

Tragedy in *The House of Mirth*:
The Decline of Lily Bart

Kate Commander

Director: Dr. Ben Lee
Reader: Dr. Dawn Coleman
Department Director: Dr. M. Luprecht
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Written in 1905, Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* portrays the downfall of Lily Bart. The novel centers around the socially elite members of society and Miss Bart's constant struggle and ultimate failure to secure a place within this world. Her actions within the elite world she inhabits propel her social decline, and ultimately her death. Readings of the novel as a work of literary naturalism would point to Lily's surroundings, situation, and a determined fate instead of Lily herself as the cause of her decline. Such readings are compelling to an extent, particularly since Wharton implies so strongly that Lily desires personal freedoms that are denied to women of her time. And yet, my own reading of *The House of Mirth* insists that the most tragic feature of Lily's life is not the small but significant role her own decisions play in her demise but rather her constant awareness of her downfall. Because Lily is conscious of her own lack of freedom and declining status, her story is all the more tragic.

Lily begins the novel as a financially unstable, unwed twenty-nine year old woman, and she knows that her only hope for survival is to marry a man with great wealth and high social status. Lily has been raised to count on her beauty and charm and has never learned any marketable skills other than entertaining and pleasing her socially elite friends. Lily's suffering becomes apparent early in the novel as she mentions restrictions of unmarried women to Lawrence Selden in the opening chapter and endures awkward conversations with her marriage prospect Mr. Percy Gryce. Her suffering increases throughout the novel as her downfall continues. Lily's acute awareness of her situation and limited options show her complete immersion in her own suffering. Despite Lily's awareness and multiple opportunities, she never makes a clear move to stop her suffering or to pull herself into the rich and socially elite life she wants and for which she

has been trained. Lily's downfall ends in her death, the final mark of tragedy in *The House of Mirth*.

Lily's story is not only a dramatic tragedy, but also a tragedy of gender and consciousness. In her many conversations with Selden about the "republic of the spirit," we see Lily's desire for freedom and the limitations on freedom because of her status as an upper-class woman at the turn of the twentieth century (81). Lily has limited options for her future. If she hopes to be a success and live the life she desires and for which she was trained, she must marry a rich man regardless of love. Lily's tragedy is thus shaped by her gender. Her story is not the story of a man struggling to reach a higher social status, but rather the story of a woman trying to survive in a world pitted against her. All the while, Lily is conscious of the limitations society imposes upon her because of her gender. Her awareness heightens her tragedy.

Lily's tragedy points to Wharton's own social and political consciousness. In *Edith Wharton's Arguments With America*, Elizabeth Ammons notes that:

The culture at large boasted symbols of progress like the world-famous Woman's Building or the amazonian Gibson Girl, announcements each of the modern woman's freedom from Victorian strictures... With this enthusiasm in the air, Edith Wharton sounded a sour, dissenting note. (2-3)

Wharton was very deliberate about the message she wanted to send in *The House of Mirth*. Although Lily is driven to make decisions that lead her against a path of complacent marriage, Wharton is fully conscious about why Lily rejects this life time and time again. Wharton sees Lily's options in life as limited and undesirable, and she understands that Lily has a longing for more freedom than her present life affords her.

Through Lily Bart, Wharton showed her progressive social views that condemned the confining, complacent gender role assigned to women of high-society at the time.

Tragedy as a genre dates back to Greek plays, includes many of Shakespeare's masterpieces, and remains relevant today. The genre has been a topic of literary investigation since Aristotle. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle offers a classical interpretation of the qualities and characteristics of tragedy. Recognition, reversal, plot, suffering, and fear and pity are all key elements Aristotle points to as contributing to the tragic characteristics of a work. For Aristotle, recognition is the point in the plot at which the tragic hero undergoes "a change from ignorance to knowledge," and reversal is "a change to the opposite in the actions being performed" (18).

Recognition, reversal, plot, suffering, and fear and pity are all key elements of Wharton's novel. While Lily is hopeful about her future in the beginning, she is always in a state of awareness about her circumstances and possibilities. In the first book, Lily is often in denial of her decreasing social status but thoughts about her next social move are ever present in her mind. By the second book, Lily becomes less able to fool herself into believing she still has a chance of marriage. Instead of moving from ignorance to knowledge, Lily moves in the second book from a conscious denial to confronting her unavoidable reality.

The reversal for Lily comes paired with her recognition or awareness about her life options. Lily's reversal comes through her actions. As her actions were once directed at securing a proper marriage, she now works to support herself and stay out of the pit of poverty. Her tragedy is displayed through her reversed and more limited actions.

Suffering is a term used by Aristotle to describe “an action that involves destruction or pain” (19). This suffering is a timeless aspect to tragedy and plays a prominent role in Lily Bart’s tragic story as well. As Lily’s story evolves and her opportunities to get out of her trapped life decline, her suffering increases. Lily’s awareness is also a form of suffering because she is almost always conscious of her actions, behavior and circumstance. This awareness suffocates and consumes her life. Lily’s human suffering also allows the audience to feel “fear and pity,” emotions Aristotle strongly associates with a successful tragedy (17).

Plot, a central aspect of tragedy for Aristotle, also drives *The House of Mirth*. In Aristotle’s words “Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life... So the events, i.e. the plot, are what tragedy is there for, and that is the most important thing of all” (11). The action in Lily Bart’s life ultimately makes *The House of Mirth* a tragedy. Opposing a purely naturalistic reading of the novel, I argue that Lily’s own decisions do contribute to her decline towards death and at no point does Lily make a strong effort to take a different path, although she has opportunities, unpalatable ones, to step off the declining slope toward alienation and poverty. The twists and turns of Lily’s life make the plot the central feature of the novel just as plot is the central feature of tragedy for Aristotle. The action taken by Lily Bart which leads to her decline certainly qualifies as a tragedy by Aristotle’s classical definition.

