lily simply finds a man with a large sum of money and tries to wrap her own life around his needs and desires. She even begins lying to make people think what she needs them to think about her, as Frances L. Restuccia discusses in her article "The Name of Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminisms. "White lies trickle from her lips: at the onset of the book she fibs to Rosedale about visiting her dressmaker; she lies to Gryce on the train about finding the porter to order tea; and throughout the novel, she deceives consistently in subtle ways" (227). Everything depends on showing people what they want to see and not the reality of who she is. Edith Wharton shows us a society in which the external self is much more important than the internal one. Lily accepts this system of values almost entirely, but Lily does have her moments of what could be called clarity.

At certain points in the novel it is as though she realizes that what she is doing is counteractive to her own personal happiness and well-being. Even when her bills are piling up and she knows the urgency of finding someone to marry, Lily is still unable to apply herself entirely to removing all of her old ways from her life. Though it may seem that she only cares for money and clothes there is more to Lily than what she allows people to see, as the reader can ascertain during her conversation with Lawrence Selden about her future. Selden has suggested that Lily only cares for money and what it can

buy and she says: “But you belittle *me*, don't you,' she returned gently, 'in being so sure that they are the only things I care for' ” (Wharton, 75). Even Lily knows that she is being untrue to herself by only pursuing material things in life. Bonnie Lynn Gerard comments on Lily's obvious desire to pursue money in her essay “From Tea to Chloral: Raising the Dead Lily Bart”. She also notes that Lily seems self-destructive at the same time. “But careful scrutiny of Wharton's depictions of Lily when she temporarily gratifies her need for material sustenance reveals an impulse that causes her to feel dissatisfied in moments when she should feel satisfied the most” (Gerard, 415). Lily should be happy with her success at getting the attentions of Percy Gryce, but instead she worries that he will be too boring to endure. She knows that she needs Percy's financial aid, but pushes against being trapped by him at the same time. Instead of going to church with Percy, she goes on a walk with Lawrence Selden. She starts the walk with the intention of catching up with Percy after church, and even sees him on his way home, but she still ends up spending her time with Selden. She manages to convince Percy that she was ill and unable to go to church, but then fails to follow up on her promises because she is again with the monetarily poor Lawrence Selden. Why would she make it so difficult for herself?

Lily's friend Carry Fisher leads a great discussion of this habit of Lily's and what it might mean at the beginning of the second book, “Sometimes,' she added, 'I think it's just flightiness—and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study” (Wharton, 197). Some part of Lily is thoroughly determined that she should not waste her life with someone she does not love and competes with the part of her that knows she needs money. Wharton is showing the reader that humans are not two-dimensional things. There are many facets to human nature; it just depends on the situation which side will win out. Lily knows perfectly well that she would be unhappy settling for a man because of his wealth, but is still driven towards it because she knows that she would probably be unhappy without money. She risks everything to get the rich husband, but ends up throwing away opportunities because

of a momentary realization that what she is doing is actually wrong for her. Lily's indecisiveness is a pure manifestation of the true qualities of human nature. In the end, though, it seems that Lily is willing to forgo the chance to meet someone that really interests her and meets her emotional needs for someone who could remove all her debts and keep her dressed in the finest clothes.

In the novel Lily actually does find a man she enjoys spending time with and could imagine herself marrying, if only he had the right amount of money. But she removes herself from this opportunity as well because the man she loves, and who is willing to love her back, would never be able to take care of all of her debts and material needs. Lawrence Selden is an old friend of Lily's. He is in and out of the group of wealthy socialites, although he does not have any great funds of his own. It can be difficult to tell where Selden stands at times, but for the most part it is pretty easy to tell that he does have feelings for the heroine of the novel. In Caroline McManus' article, "Subverting Romantic Comedy: Edith Wharton's Reading of Shakespeare in 'The House of Mirth,'" she mentions what takes place between Lily and Lawrence Selden. "Lily's encounters with Selden speak to their mutual desire to dwell in a green world, an idealistic alternative to their sordid capitalistic society, but these moments, each marked by the possibility of fulfilled romance, are fleeting" (McManus, 96). Lily and Selden do have their moments, but something always happens that brings them back to reality and what Lily really "needs" to survive. But the moments are not without their importance in Lily's life. Lawrence Selden professes his love for Lily while she is vying for the company of Percy Gryce, "'No, I have nothing to give you instead,' he said, sitting up and turning so that he faced her. 'If I had, it should be yours, you know'" (Wharton, 75). This may not be the most romantic declaration of love, but that is in fact what it is. If Selden were capable of giving Lily everything she needs and tearing her away from her materialistic lifestyle, he would certainly do it. Lily initially refuses to acknowledge this comment and moves on in her quest to capture Percy Gryce.

