CHAPTER-II

MIRTH LOST AND FOUND:

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH
Superbly written naturalism. The words fit together in sentences like gemstones in a jewelry setting.

Tyler, Good reads librarian

The House of Mirth is first published in 1905 and fourth of Edith Wharton’s novels. The novel is written when she was living in Lenox, Massachusetts. 1890’s New York upper class society forms the back drop for the novel. The title is derived from the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible chapter 7:4 which read as: “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” Though the novel was originally titled A Moments Ornament, later changed into The House of Mirth.

The age between 1876 and 1900 in America is called the America’s gilded age. The rich got richer and the poor, poorer. There was immense expansion of industries, progress in stock market business and great cities such as New York are inhabited by millionaires. Along with there lived immigrant families in ordinary homes. This is the environment in which the whole plot of the novel is set. Edith Wharton knew that upper class society as her family is part of it. She is familiar with the politics of that society and knew how cruel it can be. Her intention in the novel is to satirize this society and show the tragic suffering it inflicts to the people involved in it.

Wharton represents in the novel the struggle between Victorian Age conventions and the new values at the turn of the century in America. A woman’s role in society starts to take a new shape that is no longer limited to domestic life. Wharton’s transitional fiction is “characterized by unhappy endings, as novelists
struggled with the problem of going beyond the allowable limits and breaking through the available histories and stories for women.” (Elaine Showalter 6)

Wharton in the novel shows how women fit into the societies through their evolving feminine consciousness. The way of living of women is controlled by social constraints; some of them exhibit sufficient strength to reject the customs, while others are destroyed by their society.

As fiction about the early twentieth century’s, THM portrays a limited world of gender discrimination, the social power of a materialistic society, maternal authority and old conventions, all of which contribute to shape a woman’s living in New York society. In this novel, Wharton depicts two categories of women: unconventional woman like Lily Bart and conventional women such as Grace Stepney, and Nettie Struther. These three women personify the female figure between old tradition and the new values of the twentieth century. Lily Bart risks the limitations of being a woman and follows her desires and needs. Lily shows strength and ability to resist the conventional power of the American society. There are moments of her life when she demonstrates female power and challenges her gender roles. In other situations, her feminine power is inadequate and she returns to the fold of her own sex.

Except Nettie, Grace and Lily are attached to the society’s conventions and they are unwilling to be separated from it. Otherwise, they will lose stability in their social identities. Nettie Struther stands halfway between these two categories of women. She is the conventional woman of New York’s lower class. She is an ideal labourer and a mother and a homemaker in a satisfied loving relationship, in comparison with the upper-class protagonist Lily, as she stands helpless in the field
of work. She lacks comfort in getting married since upper-class marriages stressed so strongly the social position and material worth of the individual. In American society, upper class women are described as:

It is here that the economic dependence of women is carried to its extreme. The daughters and wives of the rich fail to perform even the domestic service expected of the women of poorer families. They are from birth to death absolutely non-productive in goods or labor of economic value, and consumers of such goods and labor to an extent limited only by the purchasing power of their male relatives. (Gilman Charlotte Perkins 170)

The protagonist in this novel explores the limitations of women’s place in this society and the sad inadequacy of marriage as a vehicle for their personal happiness. Wharton does not offer alternatives to Lily’s quest for marriage and for Grace’s gloomy status as an old maid. The unresolved lives Wharton portrays reveal her contradictory views of a woman’s position in society. As she did in her own life, Wharton’s protagonist endures complication and unhappiness in her life by her socially dictated choices. Wharton herself endured an unhappy marriage for twenty-five years before she decided to sue her husband and take a step towards a more satisfying life. Her protagonist Lily, is also hesitant character. Lily’s mood changes frequently in the novel. She is usually at one extreme or another- freedom or slavery. It is interesting to note that both states are based on her financial status. When she has money, she feels wholly free, but whenever she is burdened by debt she feels enslaved. Lily compares herself to the maid who works for her that the
maid is not a slave to debt, clothing and gambling like herself. The theme of freedom versus slavery continues through the novel as Lily troubles to pay her debt to Gus Trenor. Edith Wharton portrays some of the ironies of the society mostly related to money. It is Lily who needs money and who has to marry a rich man like Gryce. Instead Gryce marries Evie, a woman who is already extraordinarily rich and has no need for money. It is also ironic that though Lily and Selden love one another, Lily feels that she cannot marry him because he has no money.

Wharton depicts her female characters in a complicated social environment and in a critical historical period. Gender discrimination, financial inequity between the sexes, and sexual incompatibility between the marriage partners yield moral corruption and throw fear and anxiety into relationship between men and women. This conflict in gender roles reflect Wharton’s conflicted mind about the issues of women— like their life being contradictory and confusing.

Katherine Joslin writes in Edith Wharton about the social group in THM “stresses the bonds put upon the individual.” Joslin also believes that Wharton’s heroines “struggle to find an acceptable, secure place within their social order.” They even seek a symbolic “home in order to define their sense of self.” (36) One of the interesting questions that Wharton’s women in THM ask is, “What shall I be? Marriage is society’s vocation for Lily Bart rather than her own choice. Lily sounds hesitant regarding marriage. She assures Lawrence Selden that people say she “‘ought to marry’” because “‘What else is there?’” (10) Lily’s choices are limited by her society’s conventions. Grace Stepney sees her only future in the “servitude” (67) of others. Old maids like her have limited roles in society. Thus, she seeks her family’s protection and works hard to amuse people like Mrs.
Peniston. Nettie Struther is a persistent woman who benefits from Lily Bart’s charitable help and becomes “alive with hope and energy: whatever fate the future reserved for her, she would not be cast into the refuse-heap without a struggle.” (193) Nettie represents Wharton’s new woman who can renovate herself in hardships.