Over time, the genre of tragedy and the discussion around tragedy have changed. In their compilation of scholarship in *Tragedy*, John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler bring together a broad spectrum of scholarship on the subject. Raymond Williams directly discusses more modern characteristics of tragedy, suggesting that “the varieties

of tragic experience are to be interpreted by reference to the changing conventions and institutions” (147). He focuses on “order and accident, the destruction of the hero, the irreparable action and its connections with death, and the emphasis on evil” (148).

Williams ideas bring a uniquely modern perspective on *The House of Mirth* by pointing to the tragic hero as the venue through which the audience experiences tragedy. His views help show the importance of Lily’s role as a woman in the society of her day.

With the rise of feminism, different aspects of tragedy pertaining to gender roles and the social roles of women have been explored. Sarah B. Pomeroy explores gender roles in tragedy while Nicole Loraux focuses on death, particularly female death, in tragedies. Because the central character of *The House of Mirth* is a female and because critics have often taken the novel as a kind of proto-feminist text, the ideas pertaining to a more feminist perspective are particularly relevant. I will apply these feminist perspectives to the novel through the lens of tragedy in order to more fully understand the gendered tragedy of Lily Bart’s life.

In Dawn Keeler’s stage adaptation of *The House of Mirth*, the play opens at the funeral of Miss Lily Bart. The social elite who watch Lily’s demise and ultimately shun her attend the funeral. In contrast, Wharton’s novel opens with a scene of Lily at her finest and also bravest in Grand Central Station in New York City with a dashing Lawrence Selden. Dawn Keeler chose to frame the play as a tragedy by positioning the tragic death of a bright and beautiful young woman at the beginning of the play. Because the audience knows the ultimate outcome of Lily’s life, they are more able to recognize her downfall from an early point in the story. Rewriting the novel as a play also places an emphasis on conversation and relationships between the characters. This form allows for

a unique perspective on the relationships in Lily's life, particularly Lawrence Selden, to whom Lily is drawn but ultimately cannot commit.

Wharton's novel is at heart the case study of Lily Bart. The ever pressing question she forces us to ask is "How did Lily get to this point?" Lily's life culminates in her tragic death. By examining the tragic elements of Lily's life through a feminist lens, we are able to more fully understand Lily's power and limitations, and understand how Wharton used them to address the role of upper-class women at the turn of the twentieth century.

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To begin the exploration of tragic qualities in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, I will begin with Aristotle's classical definitions in *Poetics*. First, Aristotle defines tragedy as follows:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions. (10)

In Aristotle's opinion, this was the ultimate and unchanging definition for tragedy. He claims that "after undergoing many transformations tragedy came to rest, because it had attained its natural state," the state which he describes above (8). While many characteristics of tragedy do remain steadfast into modern times, some characteristics have been interpreted in new ways or disregarded altogether. Modern scholars and critics have also identified new characteristics contributing to the tragic identity of a work. The

most notable difference between Aristotle's vision of tragedy and Wharton's is the shift from dramatic performance to the novel.

Aristotle's definition cites tragedy as "performed by actors, not through narration" (10). The idea that tragedy must be performed addresses the root of tragedy for Aristotle, for whom tragedy is an imitation of life. The goal of a tragedy is to create an emotional experience for the audience to be "effect(ed) through pity and fear" (10). However, when addressing this aspect of Aristotle's definition we must take into account the audience differences between Aristotle's era and Wharton's. Because at the core tragedy should imitate life, the audience is a central part of tragedy that brings the genre to life. Without an audience's own life, there would be no life to imitate. For Aristotle, the best way to reach an audience was through performance, whereas novels consumed for enjoyment were widely available to Mrs. Wharton and to her readers. Because the novel form was not readily available to Aristotle, the only way for him to imagine reaching a broad audience effectively was through performance. This form of communication for tragedy is important to Aristotle because it enables understanding from the audience. In his view, "understanding is extremely pleasing... This is the reason why people take delight in seeing images, what happens is that as they view them they come to understand" (7). For Aristotle the best understanding comes from that visual representation that comes from a stage performance, but for Wharton the height of understanding is reached in an intimate relationship between story and reader. Each form creates a relationship with the audience in order to help them develop an understanding of the characteristics and events they depict. Each form offers an imitation of life.

A second important characteristic Aristotle gives to tragedy is recognition. Aristotle defines this recognition as “a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune” (18). Aristotle goes on to note that a recognition of this kind is important because “a recognition and reversal of that kind will involve pity or fear...Moreover, bad fortune or good fortune will be the outcome in such cases” (19). Reversal is another trait of tragedy that is often associated with recognition. Aristotle defines a reversal as “a change to the opposite in the actions being performed...in accordance with probability or necessity” (18). This reversal is often the catalyst for recognition for the tragic hero and so the two traits are paired.

In *The House of Mirth*, this recognition and reversal for Lily Bart comes at the beginning of the second book in an interaction between Lily and the very rich and powerful Bertha Dorset. Bertha Dorset had invited Lily onto the Dorsets’ yacht to distract her husband George from her own affair with Ned Silverton. Nancy Bently points to this moment in the novel in her essay, “Wharton, Travel, and Modernity”:

In the *House of Mirth*, for instance, Lily Bart is saved by a yacht. An invitation from her friend Bertha Dorset to travel the Mediterranean on the Dorsets’ steam-yacht allows Lily to escape the threat of ruinous gossip in her Manhattan circle. Though she knows Bertha’s social world is ignoble, it is the only world in which Lily can imagine finding security and pleasure... Yet at the moment she believes herself most secure, Lily is headed for a fall. (151)

Previously, Bertha had an affair with Lily’s friend Selden, and Bertha was jealous of Lily’s relationship with him and therefore made circumstances often difficult for Lily.

Bertha requested Lily on this trip because Lily could be of some use to her. Lily could act as a distraction for her husband George Dorset in order to protect Bertha's affair with a young Ned Silverton from becoming known. However, George Dorset is becoming quite fond of Lily, and Bertha becomes jealous. Bertha also continually fears that her affair will be a topic of gossip and reach her husband's ears. For these reasons, Bertha has started rumors that Lily is having an affair with her husband George. While on the yacht and in Monte Carlo, Lily mingles with European society with quite a bit of social success. Lily's success also bothers Bertha. While offshore at a party one evening, Bertha shuns Lily and completely isolates her from the social circle she has worked so hard to remain a part of by making it clear that Lily is not to return to the yacht. When a member of the party beckons Lily to join the group heading back to the ship, Bertha Dorset coldly states, "Miss Bart is not going back to the yacht" (208). With this simple statement, Lily is expelled from the elite social world.