But Selden makes it clear again, later in the novel, that he wishes to marry her. Selden witnesses Lily's performance in the *tableaux vivants* and seeks her company after the show. Before leaning in to kiss her he states: "The only way that I can help you is by loving you" (Wharton, 145). Up to this point in the scene, Lily is entirely receptive to Selden's desire to be with her and feels the attraction pass between them. It is these words that seem to snap her back into the reality of her situation. She tells Lawrence, "Ah, love me, love me—but don't tell me so" (145) and leaves him alone in the garden. Carol Baker Sapora discusses how Lily essentially has two parts to her, the public part and the private part in "Female Doubling: The House of Mirth." It is in Selden that Lily finds someone she can be her true self with:

In Lawrence Selden, Lily thinks that she has finally found a person who will welcome her inner self, a friend 'who won't be afraid to say the disagreeable [things]' that her real self needs to hear (7). Lily has acted the part of her public self so long that she fears she has no other self left. She looks the Selden to verify her existence, to prove the reality of her inner self. (Sapora, 378).

But regardless of this trust in Selden and her obvious attraction to him, she refuses him. Sapora mentions that Lily is able to free herself while she is around Selden until something happens or someone shows up to remind her that Selden may not be best match for her financially and she has other things she needs to focus on. She feels that even love cannot fulfill her as much as money can. She throws away her chance at possibly being very happy to continue her search for a wealthy husband. Gerard also mentions this: "But to travel with Selden into his 'republic of the spirit' requires that Lily suppress her longings for the society of the material in which she has been brought up to seek her place" (416). Lily would ultimately have to give up everything she has been taught to work for in order to marry Selden and she is initially unable to make this sacrifice. Wharton shows us that while Lily is capable of giving up happiness during her search for wealth, she is generally unable to sacrifice status

and wealth while she still thinks that she has a chance to get it. And this is a major factor: while she still has an opportunity to get status, she must burn bridges and make serious sacrifices to get it. But once she no longer has the chance, Lily sees Selden as being a viable option for marriage. Even though she finally comes to this decision, Selden's own nature prevents it from coming to fruition.

Lawrence Selden contributes many different things to the analysis of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and it is important to look at these things to get a better understanding of how he really relates to Lily in this novel. Lawrence is, at times, quite the complicated character. In many ways he is involved with the wealthy society, and in others he looks down on it completely. When Lily makes note of the fact that Selden thinks the materialistic lifestyle is below her he responds in agreement: “Selden smiled, but not ironically. 'Well isn't that a tribute? I think them quite worthy of most of the people who live by them' ” (Wharton, 74). At the same time Selden acts a lot like the people he looks down upon. His republic is not truly a republic at all; he excludes people based entirely on their status, just like the people he claims to dislike. “ 'Why do you call your republic a republic? It is a close corporation, and you create arbitrary objections in order to keep people out' ” (Wharton, 74). Lily is being kept out of a group because of her monetary status and Selden keeps people out of his own group because they have too much money. *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton: Gender, Class, and Power in the Progressive Era*, a book written by Wharton critic Anne Benert, talks about Selden's republic: “In *The House of Mirth* Lawrence Selden further complicates Lily Bart's situation by locating the ideal not in the house beautiful or even the house comfortable, much as she needs both, but in a variety of ahistorical landscapes” (148).

The ideals created by Selden are not in any area that Lily can easily gain entrance to. She wants desperately to have wealth and status, but at the same time wishes to be able to reside in Selden's republic; and he makes it very difficult for her to do. It is quite the hypocritical quandary that Wharton creates for her characters. Dimock brings Selden's double characterization up in her article: “Selden is a

'negative hero,' then, as Wharton herself admits, not a high-minded dissident, very much 'one of them' (73). Like the others he exudes a cold stinginess, a desire for acquisition without risk and without expenditure" (Dimock, 787). He seems to be incapable of sticking to one group or another. He claims that he is open-minded and above the materialistic ideals of the wealthy set, but in reality he thinks just like they do when it suits his needs.