Edith Wharton in THM explores the constraints that New York upper-class life places on the lives of women at the turn of the century. Wharton shows how materialism and society’s conventions are made to be more important than the emotions like love. She presents New York of the 1870s as the “Old New York,” with all the life-defeating narrowness of the New Yorkers’ mentality, especially for the upper class. The New York upper crust limits a woman’s role by its materialistic values and the power of the patriarchy. This social setting destroys a woman’s freedom because it chains her within the social conditioning of man’s patriarchal authority.

By studying Edith Wharton’s women in THM it is identified that their needs are not very different from the needs of women today. They differ in circumstances, but not in motives and demands. For them and for contemporary women, it is important to find a suitable way of living. Their lives depend on their social status. For example, Lily Bart seeks two things in marriage, money and love. It is proved that both cannot be attained. This is a very complicated issue because Lily connects passion to money. With money she can buy material things, but not love. Nettie Struther, on the other hand, seeks love in marriage. Unlike these women, Grace Stepney seeks the love of her family. Edith Wharton’s portrayal of
these women sheds light on how women around the turn of the twentieth century are torn between human desires, social obligations, and material wants and needs.

Wharton presents Lily’s struggles to have her desires satisfied. Lily Bart as a woman, has ethical principles, unsure as she is of them, and who pays a high price for her principles. Wharton’s discussion of women lingers between their values and their desires carries special credibility in the society.

Lily is born in an aristocratic family of Old New York. Her parents are ruined though they are wealthy in the beginning. They die without leaving any riches to Lily. So it is a story of Lily who wants to marry a rich person along with social power. She craves to maintain her aristocratic rootedness and at the same time is in search of a union that provides modern feelings and awareness. This attitude of Lily is acknowledged in the novel: “Lily’s preference would have been for an English nobleman with political ambitions and vast estates; or, for second choice, an Italian prince with a castle in the Apennines and a hereditary office in the Vatican.” She wants a husband “to arrange her life as she pleased, to soar into that empyrean of security” and “the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste.” (26) In short, Lily wants “the house not built with the hands but made up of inherited passions and loyalties.” (196)

Lily begins her search for a wealthy and self-defined husband. She starts mingling with a group of wealthy people in New York. She often leaves her aunt Pension’s house, as she feels it as a gloomy cage. Julia Peniston, Lily’s guardian, is the widowed sister of Lily’s father. Mrs. Peniston always prefers women with
morals and is also strict in behavioural codes of women. Lily is from the leisure class of Old New Yorkers who have always “lived well, dressed expensively, and done little else.” (28) However Wharton clearly shows in the novel that these leisure class people are also emancipating and becoming a part of the twentieth century city people with busy lives.

Lily spends much of her time staying at the Bellmont, outside the town estate of the wealthy Gus and Judy Trenor. There Judy Trenor throws extravagant parties regularly where the New York upper crust attended. They gamble for money, which Lily cannot resist as she is addicted to it though it ruins her financially. Lily’s two main preoccupations marriage and wealth makes her invest in the stock market at Bellmont. Gus Trenor, secretly attracted to Lily readily agrees to invest her money as her investments pay off and begins to spend lavishly. Later, when Trenor tries to proposition her, she learns that he has not been investing her money but giving her his profits. He proposes to Lily that she may pay him back what all she has spent by spending time with him but Lily quickly with draws his presence and resolves to repay him although she doesn’t know how to.

Shari Benstock comments that American’s pleasure and entertainment lies in “gambling, drinking, stock market speculation, and extra-marital affairs.” (311) This American attitude is reflected even in the character of Lily. But Mrs. Peniston dislikes American ways of pleasure as she is from old aristocratic family background. As a result of choosing American modern indulgence, she is not at all supported by her aunt.
Being deep-rooted to the American way of living, Lily prefers to act upon gender role prescribed for women. Moreover, she considers wealthy marriage as the primary goal of a woman’s existence. She craves for a husband who can consider her act of spend-thrift as the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on is her ‘vocation.’ She confirms this desire to Lawrence Selden: “A girl must marry to escape the horrors of a dingy life, a man may if he chooses.” (12)

Twenty-nine-year-old Lily left with either husband or money, after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing, Lily is unable to catch a husband. She realizes that if she marries only for riches and social position she will get only “dull and ugly people” like Percy Gryce, George Dorset and Simon Rosedale. These men are narrow-minded, self-centered, and conventional.

Lily Bart longs to have a secure life. Her continuous search of herself in the mirror reveals her doubt and hesitation about what she is in New York society. Lily keeps “studying herself in the mirror.” (12) The mirror to her is a means to assert that her beauty has not yet faded. Her life is tied up to material concerns as her beauty is connected to the mirror. This relationship with the mirror shows Lily’s weak confidence in what she has. Lily is economically dependent; she relies on her beauty to sell herself in the New York marriage market. If her beauty fades, then her marriage options will fade too and she won’t achieve a secure life. Lily’s closeness to the mirror reveals her loneliness in New York society. Lily does not ask people to assure her that her beauty is still glowing. She seeks for the answer in her mirror. The mirror reflects sharpness, purity, and clarity, unlike people who commit errors. Appearance is important to Lily because she herself has become a product in the marriage market. Beauty and money are the things that Lily trusts
most in life because they are her means to have a good social and economic position. Joslin notes how women’s economic dependence forces them “to use the power of sex—to become Lover-sexed”—in order to appeal to men, to prey on their sexual appetites and thus gain their financial support.” (56) Similarly, Lily tries to use the power of her beauty to marry well and to find a refuge in society.