For Lily, as with many tragic characters, the recognition and reversal happen together and change her path dramatically. Previously, Lily was struggling to stay afloat within this elite society and working to find a marriageable suitor for herself in order to stabilize her social status. With this move from Bertha, Lily is publicly shunned and isolated from high society. This event brings about a strong reversal in action for Lily immediately. Because Lily cannot go back and stay on the ship, she must find an alternative plan for her evening. Being an unmarried woman, her options for the evening are limited, but luckily she finds refuge for the evening at her cousin Jack Stepney's apartment. Prior to this moment, Lily's concern was paying off her debt and finding a suitable marriage for herself to maintain her status. After this moment, Lily's actions and

goals shift. While ideally Lily tries to maintain her status and find a husband, her central focus is now on escaping the encroaching poverty that is a serious threat.

Lily's expulsion from the yacht also marks her own recognition of her declining social situation. From the very beginning, Lily has had a general awareness of her dependence on others to maintain her lifestyle. Now Lily is faced with the harsh reality of being dropped from her social circle. Her situation takes an immediate downturn as she is no longer desirable to her previous suitor, Mr. Simon Rosedale. Lily has resolved that her only option for recovery is to marry Rosedale, who in her eyes is an undesirable option because he remains on the edges of the socially elite world because he is Jewish. Lily says, "And, though I was unable to consent when you spoke to me in this way before, I am ready, now that I know you so much better, to trust my happiness to your hands" (240). Rosedale is an outside member of the elite social circle who has an enormous amount of money because of his success on Wall Street. Previously in the novel, Rosedale proposed marriage to Lily as a business move for each of them. He proposed that his monetary success paired with Lily's beauty and status in the social world would make them an accepted and stable couple within that crowd. Lily thought she could make a better match for herself and turned down this proposal. In addition to this matter, Lily also has a connection with Lawrence Selden that she denies herself the ability to pursue because he is not the wealthy match she envisioned for herself. After being rejected from the Dorset's yacht, however, Lily's status strongly declines and Rosedale is in a higher social position than she. Lily no longer brings anything to Rosedale's business proposition. In response to Lily's comment, Rosedale says "My dear Miss Lily, I'm sorry if there's been any little misapprehension between us – but you made me feel my suit was

so hopeless that I had really no intention of renewing it" (240). Rosedale's rejection is the final moment of recognition Lily has about her lowered social status. Because Rosedale was treated as a last resort and Lily had snubbed him earlier, she lost her chance to regain any social status through this match. On top of this, Rosedale was the last resort for a marriage for Lily. With this rejection, Lily comes into full knowledge about her declining social situation.

Lily's reversal of action and her recognition of her situation mark the increase in her decline and are made clear to the audience at this point in the novel. The first book of the novel tells Lily's story as a woman seeking a good marriage to cement her status in high society. Lily is portrayed as a woman with skills for society and nothing else. Her only opportunities for success in life are through a successful marriage. It is undeniable that certain circumstances are beyond Lily's grasp of control. She was brought up to take on the role of ornamental wife and she has no other profitable skill. Throughout the first book, Lily is aware of her situation and is constantly thinking and planning her next move and seeking her next prospective husband. Her actions and decisions, however, direct her away from married life. Though she is not set in society, she is very close. Although she seems desperate and dependent on finding a marriage at times, her situation is still promising enough to give her fine options for suitors.

In other words, the first book portrays Lily's situation as difficult but not hopeless. Despite a rocky end to the first half of the novel with Lily's run-in with Gus Trenor, Lily's situation is still hopeful. The expulsion from the Dorset's yacht catalyzes her expulsion from high society and triggers the reversal in her action. Each of Lily's moves from this point on are much more desperate and no longer focus on moving up in

society but simply staying put and not declining any further. The focus of the first half of the novel and the opening of Book Two is Lily's goal of moving into a permanent position within high society. After the expulsion, Lily recognizes her reversal of focus to simply staying out of poverty. This recognition paired with the reversal precedes the rest of Lily's decline into the working class and ultimately the poverty she has feared. Lily's recognition makes this decline more tragic and painful, and elicits pity and empathy from the audience.

In Aristotle's opinion, after reversal and recognition, another important element to tragedy is suffering. He explains that "suffering is an action that involves destruction or pain (e.g. deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on)" (19). The classical image of Oedipus gouging his own eyes out comes to mind. For Aristotle, tragic suffering was characterized by its public setting or extreme measures of pain. In the context of the tragedy of Lily Bart, Aristotle's specific definition of suffering simply would not fit. Lily's central suffering, furthermore, is not focused on her death but rather her decline and painful destruction while she is still living.

Because Lily's decline centers on her fall from high society, her suffering is made very public at several points throughout the novel. At the beginning of her downfall, she is publicly humiliated by the rumors Bertha Dorset spreads about her having an affair with George Dorset. Lily works very hard on her social reputation, and Bertha knows it will sting Lily to have that reputation damaged. Along with the rumors, Bertha publicly embarrasses Lily by not allowing her to return to the yacht. With this action, Bertha is sealing the truth about the rumors. Lily cannot speak against Bertha at this point,

therefore, the assumption among the social group is that the rumors are true. This public humiliation brings Lily to great suffering.