One of the most important moments in the novel, one that really illustrates the duplicity of Selden's nature, involves possible adulterous acts between Lily and George Trenor. We learn early in the novel that Selden used to be romantically involved with Bertha Dorset, a wealthy married woman who is in Lily's group of acquaintances. Bertha has become upset because Lawrence Selden may not be going to Bellomont and Lily responds by stating her confusion: " 'I thought that was all over' " (Wharton, 45). The two have apparently been seeing each other for some time, but now Selden has ended the relationship. This ends up being hypocritical for a few reasons. For one, Selden is apparently fine with running around with someone of the wealthy set, but refuses to allow them into his "republic". Apparently materialistic people are fine for sexual encounters, but they are incapable of truly being a part of his life. Selden may think that he is a cut above all the rest, but he is just as shallow as they are in reality. His relationship with Bertha also creates a hypocritical situation. Due to his constant switching back and forth, Selden jumps to an incorrect conclusion when he sees Lily leaving Gus Trenor's apartment in the city. Selden has been informed by Carrie Fisher that Lily has left for the Trenors so he goes to check the situation out for himself: "...two figures were seen silhouetted against the hall-light. At the same moment a hansom halted at the curb-stone, and one of the figures floated down to it in a haze of evening draperies; while the other, black and bulky, remained persistently projected against the light" (Wharton, 169). The only proof that Selden has to go on is seeing one person enter a carriage and leaving another person behind. It is too dark to decipher the actual identities of the people so for all Selden knows Trenor could have been meeting with someone else altogether.



And even if Lily is Trenor's partner in this scene, he has very little basis for automatically concluding that she is having a sexual affair with him. Yet, he still assumes that this is the case.

The next day Selden breaks his meeting with Lily because of what he saw that previous night. Instead of trying to talk to her, he decides to run and leave the country. But even then he is unable to avoid Lily entirely. When Selden goes to Europe, he discovers that there is a chance that he may actually see Lily Bart. Rather than staying and confronting her about why she was with Trenor, he runs once again: "In his inmost heart he was not sorry to put himself beyond the probability of meeting Miss Bart. Completely as he had detached himself from her, he could not yet regard her merely as a social instance; and viewed in a more personal way she was not likely to be a reassuring object of study" (Wharton, 199). Selden proves to be very selfish in this scene. He is so wounded by his own assumptions that he is entirely unable to consider what Lily is dealing with. He never even takes his own affair with Bertha as a comparison for what Lily is doing. He is allowed to keep company with anyone he chooses, while Lily must uphold impossible morals. Roslyn Dixon mentions this in her writing as well:

In the same way, Selden also reveals that he is a self-serving, albeit sporadic, participant. His condemnation of Lily's apparent liaison with Gus Trenor contrasts with Selden's own liaison with Bertha Dorset. Selden's actions are condoned, however, while Lily's are condemned. (216).

Selden's hypocritical actions play a major part in Lily's life. Had he simply confronted her and made an attempt to understand the facts he might have been able to end up with her after all. Lily would have been able to have the love she was really wanting and her suicide would have never happened. Lily is not the only character in this novel that gives up everything to gain a certain reputation. Selden also gives up the opportunity to be with the woman he loves to selfishly protect himself and save his reputation. It would, in the end, be very inappropriate for him to marry a woman that supposedly has

affairs with men; especially if those men are married. This one decision affects the entire novel and how things come to be for the protagonist. Wharton proves to the reader that a person's sacrifices and decisions are not simply factors in an internal battle; other people can greatly influence the outcome of a person's life.

Selden may have his problems, but he does bring out some different aspects of Lily that were otherwise hidden from other people: "Selden thus brings to the surface what Lily kept suppressed by virtue of her involvement in the group" (Dixon, 214). Until encountering Selden, Lily has been very good at lying to herself about the people she was with, as well as what it was that she truly wanted from life. It seemed easier to her, previously, to fake it and deal with the unpleasantness to get what she wanted. Especially because all she had to do was surround herself with these people to remove herself from the truth: "The hidden self generally makes her uncomfortable when she is alone, and so she avoids the solitude that would force her into dialogue with it" (Sapora, 377). Regardless of her attempts to avoid her problems, she actually sees a change in her ideals when she is around Selden: "'Whenever I see you, I find myself spelling out a letter of the sign—and yesterday—last evening at dinner—I suddenly saw a little way into your republic' " (Wharton, 77). The night that she is referring to Lily spent the dinner looking over her group of friends and realizing that her previous convictions about them have changed:

Lily smiled at her classification of her friends. How different they had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining, now they stood for what she was giving up. That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw they were merely dull in a loud way. (Wharton, 57).

Just the fact that Selden was suddenly in her vicinity made Lily change all of her ideals. Even though the change was temporary, it still factors into Lily's character development. Even though Selden is inconsistent in his ideals and actions, he does accomplish his desires in a small way. He also helps her

realize that everything she had been working towards the last twenty-nine years was really a complete waste. At the beginning of their conversation at Bellomont, Lily attempts to stand up for her desires. She starts out by stating that people judge society and money unfairly. They view society as an end, rather than a means, and money as something to be gloated over. She finishes by saying: “ ‘ Isn’t it fairer to look at them both as opportunities, which may be used either stupidly or intelligently, according to the capacity of the user’ ” (Wharton, 73). Initially Lily still holds to her beliefs and argues her point, but the more time she spends with Selden, the less she even believes herself. Selden lays out what he feels will be her future if she keeps on her current path and asks if she has realized this on her own: “ ‘Often and often,’ she said. ‘But it looks so much darker when you show it to me’ ” (Wharton, 74).