Kathy A. Fedorko writes that “a woman’s search for a home is a search for a way of being in society.” (21) Lily Bart struggles to have a better social life. Lily’s position in society is unprotected. She suffers from her family’s bankruptcy and her own twenty-nine years of age. A woman of her status is unprotected until she finds a suitable way of living. Lily is aware that a woman like her must marry in order to avoid becoming a heavy burden on her family. Lily knows that her position in society needs man’s shelter in order to be a recognized woman. New York society considers marriage as a girl’s vocation, as one of its elites, Mr. Ned Van Alstyne, says:

‘When a girl’s as good-looking as that she’d better marry; then no questions are asked. In our imperfectly organized society there is no provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations.’ (157)

From the beginning of the novel, it is interesting to see what Lily might do in order to become a recognized woman in her society. She appears interested in Lawrence Selden, but at the same time she admits he is an unsuitable match. To her understanding and according to the way she is raised, the man she marries should be rich. A beautiful woman who descends from a rich family requires a rich
husband. This is one of the ideas that Lily inherits from her mother. To Lily, marrying a rich man is the way to regain luxury. However, to get it she must expose her beauty. Lily “would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich: she was secretly ashamed of her mother’s crude passion for money.” (26) Despite the fact that Lily likes Selden, she hides her feelings from him since neither of them is rich. She thinks their match will not succeed, for she considers herself an “expensive” woman. Hence, the man she will marry has to be wealthy.

Lily Bart as a lonely woman is in need of a friend. Living with her aunt, who “is full of copy-book axioms,” (10) has widened her sense of loneliness and her need for a friend who understands her way of thinking. As she says, flirting with Lawrence Selden, a friend is a person “‘who won’t be afraid to say disagreeable ones when I need them.’” (9) Lily thinks that Selden might be a good friend since she “‘shouldn’t have to pretend with him or be on her guard against him.’” With Selden, Lily feels that she can speak frankly about her private life, or at least so she tells him. Lily needs a man’s analysis to verify her social existence; about her female friends, she says that they either “‘use me or abuse me.’” Lily shows a child’s fear in her insistence to Selden on “how much I need such a friend.” (10) Lily thinks that Selden, unlike other men, is a man of knowledge, for he assures her that he reads ‘good editions’ of books. Because of this Lily believes that she can trust his ideas and takes them into consideration. To her, this man can offer her good advice about her life. Lily believes that Selden’s evaluation of her will be rational since he “‘can’t possibly think I want to marry you.’” (9) Lily assumes that their friendship will be successful because it is built on liking and honesty.
With Selden, Lily does not get bored. She is frank to ask him what she wants and it is pleasant for him to sit and watch her talk. It is very important for Lily at this point to have a friend and not a lover and that is what she insists on: “what I want is a friend.” (9) Lily can have other men who can tell her nice things and who can offer her the most expensive things. But what Lily’s inner self really needs is to be the real Lily and not the one that lives up to social appearances. “Lily puts appearances aside when she is with Selden. She concentrates more on mental and social issues like how “‘a girl must marry a man may if he chooses.’” Lily grows mentally and emotionally with Selden. With him she can speak out loud about critical matters, such as a woman’s position in society. Lily cannot really have such discussions with other men. Selden, for instance, inquires about the various men she might marry. Through their discussion, all he admires is how beautiful she is. Lily, on the other hand, is worried about the troubles that a woman like her face such as dressing well to provide ‘the frame’ to attract men to date her. Lily and Selden think differently; he admires her beauty whereas she is worried about the frame for her beauty. Lily finds herself torn between the real Lily and her materialistic appearance. Clothes become the background of Lily’s identity. Without her clothes, Lily loses her identity just as she has none without the objective of marriage. It is in light of this situation, Lily tells Selden about her real motives for attending big parties. To Lily, attending those parties “‘is part of the business’” (12) in order to seduce a good future husband.

Lily looks at Selden as superior because of the social freedom he has. The contrast she draws between their sexual identities will reshape their relationship later on. From the beginning, Wharton portrays Lily as a weak woman who seeks
male’s positive evaluation. Selden, on the other hand, shows a man’s assertiveness when Lily gives him the opportunity to practice his judge-like role. Lawrence Selden’s psychological influence on Lily’s life affects her future choices. Selden encourages Lily to use her talents to convert “impulses into intentions.” in order to succeed in life. To Lily success is a tiresome process and unreachable. But Selden draws her attention to the real meaning of success. To him, it is freedom from ‘worries’, ‘from money’, and ‘from poverty.’ (46) It is what he calls a ‘republic of the spirit that leads to success’. Lily starts to see herself as part of his ‘republic’. Selden enjoys the spontaneity of her liking him. Yet, he insists that she cannot be in his ‘republic.’

Selden believes that Lily is obsessed with money without trying to think of how she can make her own money. Selden sees in Lily the capacity to shape her life in a successful way if she knows how to use her talents. Selden does not want Lily to think too much about luxury. He advises her not to take rich people as an example to follow. Selden assures Lily that if she marries a rich man, she will become rich and it would be hard for her to join his idea of a republic as it is “hard for rich people to get into as the kingdom of heaven”. Selden appears sure of himself and of his republic. He assures Lily that “there are not many married people’” (47) in his republic. Selden hints to Lily that if she marries she will lose the privilege of becoming a member. He tries to influence Lily to think that he and his republic based on his ideas are something special. On the other hand, Selden makes Lily think that marriage minimizes her chances of success. Indirectly, Selden tries to play on Lily’s feelings. He is mixed up between his role as a friend and his masculine weakness towards her beauty. Selden’s egoism rises; he wants to feel
that Lily wants him. In spite of this, he makes it clear to Lily that he and his republic cannot be easily attained. Lily dislikes the idea and feels herself torn between her love for money and his republic. She condemns his republic because “he creates arbitrary objections in order to keep people out”. Lily assures Selden that “Money stands for all kinds of things,” (48) and if she has it she will make good use of it. Lily tries to prove to Selden that she has good ambitions. Unfortunately, Lily’s good ideas are shuttered down by Selden’s doubting words: “I’m not divine Providence, to guarantee your enjoying the things you are trying to get!” (49) Selden’s sexuality contradicts his ‘freedom of the spirit’ because there is no presence for such a freedom except in heaven. Selden’s ‘freedom of the spirit’ is divine and hence, it does not require earthly people like him.