After being turned down by Simon Rosedale, Lily unhappily works as a social secretary for Mrs. Hatch. Selden makes a visit to Lily to inquire about her plans. Lily says that "My relation to Mrs. Hatch is one I have no reason to be ashamed of. She has helped me to earn a living when my old friends were quite resigned to seeing me starve" (262). With Lily's growing awareness, she sees her foreseeable future turn towards starvation. At this point, Wharton is aware of exactly where Lily's future is leading her, to harder times to come. Lily recognizes the fact that her old friends are no longer concerned with her because she is no longer an amusement or enjoyment for them because of her negative relationship with Bertha Dorset. Selden encourages Lily to wait out her hard time until her aunt's estate money comes by moving in with Gerty Farish, a friend of Lily's who is independent and in a lower social class than Lily had previously desired. Lily fires back at this suggestion by saying, "But Gerty does not happen to know...that I owe ever penny of that legacy" (263). Selden is shocked at this fact, and Lily is even more convinced than ever that there is no hope for her life at all because she is drowning in debt.

Although Lily has finally separated herself from the society that shunned her, she remains tied to that society through Gus Trenor, to whom she owes almost ten thousand dollars. Lily has been seeking freedom throughout the whole novel. Initially, her only picture of freedom was to make a good marriage for herself to alleviate the constant suffering she endured by her unstable status and future. At this point in the novel, Lily has given up on a marriage as affording her any freedoms. The freedom Lily now seeks is

only a freedom from debt. Throughout the novel, Lily's suffering is tied to her lack of freedom. In the first book of the novel, Lily's lack of freedom was a result of her calculated life that had to revolve around getting married. At the beginning of the novel, Lily joins Selden at his flat in New York City while she awaits the arrival of the next train. She exclaims, "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable this it is to be a woman" (28). After Selden points out that some women do enjoy just that, Lily responds by saying, "Oh, governesses—or widows. But not girls—not poor, miserable, marriageable girls!" (29) The limitations on Lily's freedom are shaped completely by in her goal of marriage. She must adhere to a set of social manners acceptable of an unmarried woman, but these social manners restrict Lily from living the free and happy life she desires.

By the second book in the novel, Lily's suffering has changed dramatically. Now Lily's suffering is still attached to her desire for freedom but it is her debt that traps her instead of her need for a marriage. In order to achieve a comfortable life, Lily had hoped to get married. Because this has not worked out, her dream of a comfortable life has been washed away and replaced with the dream of surviving and staying out of poverty. In the second book, Lily's suffering is magnified in comparison to the first book; as the second book progresses, her suffering increases. Although, Lily does not endure the public death or violent suffering Aristotle envisioned for a successful tragedy, she does endure plenty of harsh public suffering in regards to her own time and place. "Her danger lay, as she knew, in her old incurable dread of discomfort and poverty; in the fear of that mounting tide of dinginess" (276). This discomfort and poverty was increasingly encroaching on Lily's life. After she left Mrs. Hatch's, she moved into a boarding house alone. On a visit

from Mr. Rosedale, he expresses his opinion of her living situation. Rosedale proclaims, “My goodness—you can’t go on living here... It’s no place for you!” (278-279) This visit from Rosedale also serves as a public embarrassment for Lily and her dreadful situation. At this point, she has taken a job as a milliner but fails to keep it due to poor work. Lily has also become addicted to sleeping medicine which offers her the only release from her troubles.

The climax of Lily’s suffering is witnessed and amplified by an encounter with Nettie Struther, previously Nettie Crane, a former charity case of Gerty Farish whom Lily once visited. Lily thinks to herself late in the novel, “The episode of Nettie Crane’s timely rescue from disease had been one of the most satisfying incidents of her connection with Gerty’s charitable work” (290). The tables turn on Lily here as Nettie takes the sickly Miss Bart into her home for the evening to show off her beaming baby and happily married home. Although Nettie is still a member of the working class, she serves as a strong contrast to Lily’s current state. Nettie now has everything Lily had hoped for in the first book except lavish amounts of money to bring her into the highest social circle. Nettie has risen from near-death to complete happiness while Lily has declined from a place of opportunity into a trapped future. These reversed roles highlight how far Lily has fallen.

Soon after her encounter with Nettie, Lily receives Mrs. Peniston’s inheritance check for ten thousand dollars. After writing checks to pay off her debts to Gus Trenor, Lily overdoses on her sleeping medicine. Lily’s death comes about as a result of her suffering but is also the first true freedom and liberation Lily experiences. Throughout the novel, Lily has made choices, both consciously and unconsciously, that direct her path in

life. At her moment of death, Lily continues to make choices. Lily was desperate for rest in her final moments. She had been worn down by her struggle for survival. In searching for her much needed rest, Lily turned to sleeping medicine, chloral. Lily is conscious of the risk in taking this medicine. The narrator points out:

She had long since raised the dose to its highest limit, but tonight she felt she must increase it. She knew she took a slight risk in doing so – she remembered the chemist’s warning. If sleep came at all, it might be a sleep without waking. But after all that was but one chance in a hundred: the action of the drug was incalculable, and the addition of a few drops to the regular dose would probably do no more than procure her for the rest she so desperately needed... (299)

This passage highlights Lily’s consciousness to her very point of death. She has been warned of the dangers in dealing with chloral, and she is aware that raising the dosage might kill her. This outcome was not definite, but at this point Lily decides to take the extra dosage believing that death would not be worse than life. At Lily’s last moments, the narrator notes, “darkness was what she must have at any cost” (299). For Lily, getting the rest she needed was worth possible death. This shows that Lily’s suffering has broken her down; there is no hope left for her. Lily knows that “she could bear it” living another day but questions “what strength would be left her the next day?” (299) Lily is aware that she has less strength each new day. Her suffering is magnified by her awareness of it. Although Lily does not actively choose to end her life, she decides that if death is a result of the rest she needs, death will be the outcome and end of her suffering.

Recognition, reversal, and suffering all fall under the broader aspect of plot. For Aristotle, “the plot is the source and (as it were) the soul of tragedy” (12). He goes on to explain more of the importance of plot:

Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life. Well-being and ill-being reside in action, and the goal of life is an activity, not a quality... So the events, i.e. the plot, are what tragedy is there for, and that is the most important thing of all. (11)

Aristotle’s view of plot within the genre of tragedy is strongly upheld in *The House of Mirth*. Lily Bart’s personal actions and decisions drive the events in her life that ultimately take a tragic downturn.