In many ways it is a good thing that Selden is able to bring these things out in Lily. She is unable to hide her true self from him and must face her problems. And yet, this creates a myriad of other problems for Lily. When she was able to lie to herself about the future and what it is that she was hoping to get from life, her plan was able to go off without a hitch. With Selden in the picture, though, she becomes unsure of her actions. She sees what she is truly giving up and back tracks on her own decisions. As a result Lily loses out on *everything*. Her pride becomes too much and she sabotages her own plans to get Percy to marry her while simultaneously still being incapable of giving up the dream of a comfortable life entirely and marrying Selden. Wharton has created characters who really represent the ups and downs of human nature. We all want one thing while at the same time really wanting another contradictory thing as well. So it ends up that, due to outside factors and Lily's own indecisiveness, she loses her chance at really being with Selden. Once he sees her with Gus Trenor, he no longer sees her as a viable love interest. “When Lily finally feels desperate enough to turn to Selden's love as 'her only hope,' the chance circumstance (also a convention of Naturalism) of his having seen her leaving Trenor's house the night before causes him to leave town, leaving her stranded

and alone” (416). Lily has successfully destroyed everything that she has been trying to achieve and everything she really wanted to achieve.

Love may have been a central part of Lily's problems but she was still ultimately consumed by the desire to be accepted by the wealthy members of New York society. And therefore she was continuously giving things up in order to make her more likely to be integrated into the group. Lily may have been trying to win her way into wealth with her charms and looks, but she was simultaneously losing money. The main issue with keeping a place within the upper classes is the fact that she had to appear to belong there, no matter what. In Ruth Bernard Yeazell's article, "The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart," she mentions the type of society that Lily lives in and what this ultimately means for Lily and the other characters. "Like Veblen, Wharton represents a world in which people acquire and maintain status by openly displaying how much they can afford to waste; and like Veblen, she knows that the crowded conditions of modern urban life compel them to make such displays all the more conspicuously" (Yeazell, 714). The Veblen that she refers to is Thorstein Veblen who published *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899. He and Wharton hold many of the same ideas about society and the way in which it functions. Yeazell's point here is that for Lily, or anyone else, to survive in the wealthy society she must be willing and able to spend constantly without showing any sign of having worked for that ability. Lily certainly has the willingness to conform to these ideals, but she certainly lacks that actual ability. Thanks to a ruined father, Lily lost any hopes for naturally being a part of the upper class when she was a teenager (Wharton, 34). Her life did not just depend on getting a rich husband; she also needed to keep a group of friends with the right status. The Trenors and their set of friends were the people to follow, always with the best in fashion and best parties: "Oh, Judy—as if anyone were ever bored at Bellomont" (Wharton, 45). Unfortunately certain things were expected of those who attended the parties at Bellomont; there was no free ride into the realm of the wealthy class.

Fancy clothes and nice jewelry were just the beginning of the necessary items. One of the other expectations was to play bridge for money with the Trenors and their myriad of guests, “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 and for the dresses and trinkets which occasionally replenished her insufficient wardrobe.” (Wharton, 28). At first Lily knows all too well that she is too poor to take part in the gambling and refrains from doing so. But the pressure to keep her place with the popular group of people finally breaks her and she becomes too wrapped-up in gambling, and as a result loses what little money she has been able to gain. Even though Lily is aware that she does not have the means to keep company with these people, she risks everything she has just to please them. The people that she finds friendship with are more inclined to the “freedom” of women playing cards for money and smoking, but at the same time they are suffocating for Lily because she becomes trapped in a world that she cannot get out of; as mentioned in Carol Miller's essay “Natural Magic: Irony as Unifying Strategy in 'The House of Mirth'”: “The social atmosphere Lily moves in is also airless—a vacuum where freedom and natural impulse are suffocated by cynicism and calculation, as stifling to Lily's better self as ever Esther Greenwood's bell jar will be to hers several generations later” (Miller, 87). Lily seems unable to separate herself from the society that she has worked so hard to get into.