The roles of men and women in New York society are described in the novel. Men are always busy in earning riches to secure their status in the society. Women’s duty is consuming the high quality products which serve as the symbols of their husband’s prosperity rather than providing pleasant atmosphere for their husbands. Affectionate relationships among the women community is hardly seen in American society. New York patriarchal system is designed to “keep women in divisive and relentless competition” for a few prestigious positions controlled by men:

Forbidden to aggress on each other directly, or aggress on men at all, women prey on each other—stealing reputations, opportunities, male admirers—all to parlay or retain status and financial security in a world arranged by men to keep women suppliant and therefore subordinate. (Showalter 140)
It is understood that patriarchy has suppressed feminine values of emotions, relatedness, and consciousness out of the culture in New York society. In this connection, Lily explains her status as a woman in patriarchal New York society: “I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, when one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time.” (35) Lily is not at all satisfied with this American mannerism in which true relationships are absent. Thomas Loebel provides an exact place of women in the society that clearly reflects the life of Lily Bart.

Women are engendered for marriage and the whole construction of gendered identity is about teaching women how to shape and deploy their physical assets for attraction and their public personae for promoting men, while shoring up the blinders of consciousness necessary for believing that they are powerfully acting out self-directed behavior (111)

Lily’s early days at home and the ways she was brought up have effect on her character and she is moulded in a different way. Lily always recollects her childhood and her parents place just as a place of shelter rather than a place filled with love and affection. Lily always used to find her father, Hudson Bart, busy in making money to support her mother’s luxurious desires. Mrs. Bart aspires for artistic effects, including Lily’s beauty, since she considers them as the emblems of the family’s financial ranking. Her mother is always indulged in taking care of Lily’s beauty. She views that Lily’s beauty will bring a prosperous husband to her: “the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be
rebuilt.” (30) Even she teaches Lily to maintain her self-respect by getting a rich husband.

To maintain her self-respect, Lily works with all possible effort to retain a sense of her splendid background. Whenever she wants to know how she feels, she looks into a mirror to find out. When the mirror provides a pleasant message, life seems good to Lily. Because she has moulded herself into a decorative object, the reactions of others are the only mirrors in which she can see herself.

For instance when Selden reacts angrily to her encounter with Trenor by going abroad, “She rose, and walking across the floor stood gazing at herself for a long time in the brightly-lit mirror above the mantelpiece. The lines in her face came out terribly—she looked old; and when a girl looks old to herself, how does she look to other people?” (113) This incident is an evidence of Lily’s self-reflection in Selden’s reaction as Selden becomes a mirror and she solely depends upon his opinion. As a result, she becomes disgusted and develops self-hatred.

Lily learns the possibilities of living alone from Selden. She wants to remain as a spinster at the same time thinks about the disadvantages of spinster’s life since she knows it through her child-hood friend, and Selden’s cousin, Gerty Farish, who is a social worker. In spite of living on her own Gerty likes to be good. Lily is scared of dinginess that she observes in Gerty’s life: “She has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap.” (8) Lily is under the opinion that though Gerty is economically independent she will never be able to secure her place in the high class society of America.
Lily does want to get a future which will be filled with poverty, spinsterhood, and social ugliness. Lily compares her life with her cousin Grace as she lives in a drab boarding house, excluded from dinner parties. Lily hates the life of Grace since it depends on Aunt Peniston’s charity. Gerty’s and Grace’s lives as single women always appears terrible to Lily. She in frustration cries out to Gerty, “I want admiration, I want excitement, I want money— ‘yes, money!’” (147)

Lily is torn between her emotions and her social demands. She wants love yet she acts contrary to her emotions. On the other hand, she wants a rich marriage but she acts in opposition to her interest. She does not know what to do to achieve her goals. If Lily follows her heart without money, then she believes she will live in misery, and if she chooses a rich marriage without attraction, she still be miserable. Both choices bring her misery. Lily’s real problem is that she is a victim of how she was brought up. Her mother’s obsession with money and luxury has its impact on her. Lily comes “to think that her beauty as a power for good as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement.” (26) Consequently, Lily’s position as an economically dependent woman weakens her social status and limits her marriage choices. Her conflicting desires lead to unreasonable actions. Sometimes she thinks in terms of love and at other times she thinks in terms of what is financially best for her.

Lily with her contradictory motives, tries to seek a financially appropriate suitor, but her conflicts make her ineffective in matters of seduction. Her chasing of Mr. Percy Gryce on the train is arbitrary and lacks an experienced woman’s cunning. Lily’s simple behavior appears to go against her ethics. For example, she
does not see anything wrong in inviting Mr. Gryce to sit next to her although Mr.
Gryce shows embarrassment at her request. Lily is a frank woman who sometimes
thinks emotionally rather than calculatingly. She considers Mr. Gryce a good match
only because he has money.

One morning, during a weekend in the country, Lily wakes up late and
misses the chance of accompanying Mr. Gryce to church. “That walk she did not
mean to miss; one glance at the bills on her writing-table was enough to recall its
necessity.” (40) If Lily had awakened earlier to accompany Mr. Gryce to church,
she would have had a great opportunity to interest him in marrying her. However,
instead of doing so, she spends the afternoon with Lawrence Selden. Lily follows
her heart, though she knows that her relationship with Selden is unfruitful because
both come from families with little wealth. When Selden sees Percy Gryce coming
out of the church, he thinks that Lily has used his presence with her in order to
attract her suitor, Percy Gryce. Lily does not tell Selden her intention to spend the
afternoon with him. Lily lies to Selden and tells him that she was waiting for him to
thank him for having giving her so many points on how to seduce Percy Gryce.