In the first book of the novel, Miss Bart’s main concern is finding herself a rich and suitable husband to propose to her. Throughout the book she has several options, the first of which is Mr. Percy Gryce, and her future looks somewhat bright. Gryce is a wealthy but sheltered and dull man whom Lily has little personal interest in or connection with. He offers her the money and stability she needs to break away from her aunt’s home and finally have a home of her own and a permanent place within high society. She will no longer be dependent upon her friends who keep her around, take her on trips, and dress her up because she amuses them. Lily longs for the freedom to live the life of luxury and comfort she has always dreamed, but she is never quite capable of following through with any sensible marriage options. The path of wealth and comfort comes with compromises which Lily seems unwilling to make; therefore, Lily never follows through with the opportunities that lead her down that path. Lily has gotten along quite well with Gryce at Bellomont, the country home of her friends the Trenors, and it appears to

everyone that an engagement is soon to follow. However, when Lawrence Selden appears at Bellomont, Lily misses her meeting with Percy Gryce at church to see Selden. "But her course was too purely reasonable not to contain the germ of rebellion. No sooner were her preparations made than they roused a smothered sense of resistance" (72). Then, instead of meeting Gryce after church, she again chooses to take an afternoon walk with Selden, who is not a wealthy or marriageable suitor for Lily. Instead of following through with a sure plan to the comfortable life she craves, she resists and loses her chance with Percy Gryce but also avoids the certainly bland and boring life she would have lived with him. Lily consciously rejects the comfort and stability that she claims would bring her such happiness with her decision. As Lily prepares to attend church with Gryce, the narrator notes, "her course was too purely reasonable not to contain the germ of rebellion. No sooner were her preparations made than they roused a smothered sense of resistance" (72). Lily was not quite ready to settle into this life with Percy Gryce, and in her rebellion she turns to Lawrence Selden for an early afternoon walk. This decision to turn from Gryce to Selden shows the early decisions that Lily makes that begin to narrow her opportunities for marriage.

Lily makes a second error when dealing with another potential suitor, Simon Rosedale. Throughout the first book of the novel, Lily is unfriendly and distant with Rosedale despite his sincere interest in her. Although Rosedale is somewhat outside of Lily's social circle because he is Jewish, Lily's stance in the social world in combination with Rosedale's wealth would give them each what they needed, or so Rosedale proposes to Lily. Lily's pride and unromantic attachment leads her to shun Rosedale although later she comes to need him. If Lily had been willing to marry Rosedale, her path might have

been completely changed. However, Lily believes she can do better than Rosedale, and her decision to reject him exacerbates her decline.

After Lily's social death at the hands of Bertha Dorset, Lily once again turns to Rosedale, this time to swallow her pride and agree to marry him. At this point, the tables have turned and Lily no longer offers Rosedale the same social status he longed for. The rumors circulating about Lily having an affair with George Dorset have irreparably damaged her status completely in high society. Rosedale said to Lily, "I don't believe the stories about you—I don't want to believe them. But they're there, and my not believing them ain't going to alter the situation" (241). However, Lily has a power against Bertha. A maid at Selden's building has come to Lily with love letters to Selden from Bertha Dorset. Selden had been somewhat careless in ripping them in half and leaving them in the wastebasket. Because Lily now owns these letters, she could choose to blackmail Bertha Dorset and re-enter her social circle. Rosedale suggests to Lily, "Why don't you use those letters of hers you bought last year?" (243) He then suggests that these letters paired with his financial backing would keep Bertha in her place for a long while. And yet Lily refuses to use the letters. This is a decision that immediately precedes Lily's sharp drop into the working class. First she works for Mrs. Hatch and then as a milliner and living in a boarding house. Soon after this, Lily is found by Nettie Struther looking very tired and sickly. Lily's refusal to use the letters expresses her feelings for Lawrence Selden because she knows they would also hurt his reputation as well as Bertha's. Lily pays Mrs. Haffen for the letters in order to protect Selden although they later become a bargaining chip which could be used against Bertha. Lily's sacrifice for Selden seals one

of her final opportunities to lift herself from certain poverty, and so she retains some integrity by refusing to expose Selden, who she cares for.

In the beginning of the novel, Lily Bart seems to have access to opportunities to live the life she desires. As the novel continues, she hints that this life may not remain as desirous to her. As she gets closer and closer to a life with Percy Gryce or Simon Rosedale, she backs away and on her own accord sabotages the opportunity. The life she once desired has come to seem very confined and trapping for her, yet her pride will not allow her to seize outside possibilities for her life. She refuses to live the unmarried, unglamorous life of her friend Gerty Farish. Therefore, she continues to seek the life of a high-society married woman. When her decisions and actions finally lead to expulsion from the Dorsets' yacht, Lily's opportunities are narrowed and the action of her life is reversed. Although she continues to pursue Rosedale, she is unwilling to follow through with his proposal based on the circumstances of using Bertha's letters. Her fortune is then sealed. One might believe that Lily is finally forced to live the independent life she longed for but had not the courage to choose. However, Lily is simply surrounded by the poverty she feared and nearly incapable of providing for herself. On top of her difficult circumstances, Lily is finally aware of her fate and has grown pessimistic about her future.

The plot of Lily's story, which leads to her suicide and includes her suffering, her reversal, and her recognition, easily point to Aristotle's classical definition of tragedy. The essence of this definition is an imitation of life, and that is what Wharton gives to readers in *Lily Bart*. Lily is a complex, full character who comes to life through her ambition, her struggles, and ultimately her failure. As we see Lily become more and more

aware of her difficult circumstances, reverse her action as a result of this awareness, and endure suffering, she is brought to life. Lily's life was an imitation and representation of the life of women of her time and status. Through Lily, Wharton represented the role and perspective of women.