Another critic of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Anne Benert, also discusses this in her book “Raised to be rich and now quite poor, without reliable ties to family or friends, Lily becomes indeed the victim of this highly specular, and acidly articulate, society.” (Benert, 113). Lily becomes so absorbed with making the right impression on people and doing what they expect of her that she loses herself, and her money, in the attempt. And as author of “The Art and Architecture of the Self: Designing the ‘I’-Witness in Edith Wharton’s the ‘House of Mirth’”, Gary Totten, points out this is quite the issue. He refers to the scene of the *tableaux vivants* when Selden claims to see “the whole tragedy

of her life.” (142): “He recognizes that because Lily seems to require an interpretive frame that is inherently impossible for her to occupy, she is forced to exist in a society that forever misreads her” (Totten, 80). Lily tries to make the right impressions on people, and yet they constantly misunderstand her or manipulate her to suit their needs. Yeazell comments on the women in the novel and their constant need to make certain impressions, “It is they who produce the ‘impressions’ by which social ascent is finally measured—as Lily implicitly recognizes when she regrets not having purchased Rosedale’s silence after their awkward encounter by allowing herself to be seen with him at the train station” (Yeazell, 718-719). The slightest misstep or wrong impression could ruin everything for Lily.

Even the people who consider themselves her friends are not supportive of her and expect her to do things like play bridge even though they know for a fact that she should not. “Yet Lily's 'friends' ultimately care more for money than they do for her welfare. Carry Fisher, although one of the most sympathetic of Lily's female friends, must continue to 'fish' not for husbands for her friend but for money and connections for herself and her daughter” (McManus, 98). Lily risks money and self-respect by feeding into the demands of the social group she wishes to be a part of. Rather than making her own way and finding happiness on her own terms, she allows other people to dictate what she should do in her life. And in doing this Lily struggles to find a common ground between the demands of the overall group and her own personal contentment. Roslyn Dixon agrees in her article “Reflecting Vision in *The House of Mirth*”, But Wharton clearly sees the limitations for the individual who accepts the conventional beliefs of the human community, especially in relation to the struggle for personal fulfillment” (Dixon, 212). Wharton is showing us here that people would much rather join a social group that is already well-known and established instead of trying to find their own way. People tend to be followers and as a result will at least try to sacrifice everything for the whims of the group, even if it does hinder their own desires and needs as a person.

Sadly her friends are not the only people that Lily must impress to make her way through the world and to keep what she still has going on the right path. Her Aunt Peniston also plays a major part in her life. When Lily's mother finally died and left Lily with nothing, Mrs. Peniston took her in and brought her up, in a sense: "Beyond this, Mrs. Peniston had not felt called upon to do anything for her charge: she had simply stood aside and let her take the field" (Wharton, 40). Regardless of this lack of interest in Lily's affairs, Mrs. Peniston still expected Lily to uphold all of her moral values. Roslyn Dixon defines Mrs. Peniston and the reasons for why she treats Lily the way she does: "Aunt Peniston's appearance of moral rectitude overshadows genuine compassion. She is dedicated to empty ritual and more platitudes, a 'looker-on at life' who has never tested the beliefs she advocates" (Dixon, 216). Aunt Peniston feels that a lady should simply follow the moral code without ever stepping outside of it no matter what the consequences may be. Wai-Chee Dimock has something to say about Mrs. Peniston as well in her essay. Her definition of Lily's Aunt is much like Dixon's: "Both her generosity and forbearance have limits, which Lily exceeds. Mrs. Peniston has not bargained for the troubles Lily gets into, and she 'recognize[s] no obligation' to help (72). But she is quick to detect any breach of contract on Lily's side and to retaliate accordingly" (Dimock, 785). Because of her own short-comings Aunt Peniston ultimately fails to understand that Lily is being torn in two very different directions and could possibly need a little understanding from the woman who helped raise her. The reader knows though that while her friends were demanding that she smoke and gamble, her aunt desired that she act tirelessly like a lady and never waver from morals. This makes it easier for us to really grasp what Lily is going through because we have the whole story. Aunt Peniston's flagrant disregard of Lily's situation is portrayed during Lily's argument with her aunt about her debts acquired from gambling, "I shall certainly not do anything to give the impression that I countenance your behaviour" (Wharton, 182). Lily has reached a difficult part of the plot, who she should follow, friends or her benefactor?

The right thing to do would have been to cut off her ties with her old friends until she could get the inheritance from her aunt. Instead she grows infuriated with her aunt and uses excuses in an attempt to convince Mrs. Peniston to see her way, “You're hard on me, Aunt Julia: I have never really cared for cards, but a girl hates to be priggish and superior, and one drifts into doing what the others do. I've had a dreadful lesson, and if you'll help me out this time I promise you—” (Wharton, 182). Wharton is showing us that people tend to want an easy way out of their problems rather than to solve the problems themselves. When Mrs. Peniston refuses to support Lily's gambling habit and therefore give others the idea that she approves of her behavior, Lily responds like a selfish child. She stomps off to her room and sulks (Wharton, 182). Lily seems to act as though she has no control over her own actions and therefore needs constant assistance from others. This could have something to do with Lily's tendency to act like a child and the fact that she referred to herself as a “girl” even though she is really a twenty-nine year old woman. It is as though Lily still thinks of herself as a child because she is unmarried and has never been forced to deal with the realities of being an adult. Her mother convinced her that beauty would solve all her problems. Men fawn over her and give her money and even her strict aunt let her do anything she wanted when she was younger. Lily has no sense that she is actually an adult because she has been pandered to her whole life. And as a result she acts immature and cannot take responsibility for her own future.