Lily’s decision to accompany Selden reveals how much she does not want to
marry Percy Gryce; it also reveals her arbitrary actions regarding marriage. As to
Lily, and from a feminine consciousness, she sees marriage to Percy Gryce as a
means of supplying what she dreams to have, such as expensive clothes and jewels.
As to liking, Lily is clearly bored when she accompanies Percy Gryce. She thinks of
him as a profitable future husband. In other words, Lily sees marriage to Gryce as a
source of money that she will spend. Lily wants something besides money from
marriage; she wants love. She is confused of her choice between Percy and Selden. In fact, Lily finds difficulty in expressing her emotions to Selden. Her pride in being “expensive” prevents her having the man she wants. There is a constant undercurrent of misunderstanding as she and Selden talk. Both of them hide their inner feelings and act contrary to how they feel. Gloria C. Erlich, suggests that “Lily loves a man who mirrors her ideal self (Selden). Nevertheless, she looks to other men whom she does not love “to provide” the material foundation of her life.” (51) Selden, too, feels that Lily is unreachable because she is expensive. He cannot afford to provide her with the luxury she dreams of. Lily, on the other hand, thinks in terms of her materialistic world. To her understanding, love without money is an unfruitful thing, for both complete each other. Lily is unwilling to give up one for the other. This is Lily’s crucial problem in life, for she is unable to separate her desire for love from her financial needs. Lily suffers greatly from her perplexity and will pay a costly price for her own desires.

Eventually, Lily realizes that Gryce is boring, and she knows about his weak character from her cousin Jack Stepney: “Mr. Gryce as the young man who had promised his mother never to go out in the rain without his overshoes.” (17) He has no individuality to out on his own, even in trivial things.

Lily, on the other hand, does not doubt Simon Rosedale’s admiration of her womanhood. She knows how much he sympathizes with her when she faces financial problems. He even offers her money; hence, “there were even moments when a marriage with Rosedale seemed the only honourable solution of her difficulties.” (153) In spite of this, Lily does not feel attracted to him. She fears “certain midnight images that must at any cost be exorcised—and one of these was
the image of herself as Rosedale’s wife.” (153) Lily fears her sexual relationship with Rosedale. She banishes the image from her mind because how can she have sex with someone she does not love? Rosedale in fact refuses to marry Lily; what he wanted when he first proposed to her was a way into her society. When she could not give him that, he no longer wanted to marry her. Jennie A. Kassanoff writes that Rosedale’s presence in the novel reveals central anxieties about Jews in New York society. Lily’s marriage to a Jewish millionaire like Rosedale “might only bring degenerating years of the Rosedale. To prevent this, Wharton transforms Lily to a piece of art.” (68) Lily’s sexuality is preserved and cannot be touched, not only by Rosedale but also by her other marriage candidates. She and Rosedale recoil from each other in order to be acceptable in New York society. Lily’s social prestige makes her withdraw from Rosedale because her real self is attracted to Selden.

Lily begins to view the society with Selden’s eyes and she feels: “that society people are not only entrapped in a “great gilt cage,” but also their so-called “smart” entertainments are “dreary and trivial.” (38) Lily, at this moment even imagines another way of life:

She closed her eyes an instant, and the vacuous routine of the life she had chosen stretched before her like a long white road without dip or turning: it was true she was to roll over it in a carriage instead of trudging it on foot, but sometimes the pedestrian enjoys the diversion of a short cut which is denied to those on wheels. (39)
Lily’s problem of indecisiveness is not her fatal flaw but it is a way of remaining true to herself. As a result every one considers her as fickle-minded. The novelist also depicts Lily as a person with hard exterior, but she is “inwardly as malleable as wax.” (38) This depiction implies that Lily is bendable but does not lack the inner strength. Lily always secretly questions, about the rejecting the “vocation” that defines a woman’s position in her society if it is not the marriage. Thomas Loebel, in Beyond Her Self describes Lily’s quest for self-discovery:

Discovering the self is a procedure that takes place between these two. The trace of the human in being persecutes the commodified object of identity, and response to the trace of the human (or what I am calling the soul) is the very process of discovering the full ontological self, a coming into being of the self. (113)

Within this confusion, Lily nevertheless considers herself a woman of ethics; she cannot risk selling herself to a rich man she does not love. Though earlier, Lily rejects Rosedale’s because he attempts “to by her trust that means the complete absence of emotional risk” (Nyquist 96) once Lily has missed her chance of attracting a good suitor, she tries to get Rosedale to renew his proposal. This is a weak moment in her life because, after a long resistance not to sell herself, she is willing to be bought by money. When Lily re-evaluates Rosedale’s proposal and is willing to accept his offer, she is accepting to sell her body in the marriage market in order to regain her place among the New York elites. What Lily decides to do does not differ altogether from prostitution. In prostitution, a woman sells her body to the one who offers the highest bid. Lily here is willing to prostitute herself to
Rosedale since he is the only man left to provide the way of life she wants. Lily
prostitutes herself to the marriage institution to be financially secure.

As Lily expects to be bought by Rosedale, fate interferes again as he turns
down her offer. Lily does not suit Rosedale now. Her social prestige is undercut by
the rumors that she has been the mistress of a married man. Rosedale’s refusal to
marry Lily awakens her to the fact that she is considered a cheap woman and is
unacceptable in her society. This is a moment of awareness for her. She realizes that
she must change her life and not depend on marriage as a solution to her financial
needs. Rosedale convinces Lily that if he married her, they would both be
condemned in New York society. He tells Lily, “‘I’m more in love with you than
ever, but if I marry you now I’d queer myself for good and all, and everything I’ve
worked for all these years would be wasted.’” (158) Rosedale is already considered
an outsider, for he stands for the new rich class in that society. His marriage to
another outsider like Lily Bart would be considered a challenge to New York old
traditions. Wharton uses Rosedale to bring Lily to a new level of consciousness.
Lily has to make a positive decision in her life and defend her existence as a single
woman.