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The criticism on tragedy from the last century shows the many cultural shifts in society and literature over time. Women and their role in tragedy, while definitely present in the tragic plays of ancient Greece, were mostly ignored in the intellectual discourse surrounding tragedy until the twentieth century. Elizabeth Ammons discusses Wharton's outlook on the situation of women at the time the novel was written:

Typical women in her view – no matter how privileged, nonconformist, or assertive (indeed, often in proportion to the degree in which they embodied those qualities) – were not free to control their own lives, and that conviction became the foundation of her argument with American optimism for more than twenty years... In her opinion the American woman was far from being a new or whole human being. (3)

Wharton saw that the life of a woman in her time was often if not always somewhat tragic and limited. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton displays the tragedy of Lily Bart, a representative woman of her time. Feminist approaches to tragedy thus offer insight into the gendered tragedy Wharton creates.

In her essay "Images of Women in Literature of Classical Athens," Sarah B. Pomeroy discusses the traditional gender roles found in classical tragedies. Her commentary on the gender roles and their uses within tragedy offer insight into gender

roles and interactions between men and women in *The House of Mirth*. Pomeroy discusses the development of misogyny and the patriarchal society which surrounded the ancient Greek authors writing tragedy. While directly discussing gender roles, Pomeroy states that “womanly behavior was characterized then, as now, by submissiveness and modesty...Because of the limitations of ‘normal’ female behavior, heroines who act outside the stereotype are sometimes said to be ‘masculine’”(218). This ‘masculine’ woman is later described as a character who “may reject the traditional role of wife and mother” (221), which is exactly what Lily Bart does.

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily continually puts off her opportunities to follow through with a possible marriage. In so doing, she rejects the traditional female role because it affords her no more real freedom than she has currently, only more comfort and less financial worry. Although Lily makes small decisions, such as skipping church with Percy Gryce, that do reject the traditional female role, she is not directly trying to reject this role. In fact, she turns back to this role continually as her only hope for success in life. Although Lily does not consciously reject the role of traditional wife and mother for herself, I believe that Wharton consciously rejects this role for Lily time and time again. Because Wharton was frustrated with the limitations placed on women of the time, she rejects certain roles for her heroine.

In the opening of the novel, Lily expresses her jealousy of Lawrence Selden’s flat. Later, Lily is drawn in by Selden’s discussion on the “republic of the spirit” (81). Selden explains that his “idea of success...is personal freedom... From everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a king of republic of the spirit —that’s what I call success” (81). Lily admits that the

personal freedom Selden mentions is a rare occurrence in her life. Lily's lack of personal freedom comes from both her financial dependence on others and her constant work to please others and remain a part of the elite social crowd.

While Lily does reject the possibilities of marriage to the point where no marriage is an option, she remains committed to the "art of femininity" that Cynthia G. Wolff describes (109). Wolff states, "*The House of Mirth* is about the disintegration of Lily Bart, about the psychological disfigurement of any women who chooses to accept society's definition of her as a beautiful object and nothing more" (10). It is no secret that society, including high society, was very patriarchal at the turn of the century when Wharton wrote the novel. Despite decisions that unconsciously reject a traditional female role, Lily still attempts to use her feminine looks and charm to her advantage and imagines making a marriage and comfortable life for herself. She does this because this is how she has been trained. Lily's only skills involve her beauty and ornamentation being displayed for the enjoyment of high society. Lily has become an ornament for the taking, a decoration for a man to hold up. Men take wives so that their money may be made public by being displayed on their wives and through the parties they throw. While Lily sees this life as her only option, she never fully commits and instead spirals down into poverty because she cannot make a living for herself. Lily uses her tools of femininity but then reverses her actions in order to avoid finally being trapped in a marriage.

As a character, Lily is an overly feminine woman who seeks the personal freedom she finds in men's lives. Although she longs for this personal freedom, she cannot completely assume a masculine role and therefore commits suicide. Lily must maintain a desirable, feminine appearance in order to be a desirable candidate for marriage. In

addition to this, Lily cannot work as men do as educated lawyers or investors. She is limited to her options in the social sphere where women belong. Towards the end of the novel, Lily finally has ruined enough of her opportunities that marriage is no longer an option. Yet Lily cannot take on the role of providing for herself.

Wharton addresses gender roles in the novel from the very beginning with the opening encounter between Lily and Selden. Selden is presented as the observer and Lily as an object or ornament. Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out:

Lily has adopted her society's images of women narrowly and literally. She has long practiced the art of making herself an exquisite decorative object, and under Selden's eye she comes to think of herself as a moral object as well... She learns to evoke approval and appreciation in others by a subtle and ingenious series of graceful postures. It is an art she has practiced so well and for so long that she can no longer conceive of herself as anything but those postures; she can formulate no other desire than the desire to be seen to advantage. (127)

Lily has lost her true self in the performance of herself as others see her. She works very hard to be seen as entertaining and clever and beautiful to the socially elite crowd of her friends. She must also work to be seen as beautiful and socially advantageous to potential suitors. Lily Bart's feminine role is to perform an act for men to observe. Lily's performance is shown in the novel at the Welly Brys' tableaux vivant, where Lily dressed in her finest and displayed herself as a living imitation of art. Lily enjoyed the "exhilaration of displaying her own beauty under a new aspect: of showing that her loveliness was no mere fixed quality, but an element shaping all emotions to fresh forms of grace" (136).

We see Lily's performance change for different men throughout the novel. In the beginning she is most frank with Lawrence Selden because she does not see him as a marriageable option for herself. He does not have the wealth it would take to maintain her lifestyle. Yet Selden is seen observing and judging Lily at several points throughout the novel. For Percy Gryce, Lily first adds to her performance an interest and knowledge of Americana, then a distaste but weakness for gambling, and a commitment to church and living a pious life. The performance Lily gives to Gryce is soon cracked as she becomes distracted by Selden and horrified with the dull future of attending church regularly with him. With Gus Trenor, Lily's first performance is as an interested and attentive friend in need of some help. When Lily asks for Trenor's financial advice in the carriage ride they take together, Lily's performance captivates Trenor. When Lily and Trenor are approaching Bellomont, Lily asks Trenor to extend their ride together. This is flattering to Trenor because it seems as though Lily wants to spend more time with him and enjoys his company. Lily continues to flatter Trenor by saying how understanding he is, and then she asks for "the very greatest of favors" (94). Basically, Lily continually acts as though she is interested at the very least in a friendship with Gus Trenor in order to get some financial advice. She lightly flirts with Trenor in order to get what she needs from him. And yet she cannot keep up her attentive behavior towards him which ultimately makes him angry. Lily also performs her act of femininity for George Dorset. Bertha has brought Lily on the yacht to keep George occupied and distracted from her own affair with Ned Silverton. Lily does a very good job of keeping George distracted and interested in her. In fact, they get along quite well. Lily's performance is yet again full of femininity for the observation of a man.