According to William E. Modellmog, this may actually be a result of Lily's lack of ability to really possess herself. In his essay “Disowning ‘Personality’: Privacy and Subjectivity in *The House of Mirth*” he argues that because Lily is unmarried, she is therefore not in possession of herself: “Possessing a seal of domestic virtue that mere suspicions cannot undo, their status renders them as impervious to ‘talk’...” (Moddelmog, 346). Lily's status as single makes her susceptible to other people's manipulations and as a result she cannot really exist successfully. Modellmog also makes note of her dealings with Mrs. Peniston: “Her eventual disinheritance by Mrs. Peniston acts as a metaphor



for the unpropertied condition in which she finds herself throughout the novel” (346). The fault is certainly not all on Mrs. Peniston for not being understanding that Lily made a mistake, or on Lily’s marital status, it also falls heavily on Lily for not knowing when to stop. Wharton shows us a character who has become so involved with money and social aspects of life that she is no longer able to sensibly pull herself from the rubble. Lily expects that she will be able to float through life with her aunt’s money until she can secure a proper husband. Rather than dealing with the issues as she should, she ignores them entirely for long bouts of time. This is best portrayed when a note comes from Bertha Dorsett asking Lily to go to Europe with her. Lily rushes off against her aunt’s wishes and avoids her debts even more. She knows that it would be better to stay in the city and save up money to pay back the dress maker and her gambling debts, but she goes on the trip anyway. Yet again she risks everything in order to do what she thinks will best promote her status within the wealthy set. Wharton shows the reader quite clearly that popularity and status can win out over basic common sense.

Regardless of her several sacrifices and constant work at making the right impression on the right people, Lily does make mistakes that follow her until her eventual demise at the end of the novel. This concept is best put into words by Ruth Yeazell: “...her slightest deviation from propriety seems guaranteed to turn the anonymous streets of the modern city into the oppressively close byways of an inquisitive small town” (714). She mentions it again later in the essay: “...the New York of this novel is terrifyingly limited—a world so narrow and intimate that Lily can scarcely take a step without encountering someone she knows” (721). It seems that one of the downfalls of knowing everyone in the wealthy set, is that they know you as well. That provides numerous opportunities for Lily to be seen doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. Dixon states: “Wharton believed that the individual exists only in relation to a complex and demanding social structure, one that allows little variance from convention” (Dixon, 211). And this makes a lot of sense for Lily. By allowing herself to be perceived incorrectly or lied about, her existence becomes extremely difficult to continue. The first mistake seems

harmless enough. At the beginning of the novel Lily makes the decision to go to Selden's apartment with him, alone. And in Lily's time meeting alone with a man in his dwelling was seriously frowned upon. While leaving, she runs into Rosedale, an upstart who is also trying to work his way into the wealthy class. He asks to escort her to the train station, but Lily refuses and goes on her way. The best thing would have been to allow herself to be seen with Rosedale in order to ensure that he does not mention her going to Selden's apartment.

The next mistake comes when Lily chooses spending time with Lawrence Selden, rather than making sure that Percy was still in her grasp. Bertha is enraged that Selden is spending time with Lily rather than with her and makes her move to start the process of ruining Lily. Judy Trenor says: "I told you Bertha was dangerous. She was in an odious mood when she came here, but Lawrence's showing up put her in a good humour, and if you'd let her think he came for her it would have never occurred to her to play you this trick' " (Wharton, 78). Lily let her whims carry her away from her duties and left an open opportunity for lies to be spread about her. Her moments of clarity in understanding that what she was after cloud her reasoning, especially at first. Lily does not realize that she cannot have the materialistic world while retaining the values of Selden's republic. The people around her will not allow that to happen. It becomes apparent to the reader that she may have to sacrifice one for the other. For instance, had she been doing what she was supposed to and heeding the many warnings that Judy Trenor gave her, she could have easily married Percy; or at the very least kept her good name.