Lily’s noble act of withstanding the temptation to blackmail Bertha, is an act
of admiration. It seems that Lily’s repulsion at the contamination of money and sex
is noble and that her refraining from revenge is an act of moral courage. She refuses
to marry either Rosedale or Dorset because it can be done only by using Bertha’s
letters. Lily does not want a life at the cost of Bertha’s life though she is responsible
for her destruction. Mary Nyquist, praises Lily “by refusing to enter into
negotiations, protects the bourgeois ideal of marriage for love rather than for
money. Lily protects Selden and defends her chastity out of her belief in the ideal of romantic love.” (84)

Margaret McDowell considers the novel as a Lily’s “moral victory” over people who represent social graces to her”. This second theme of the book derives from Lily’s gaining a degree of moral or spiritual victory through suffering defeat in a society that lacks meaning and direction through her returning good for evil.” (20) In this sense, Lily is both a victor and victim. Lily’s “moral fineness, which is so pure that her own newly found honour rather than the social system ironically cause her to fail.” (Robin Beaty 263)

In spite of being fond of luxurious life, it is identified that Lily gives priority to self-satisfaction rather than material success. For her, wealth is an absolute necessity to be “dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in.” (21)

One of the important scenes in the novel is the scene in the Mediterranean. Bertha invites Lily to the cruise only to divert her husband while she has an affair with Ned Silverton. Lily knows Bertha’s intention, still she joins the Cruise to get rid of her isolation. She is scared to being alone because her narcissistic sense demands the presence of others. Finally Bertha accuses Lily of adultery with her husband George Dorset and makes Lily to get social disgrace. In response to Bertha’s accusation, Lily does not request Selden for help and does not attempt to protect for herself, but rises and stands “before him in a kind of clouded majesty, like some deposed princess moving tranquilly to exile.” (135) This scene is
powerful not only because it marks the moment when Lily is debarred from society but, more importantly, because it brings an insightful change in the protagonist.

Lily’s aunt disinherits her when she hears the rumours of Lily’s flirtations with married men Gus Trenor and George Dorset. She considers Lily’s supposed immoral behavior unforgiveable. Mrs. Peniston shows “resentment against her niece” before she hears Lily’s defense. To Mrs. Peniston, “It was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made.” (82)

Mrs. Peniston’s ironic ‘God-like judgment’ reveals a final decision as to what is going to happen to Lily. In her opinion, Lily is responsible for what she has done. Even if Lily has not been involved in any affair, still it is her fault to let herself be talked about. According to Mrs. Peniston, conventions come first, even before blood relationship. The money Mrs. Peniston leaves to Lily will be enough to pay Lily’s debt to Gus Trenor, but Lily will still suffer from economic necessity because she has lost her allowance with Mrs. Peniston’s death.

Thus Lily Bart fails to attain a good social position through marriage and since the money her aunt leaves is only enough to pay her debt to Gus Trenor, she decides to join the working classes to earn her own living. Accordingly, with the help of her friends Mrs. Fisher and Gerty Farish, Lily manages to get a job at Regina’s millinery. Her attempt of financial independence proves a failure from the very beginning. Mme. Regina doubts Lily’s possible success as a laborer. She knows that Lily’s background as a leisure-class woman won’t fit her for work of this sort. Mme. Regina suggests employ Lily “in the show-room: as a displayer of
hats.” (175) Even when Lily is willing to learn a trade, people around her cannot see her as a working woman. Simon Rosedale, for example, expresses his shock when he learns from Lily that she has joined the working classes. Simon’s agitated inquiries, “‘Why, what on earth are you doing?’” (178) reveal his refusal to imagine Lily as a milliner or trying to learn a trade. She belongs to another social class, and in his mind, no matter what her economic situation is, she should not be in this low position. Rosedale’s angry tone regarding Lily’s job reveals his love and care for her. He is angry with her not because he underestimates her abilities but because he values her and believes she deserves a better career than being a milliner. Lawrence Selden, on the other hand, when Lily assures him that her work at Mrs. Hatch’s fulfills his advice that she should learn to get what she wants, Selden tells Lily, “‘I’m not sure that I have ever called you a successful example of that kind of bringing-up.’” (172) Selden’s words reveals his lack of faith in Lily’s capability as a working woman and his superiority in judging her. He declares that he knows what is best for her social position. Though Lily discards his comment, yet later on, she starts to see that she cannot succeed as a laborer. Lily realizes that she has been slow to learn and that “as a bread-winner she could never compete with professional ability; she was raised to be ornamental.” (183) Lily suffers from ignorance about life outside the upper class. Although she tells Selden to wait a little longer and to give her time before he judges her success or failure in work, Lily is not prepared to become a working woman. She joins the working classes without any plan. Her decision to engage in physical work at Mme. Regina’s millinery reveals her ignorance about such work. She insists on having the job
without any knowledge about the long hours or the unhealthy environment. She misjudges the requirements of the job and thus falls a victim to it.

In Wharton’s novel, at the turn of the century women are seen struggling to live their gender roles and social positions in a materialistic society governed by a factitious morality. Lily Bart’s search for a husband who can financially secure her enacts the materialism of New York’s upper-class. Lily’s failure to marry for money or to secure her social and financial position by becoming an independent working woman displays the social restrictions of her gender role since she belongs to the upper class by birth although not by wealth. As Marriage is part of New York’s materialistic world and Lily is brought up to think and exist within its terms, she cannot bring herself to act within her class and gender role, she becomes a stranger to her society; she cannot fit in it. Lily’s loss of social and economic security derives from her class affiliation. Lily only sees “the fragmentary and distorted image of the world she had lived in, reflected in the mirror of the working-girls’ minds.” (175) Lily is not destined to belong to this group of working-class women. In the midst of conflicts and exhaustion, she struggles to keep up her energy by drinking tea during the day and taking chloral during the night. The narcotic properties of the chloral bring her into a state of lifelessness.

On the other hand Lily protects Selden and Bertha from social disgrace by buying Bertha’s letters from a charwoman. At first she decides to burn them but later she changes her mind when she hears the news of Gryce Percy’s wedding and the agent is none other than Bertha who brings Gryce together with Evie. Bertha does this even after knowing that Lily is working on to marry Gryce, She disrupts Lily’s plan to catch Gryce. It is Bertha’s act of taking revenge against Lily for
moving closely with Selden at the Bellmont party and taking him away from her. Though it is who brings down Lily’s honour in the society and reduces her chances of honourable marriage, Lily does not want to take revenge against Bertha. The evidence is that even after having letters that could ruin Bertha, Lily’s last act before taking chloral is to burn the letters that would incriminate her enemy. It makes Lily to stand in high ethical and moral codes. Judith Fetterley describes this act of Lily as:

Lily’s value ultimately derives from her self-hatred; her beauty is finally located in her unwillingness to survive. Lily’s relation to the letters of Bertha Dorset makes this point. In possessing these letters, Lily equally possesses the means of survival: the letters are her ticket back into society, security, and economic viability. Yet Lily's value lies in her refusal to use the letters.