Although Lily completely adopts the feminine role, she never follows through with the traditional feminine life for women of her time. Lily's action is in the rejection of this life and the acceptance of her downfall as a result. Through this fact, Wharton displays the stifling limitations placed on women. The only life Lily knows to lead asks her to assume the traditional female role, and yet she rejects the unhappiness that this unfulfilling life would bring her. When she rejects this life, there is no other life for Lily to live. Although Lily does not want to live the life she has been lead to, she cannot make another life for herself. Wharton is addressing the realization that women no longer wanted to play the role of dutiful wife and mother, and yet many women could not imagine any other life to live and remained trapped. Lily is essentially trapped on a path for her life and has no alternative.

This idea is central to the gendered tragedy that Wharton builds around Lily Bart. Lily's tragedy is determined in large measure by the fact that she is a woman. If Lily were an unmarried man at the age of thirty, her options would include working to provide for herself, an option that is unavailable to her because she is a woman. Lily is trapped in a life with few alternatives because she is a woman.

Nicole Loraux further develops the modern feminist perspective on tragedy by discussing female suicide in ancient Greek tragedies. Loraux first notes the standard difference between male and female deaths in those ancient tragedies. She speaks of the "male courage" associated in most male deaths and even suicides in Greek tragedies, deaths that most often occur on a battle field (234). In contrast to this valiant death for heroic males, for women suicide was represented as a "tragic death chosen under the weight of necessity by those on whom felt 'the intolerable pain of a misfortune from

which there is no way out'¹. But in tragedy itself it was mainly a woman's death" (235).

This quotation speaks directly about Lily Bart's situation and suicide. Wharton's narrator describes Lily's hopelessness during her final moments as follows:

It was growing late, and an immense weariness once more possessed her. It was not the stealing sense of sleep, but a vivid wakeful fatigue, a wan lucidity of mind against which all the possibilities of the future were shadowed forth gigantically.

She was appalled by the intense clearness of the vision. (298)

After her struggles and ultimate failure to remain a member of her high society, Lily grows very tired. She has spent the past year merely trying to survive and lift herself out of the eventual poverty she was moving towards. Lily has essentially been to battle and lost. The battle Lily tried to fight did not even allow women of her training on the field. Lily could not make enough money to support herself therefore she spiraled into poverty. Further, she has not gone down on the battle field with her glory intact. Instead, Lily simply continues to decline and become more helpless. Her working skills are insufficient to maintain a job and provide for herself. Lily chooses not to use the letters against Bertha in order to spare Selden the associated humiliation because she cared for him. She does not fight with the glory and intensity of a man as Bertha does. Instead, Lily allows her personal feelings to interfere with the fight. After Lily's total decline from a high social status to the edge of poverty, she sees no way out. She continues to wither, and she eventually escapes by overdosing on sleeping medication. Lily is left with one glimmer of dignity when she pays off her debt to Gus Trenor before she takes her last dose.

¹ Here Loraux quotes from Plato, *Laws* IX.837c5-6.

Although Loraux focuses on ancient Greek plays in her essay, her ideas and thoughts on women in tragedy relate surprisingly well to Edith Wharton's early-twentieth-century novel. Loraux discusses the importance and meaning of the place where women chose to die:

This room reveals the narrow space that tragedy grants to women for the exercise of their freedom. They are free enough to kill themselves, but they are not free enough to escape from the space to which they belong, and the remote sanctum where they meet their death is equally the symbol of their life—a life that finds its meaning outside the self and is fulfilled only in the institutions of marriage and maternity, which tie women to the world and lives of men. (244)

In her final moments, Lily is alone in the lowly boarding house in her small room that is all her own. Lily has struggled throughout the novel to find her meaning in the institution of marriage, but she has ultimately chosen her path of solitude and in order not to lose what little freedom she felt she did have. For Lily, marriage would mean stability within her social group but not the kind of freedom she longed for. Lily refuses to allow her life to be defined by a man. She turned down proposals and knowingly ruined other marriage opportunities. Fittingly, Lily is alone when she overdoses on sleeping pills. The escape Lily found in sleep would be her ultimate fate and comfort. The location of her death harks back to her initial meeting with Lawrence Selden in the novel. While in his flat, she expresses her desire for “a place like this all to one's self!” (28) In the end, that is exactly what Lily got. At the time, there was no way for a woman to realistically maintain a place of her own and live a full life of her own. Even the independent Gerty Farish depended on men like Selden for things. Lily's death is a reflection of her life. She chose the life of

solitude and fittingly she died in solitude. Lawrence Selden, who rushes to Lily's side when he realizes his love, is too late to save Lily from herself.

In his essay "Modern Tragedy," Raymond Williams offers a more contemporary vision of the tragic hero. Williams notes,

We think of tragedy as what happens to the hero, but the ordinary tragic action is what happens through the hero... in a culture theoretically limited to the individual experience, there is no more to say, when a man has died, but that others also will die. Tragedy can then be generalized not as the response to death but as the bare irreparable fact. (157)

Williams speaks to the audience of the tragedy in this quotation. This audience includes both the reader or viewer and the audience within the work itself. Lily Bart is an individual character who takes on a collective representation for women of her time. She is trapped by the social conventions of the time and unable to escape her fate. Just as Lily is trapped, other women are trapped. Just as Lily dies, other women will die. Because Lily did not fulfill the role of wife and social entertainer in society, there was no place for her. Society dismissed Lily, and because she could not work there was no place for her in the world. This speaks for all women of the time who felt there was no escape. Lily represented the fact there was no room for independent women in her society. Others will continue to suffer and die the same death. The idea that Lily represented the life of many women of her time makes her story truly tragic.