As the novel progresses Lily's transgressions grow more and more serious. As previously mentioned Lily gets caught up in Gus Trenor's machinations and loses the chance to marry Selden. But the most detrimental to her social standing comes after that while Lily is in the Mediterranean with The Dorsets. We learn from Carry Fisher that Bertha has ulterior motives for asking Lily to join her on the yacht: "We all know that's what Bertha brought her abroad for. When Bertha wants to have a good time she has to provide occupation for George' " (Wharton, 196). But Bertha is not content with simply

getting away from her husband to “have a good time” with Ned Silverton. She has become jealous, once again, of Lily’s abilities to garner attention and is torn between keeping Lily on board to distract her husband and throwing her off the boat to remove any competition. We see that yet again Lily has been put in an unfortunate situation by her own careless actions. Eventually, though, the tension breaks and Lily is completely destroyed in one brief moment. “ ‘Mrs. Bart is not going back to the yacht,’ she said in a voice of singular distinctness’ ” (Wharton, 227). This one instance of insult rips Lily out of a status she had gained and leaves Bertha the chance to inform everyone, incorrectly, that Lily has been having an affair with George Dorset. Joan Lidoff makes a comparison between Lily being seen with Gus Trenor and Bertha’s eventual decision to stage an affair between Lily and her husband: “In both, by a series of thin coincidences of bad luck and bad timing, Lily is observed in what seem to be sexually compromising situations. Her reputation is polluted; the resulting social ostracism indirectly causes her death.” (Lidoff, 536). By the time Lily arrives back in the states, her reputation is already ruined and she must try to salvage what is left of her life. She knows better than to try and make people see the truth, though, as talked about by Carol Sabora: “Lily knows that in her society 'the truth about any girl is that once she is talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks' ” (Sabora, 384). By even mentioning the transgression Lily would have seemed all the more guilty.

Bertha’s lies are not the last of Lily’s problems, though: “Well before Bertha Dorset accuses Lily of having been ‘so conspicuously’ alone with George Dorset late at night in Monte Carlo (207), Grace Stepney begins to alienate Mrs. Peniston from her niece by passing rumors that have been circulating about the latter’s relation to Gus Trenor” (Yeazell, 728). Her cousin has her eyes on the money that Lily is due to inherit and will stop at nothing to get it. At first Grace Stepney makes it seem as though she was only helping Mrs. Peniston out of love for the old woman while Lily was out in the Mediterranean. And when she is named as the main heir to Mrs. Peniston's estate she cries out: “There

was a subdued gasp of surprise, a rapid turning of heads, and a surging of sable figures toward the corner of the in which Miss Stepney wailed out her sense of unworthiness through the crumpled ball of a black-edged handkerchief” (Wharton, 233). Grace is playing it cool at this point in time, making the relatives see what a helpful cousin she has been to Mrs. Peniston and what a bad seed Lily has become.

It seems that while Lily was away Grace had been making herself very cozy with Mrs. Peniston. We learn that she had even been helping her put all of her affairs in order and went over every towel with her “the very day—” (232). But she has a very different way of acting when she alone with Lily. Lily goes to her cousin to ask for the measly ten thousand that she has inherited in advance and Grace cites the rumours that have mysteriously reached Aunt Peniston's ears:

Oh, I don't know the particulars of course—I don't *want* to know them—but there were rumours about your affairs that made her most unhappy—no one could be with her without seeing that. I can't help it if you are offended by my telling you this now—if I can do anything to make you realize the folly of your course, and how deeply *she* disapproved of it, I shall feel it is the truest way of making up to you for her loss. (Wharton, 241).

Wharton's italicizing of “she” shows the emphasis that Grace put on the word during her lengthy speech. This makes the reader wonder what the aim of this was. It is very probable that Wharton did this to portray Grace's character. By putting so much emphasis on Mrs. Peniston's displeasure and then telling Lily that she must keep to Mrs. Peniston's wishes, we can ascertain that she certainly had something to do with the rumors that were spread. Wharton also uses this character to show the opposite side of Lily's nature. Grace has no problem ruining other people and doing everything in her power to get what she wants. She destroys her own family member for her own means. She may not have sacrificed her personal happiness, but a family member is still a huge thing to give up in pursuit of monetary stability. Lily could not even make the smallest sacrifice to ensure her continued good

standing with Mrs. Peniston. If Lily had stayed at home she would have stayed out of Bertha Dorset's trap and may have been able to keep her four hundred thousand dollar inheritance. Lily's tendency to make snap decisions coincides with her other childish behavior mentioned earlier in the paper. If she had used sense, Lily would have known that she was making the wrong choice if only because Mrs. Peniston disapproved of her travels. She would have been able to try to make amends with her aunt and shown her that she was truly sorry for her actions. Instead she ran away from her current problems and only made even more for herself.