(210-11)

Rosedale tries to rescue Lily by asking her to use the love letters which prove the affair Bertha Dorset had years earlier. Rosedale offers too many to her if she does so and brings her social grace and solve her financial problems. But Lily refuses his offer for the sake of Selden’s reputation. She accuses Rosedale of being mistaken both in the facts and in what he infers from the letters. The decision of happiness is within Lily’s hands. She can change her social position from a woman refused by her society to a respectable woman. But Lily decides not to take advantage of Selden’s love letters to rescue her own reputation. She acts courageously in comparison with Selden’s cowardly attitude when he suspects her affair with Trenor. Selden builds his conviction about Lily’s behavior on suspicion
and not on real evidence. Lily, on the contrary, when she has real proof in the letters of Selden’s immorality, does not abandon him as he does her. Lily continues to defend his morality and proves to be more spiritual and honorable than he. She chooses to sacrifice luxury to live ethically in an unethical society. In fact, she decides to start a new life away from her family and friends. That’s when Lily joins the working class to earn her own living. In Lily Bart, Wharton portrays a single woman’s need for marriage. This decision of Lily can be described as:

As we watch Lily try to escape the stuffy parlors of the past in order to find “a room of her own,” a room that will express her identity, and as we watch her fluid sense of ‘self’ increasingly merging with the commodities surrounding her, she seems a most modern woman indeed of a spectator as well as a spectacle. (Von Rosk 323)

The most pathetic scene in the novel is Lily’s encounter with Gus Trenor when he is alone in the house. He tells Lily that she owes him $9,000 and that he wants the repayment in sexual coin: “‘I’ll tell you what I want: I want to know just where you and I stand. Hang it, the man who pays for the dinner is generally allowed to have a seat at table.’” (92) Lily is upset by his notion of sexual transaction. She feels guilty that she is polluted and that she is considered as a prostitute because she has “taken what they take and not paid as they pay.” (105) Here she pays a high price that is nothing but getting the disgrace in her entire life. Lily runs off to Gerty after escaping from Trenor and explains Gerty through an image of “disfigurement” how terrified she is:
Can you imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement—some hideous change that has come to you while you slept? Well, I seem to myself like that—I can’t bear to see myself in my own thoughts—I hate ugliness, you know—I’ve always turned from it— but I can’t explain to you—you wouldn’t understand. (104)

Lily loses her confidence by the rape attempt of Trenor. She predicts that an old self stands guard against the newly distorted self. As Lily states to Gerty, “There’s no turning back—your old self rejects you, and shuts you out.” (105) It is noted that Lily’s feeling toward herself is never the same as before when the first book of the novel ends: “it would take the glow of passion to weld together the shattered fragments of her self-esteem.” (110) In other words, it is time for Lily to come with a new consciousness to birth though the new growth is interrupted by old habits and old ways.

In *Athena, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Initiation into the Conscious Feminine*, Jean Bolen illustrates the evolution of consciousness by describing it as a near-death experience:

Similarly, transition periods are times when we are in between our former lives and the next stage of growth. That time in between one realm and the next, one state of consciousness and another, is experienced as “liminal,” from *limen*, a Latin word for the horizontal beam of a doorframe, under which we pass. (220)
Lily meets Nettie on the way to her house after meeting Selden on the night of her death. Nettie’s small family, her husband George and the baby, shows a new way of living to Lily. She identifies Nettie’s family as a new idea about how a marriage should be built on love, frankness, and belief in one another. The most interesting aspect of Nettie’s marriage is that neither of them is economically dependent on the other. Both Nettie and George are independent partners. Their relationship is socially and economically secure because it is built on love and mutual economic power.

Nettie Struther who wants family rather than money is a member of the Working Girls’ Club who benefits from Lily Bart’s charity. Lily, through the money she takes from Gus Trenor, succeeds in helping poor Nettie Struther recover from her illness and overcome the loss of her job. To Nettie, Lily’s efforts to help her and to look out for the comfort of poor women like her reveal Lily’s great generosity and kindness. Lily’s charitable work proves that she can do something beneficial with money. Lily, in spite of her limited economic power, succeeds in lessening Nettie’s despair. On the contrary, when Lily tells Nettie that she ‘is in great trouble,’ (12) Nettie unfortunately forgets to ask Lily about the kind of trouble she is facing.

Nettie is proud of her ability to overcome the misery she has passed through. She tells Lily, “I never thought I’d come back alive.” (194) Nettie represents the successful working woman that Lily wishes to be. Though Nettie has been a victim “of over-work and anemic parentage,” (193) and belongs to Working Girls’ Club, she has been able to find good shelter and has had the opportunity to find a good job with better working conditions. Thus, through the love and care of Lily towards
Nettie and other charitable women like Gerty Farish, she becomes the new woman. Nettie cannot reproduce herself without the help of others. Hence, women’s union, whether through charity or other forms of cooperation, intensifies women’s social and economic progress. Nettie Struther is dependent in her recovery, as she tells:

“Work girls are not looked after the way you are and they don’t always know how to look after themselves. I didn’t…and pretty near killed me when he went away and left of writing…It was then I became sick—I thought it was the end of everything. I guess it would have been if you hadn’t sent me off.” (194)

Nettie Struther is luckier than Lily Bart because she has had the right help at the right time. Lily, in contrast, has received help when her fate has already been determined, Nettie Struther’s femininity is trained to function in life. She can gather up the fragments of her life and build herself a secure social position. Nettie’s position as a lower-class woman is a grace because it frees her from the social gossip that Lily and Ellen suffer from. Nettie is free to love and marry the man she likes whereas Lily’s acts are limited to New York conventions. Lily has to act like a respectable woman in order to be marriageable in New York society. Unlike these two women, Nettie watches over her small family, her husband and her baby. Their love and warmth are her power for renewal and survival in life. However, Nettie’s social and economic positions are interrelated with her husband’s. Wharton’s portrayal of the new woman at the turn of the century is also connected to the new man who backs his woman and supports her with love and care.
Unlike Nettie, Lily Bart fails to become the new woman in social life and in work. Her failure is related to her position as an upper-class woman. Lily’s efforts to change her way of living and to become independent are futile. Lily’s failure in social life is related to cruel misjudgments of her. Lily believes that when a girl is “talked about she’s done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks.” (140) For example, when she is suspected of having an affair with Gus Trenor, she does not defend herself or deny the affair. She surrenders to people’s talk. The problem with Lily is that she wants people like Selden to believe in her honesty and to come to her defense, while in fact, Selden believes the gossips, like all the New Yorkers. Gossip and rumors have a great influence in determining Lily’s existence in society. Selden, for instance, knows and understands his society’s cruel judgments of Lily’s appearance with some men. And he himself cannot “lift Lily to a freer vision of life, if his own view of her was to be coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected?” (101) Selden cannot rescue Lily even if he is willing to do so. Her reputation is influenced by people’s gossip. He cannot ignore those suspicions because he has seen her coming out of Trenor’s house. It becomes a barrier between his love for her and any possible desire to marry her. The unlucky Lily Bart fails to find a husband because her reputation is burdened by immorality. In fact, Lily does not find the right man to empower her by love and to accept her as she is.

The pivotal moment of Selden’s abandonment of Lily is when she visits him for the last time. What Selden offers her is a cup of tea and a few theoretical words about self-confidence to help her overcome “what people think of her.” (189)
Selden ignores Lily’s miserable tone. She wishes to make Selden understand her wholly, she confesses to Selden in a weeping voice:

I have tried hard, but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap—and you don’t know what it’s like in the rubbish heap!

(270)

Selden does not show his love or his sympathy over the miserable situation she is in. The irony here is that both Lily and Selden think in parallel lines. Selden misinterprets Lily’s words. After all the misery Lily has gone through and the marriage proposals she has missed, still Selden thinks that she is going to get married. For her part, Lily thinks in a romantic way. She tells Selden that since they are going to part physically she is going to leave her spirit with him. Lily’s tone here carries the feeling of death. It is a feeling that Selden cannot understand because he is like the other New Yorkers who only evaluate appearances. He judges Lily through what he hears from her. He does not go beyond words to understand the real Lily.

According to Wharton, Lily can free herself from social restrictions through death, and this is what Lily means when she talks about leaving her spirit with Selden. It is then that they can be together. William E Moddelmog says that “Lily’s
death is a strategy that Wharton follows to assure her character’s privacy and that a character like Selden never does see her fully.” (340) In their hollow, conservative society, Lily does not have the courage to ask Selden to continue the love that they have shared “for a moment.” (191) Selden, on the other hand, is not a passionate man. He acts as a New York gentleman should act, and that is by controlling his passion and not showing such a weak point. Now Selden would not love Lily anyway because she has slipped in social level. Selden, the highly educated man, cannot judge Lily beyond the limits of New York’s mentality.

Lily is too lovely, too perfect, too deep to fit in the ordinary world that forces her to influence others through power, money, or looks. Because of her destiny she becomes a prey to poverty, illness, depression, drugs and death.

She shows her morality even in her last action. On the night of her death, before going to bed, Lily finishes her last duty by paying off her debt to Trenor with her last ten thousand dollars. In her dream state, she is consoled by the feeling that “to-morrow would not be so difficult after all; she felt sure that she would have the strength to meet it and sinks from the soft approach of passiveness into complete subjugation.” (198)

Lily’s journey ends with her capitulation and death. Lily’s death can be considered as the other face of life, an escape from the cruel circumstances of the society, death is not the end but a symbol of transformation. It provides freedom to the soul. Because for the ages people consider death as freedom.

Lily’s death turns out to be only sleep. She has finished all her tasks, each one gradually makes Lily to gain self-understanding. In her illusions due to the
effects of choral, she feels that “she had been unhappy, and now she was happy—she had felt herself alone, and now the sense of loneliness had vanished.” (198) Suddenly feeling Nettie Struther’s baby—who has been named in her honour—on her arm, Lily holds her as if “the child entered into her and became a part of herself.” (194)

The baby Lily holds in her sleep of death embodies pleasure or joy. The indication of a woman’s full development is giving birth to an element of pleasure, joy, or ecstasy. Lily Bart dies of exhaustion because of the terrible struggles. Finally it is identified that Lily acquires complete consciousness and freedom only after her death.

Lily Bart’s psychological growth is futile because she could have integrated her psychological and social identities, but only when it was too late to relive what she had already missed. Lily could integrate her psychological growth in her life when she viewed herself as a mother with an infant, but this is the last scene she sees before she dies. Lawrence Selden, too, could only integrate his psychological growth in his life when he finds Lily dead. It is then that he declares his love to her and regrets what he has missed with her.

The three women in the novel who stand between old tradition and new values by the twentieth century, fail to trust each other as Jerome Loving writes: “that expects women to compete against one another for a very few positions of prestige cannot encourage friendship, trust, and mutual sharing among women. Instead, jealousy must govern their relationships with one another.” (107) With the exception of Nettie Struther, this moral fits Lily and Grace. Grace Stepney competes against Lily Bart and succeeds in winning Lily’s inheritance from her
aunt. Though Grace appears submissive and weak character, yet she is more powerful than Lily. She develops strength from her weakness and manages to secure her social and economic positions. Lily in contrast, plays decent role; she refuses the transaction that deal unethically with other persons, even if they provide her with a secure social and economic position. Lily represents trustfulness and morality in an immoral society. It is her story told by Wharton to show the disparities in class, region and creed.

The succeeding chapters discuss more women characters put in different circumstances and the unfolding of their feminine consciousness.