As much as Lily would have like to have been able to continue avoiding her problems, they eventually catch up with her. And as a result, she pays the price of death. Many critics have analyzed the meaning behind Lily's sudden death at the end of the novel. One of the main concerns is whether the death was accidental or suicidal as Shari Benstock wonders: "But was Lily's death suicide or an accident? Did she at last take her life in her own hands, if only to end it? We desire to know her intentions, but the author withholds the crucial piece of information, thus clouding the death in mystery" (134). Lily manner of death is what creates the general mystery surrounding the end of the novel. She takes the sleeping medication and "she lay very still, waiting with a sensuous pleasure for the first effects of the sopoforic" (Wharton, 340). Lily wants to forget and be able to slip quietly into the comfort of sleep. By referring to the sopoforic affects of the sleeping pills in a sensual way Wharton suggests that Lily is very welcoming of what they will do for her. Once they take affect, a sense of calm comes over her: "She saw now that there was nothing to be excited about—she had returned to her normal view of life" (340). But the questions remains: does she really want death? She refers to "having the strength to meet it [tomorrow]" (340) and she momentarily struggles against the overwhelming sleep before giving in to its pressure. Does this mean that she still saw herself as living to meet her problems tomorrow? Or did she mean to meet tomorrow in her death?

Judging the situation that Wharton creates, I feel that some part of Lily wanted to succumb to the eternal sleep. During her last visit with Selden she tells him: "Let us always be friends. Then I shall feel safe whatever happens" (Wharton, 126). It is as though she is hinting to him that she wants to clear everything up between them before she dies. The same goes for her decision to up the dose of her sleeping drops to a lethal amount. Her brief instances of resisting the medication only come about when she begins to worry about life again, "...but even this feeling was gradually lost in an indistinct sense of drowsy peace, through which, of a sudden, a dark flash of loneliness and terror tore its way" (Wharton, 341). Panic only ensues when Lily feels the gripping fear of being broke and alone in the world. Once she is able to get over the fear, she is able to calmly slip into death. While her death is most arguably a suicide, I do not think that it was Lily giving up on her life. She is merely accepting that there is no way that she can feasibly continue to exist. Both worlds, the materialistic and Selden's republic, have rejected her and the last place for her to go is into death.

Regardless of whether the death was a suicide or not, it still seems to have been inevitable. We have to wonder what it was that actually led to Lily's death? In my mind, Carol Miller puts it best: "She is brought down by the internalized conflict between the real and the ideal, between fate and freedom, and by the confusion these contraries engender in her about how to live" (84). Lily ends up so torn between what she should want and what she really wants that she is driven to her death. In a sense there was no way that Lily could have kept living because of this separation within herself. She is incapable of choosing one of the paths set before her and society dictates that she is not allowed to have both and still survive: "But Lily is murdered one way or the other. In point of fact, it *is* one particular set of laws that condemns and destroys Lily, which is the inevitable result of her trying to step outside it" (Restuccia, 238). The society that Wharton creates in her novel does not allow for deviants from the norm. A person is wealthy and popular, or she is poor and relatively unknown. Lily knows that she does not truly want the unhappy life of a rich man's wife, but she is unable to really give herself over to the

idea of Selden's non-materialistic republic. So with no other options left she must die. James Gargano's "The House of Mirth: Social Futility and Faith" views her demise as a good thing: "What might appear to be the tragic consequence of a misguided life is suddenly transformed into self-fulfillment" (138). In some ways I have to disagree with Gargano's comment. Lily's death is certainly the product of a problematic life. If Lily had chosen between one of the paths laid before her, she would have at least lived. Even if she had not chosen a path immediately and she *had* been able to refrain from taking part in things that her aunt saw as being unladylike, she could have kept her inheritance and thus continued living. And the list goes on. Lily's fate could have easily been diverted away from a sudden death but, due to her nature, Lily leaves herself with very few options.

At the very end we get a glimpse into Lawrence Selden's mind: "He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences that which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically" (Wharton, 347). Wharton wants the reader to understand that a person is not just one thing or another. By focusing in on one aspect of life too directly, people can really complicate things for themselves. Lawrence is too judgmental of those who do not share his same set of ideals; therefore he is unable to really love unconditionally. Mrs. Peniston is too focused on being proper and fails to recognize that her niece needs help. Grace is too blinded by money; and as a result she relinquishes the bond of family. Our very nature is to change constantly, rather than to simply stay stagnant. But the opposite can cause troubles as well. Lily tries to be too many things for too many people. And in spreading herself thin, she loses all control of herself and her life. She no longer has a say in what people think of her or how she can be manipulated. Life is all a matter of creating balance and coming to terms with the fact that the most convenient things may not make us the happiest.