* * *

In 1995, Dawn Keeler adapted Edith Wharton's novel into a stage production. The play was performed by the Cambridge Theatre Company at the Theatre Royal in Winchester, England. After the initial production, the play toured England for nine weeks (Keeler). This modern adaptation offers a late-twentieth-century interpretation of Lily Bart's story that emphasizes freedom, relationships, and tragedy.

A more contemporary version of Edith Wharton's story offers insight into the tragedy of Lily Bart's life. This timely adaptation is interesting because it returns the tragic story of Lily Bart to a more traditional medium for tragedy, the stage. Classical Greek tragedies were made to be performed, and the audience was an important element to tragedy. Keeler's adaptation also expresses the story as a tragedy. The play opens with a scene full of Lily's elite social circle waiting to travel to her funeral. Lily Bart is to be buried at Bellomont, at the insistence of Gus Trenor (8). In Act I, the stage directions note:

ON SCREEN, Newspaper Print. Town Talk. New York, May 16, 1905. The funeral of Miss Lily Bart, famed social beauty, who died May 12th, at age 31, takes place today at the Gus Trenor's country estate, Bellomont. A special train will take the coffin and mourners from the Grand Central Station at 10am. (7)

Because the play opens with the death of Lily Bart, the audience is given information that the reader of Wharton's novel was not. This scene frames the story as a tragedy. The central focus of the play is no longer the life and struggles of Lily but rather her death. The audience will now see every action of Lily's life as a step toward her death. It is also interesting that Keeler places Lily back into the socially elite crowd she has fallen from at her funeral. Although many of these people dismissed Lily in life, they each show up for

her death. The description of Lily as a “famed social beauty” is also interesting because it introduces the audience to the way they should perceive Lily. Her identity was essentially wrapped up in her social life and beauty. Other people also supported this identity for Lily. When she lost her social life, her beauty did not matter. Keeler also places Lily back at Bellomont, a place she could not have dreamed of returning to at her death.

Keeler’s adaptation opens at Grand Central Station just as Wharton’s novel opens in this location. In the novel, Lily meets Selden at a time when her hopes for life and marriage and social stability are high. She seems to know what she wants and has a plan to get it. In Keeler’s adaptation, everyone attending Lily’s funeral is waiting for a train to Bellomont where Lily will be buried. They look back and talk about Lily after her death. Because the funeral happens first, the rest of the story spills out through the memories of her friends. Time shifts throughout the play from present to past.

Aristotelian recognition is particularly emphasized in Keeler’s adaptation. At several points within the play, Lily speaks directly to the audience as the ghost of Lily, who looks back on her life with understanding. After an afternoon spent with Selden instead of Percy Gryce at Bellomont, Lily notes “I had almost landed you, Percy—but you were so boring. You had bored me all afternoon. Did I really want you to do me the honor of boring me for life? But what choice did I have?” (34) In this quotation, Lily speaks with directness that she does not have in Wharton’s novel. We see more clearly that Lily had definite recognition and awareness of her circumstances. In her opinion, Lily had little choice but to try to marry Percy Gryce and others like him. Yet when it came down to sacrificing herself to a life of boredom and stability, Lily could not commit. She always hoped for something more or something better.

In Lily's final words in the play, she says,

There were in me two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom, the other gasping for air. As I lay in my bed, the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the free spirit quivered for flight. I had the first glimpse of the central truth of existence, the continuity of life. I thought again of your 'republic of the spirit.' (89)

This statement suggests Lily's ultimate awareness. She knew that she could never be happy in a suffocating marriage, and yet she did not have the option of full freedom in life, only a few "deep breaths of freedom" (89). Even in her final moments, Lily is still "gasping for air" and, Keeler suggests, fully constricted by her status as a woman with very limited opportunities in life (89). As we learn that Lily's "free spirit quivered for flight," we become aware of how much suffering she truly endured because of the restrictions on her life. The only freedom Lily can find at this point is death.

Keeler's adaptation also focuses on Lily's desire for freedom, as expressed in the quote above. This desire for personal freedom is very active in a more modern audience of 1995, so it makes sense that an emphasis on this desire would allow the audience to connect more deeply with Lily and therefore empathize with her. This connection from the audience also helps to frame Lily's story as a tragedy. Her desire for personal freedom is also closely tied to Lawrence Selden in the play, even more so than in the novel. In both the novel and the adaptation, Selden introduces Lily to the "republic of the spirit" (81). In the novel, however, Lily's final thoughts are more directed to paying off the debt to Gus Trenor than to seeking freedom. She received her inheritance from her Aunt Peniston, and "she meant to use it in paying her debt to Trenor; but she foresaw that

when the morning came she would put off doing so, would slip into gradual tolerance of the debt. The thought terrified her” (298). In her last moments, Lily longs for rest. She seeks rest in chloral, the drug that will ultimately take her life. In the adaptation, her final thoughts turn slightly more optimistically towards freedom and Selden.

The stage adaptation emphasizes Lily’s relationships with other characters in the novel through dialogue and conversation about Lily at her funeral. Throughout the adaptation, time flashes between Lily’s life in the past and her funeral in the present. In a conversation at the funeral, Bertha Dorsett tells Judy Trenor, “I don’t understand why Lily is being buried at Bellomont, anyway.” Judy replies, “Gus insisted, Bertha. For once he seemed quite adamant, so I gave in” (8). This conversation adds another layer to Lily’s relationship with Gus Trenor. This shows the Gus seems to continue to care for Lily after she is gone, which allows a more humanized view of him as a character. Instead of opening with a commanding and overly aggressive picture of Gus that the novel portrays, Keeler shows Gus in a more compassionate light. The dialogue form also emphasizes the prominence of relationships for Lily. The action of the play happens almost entirely in dialogue and with very few stage directions. There is no narrator; the only person who addresses the audience is the ghost of Lily. In this dialogue, we see Lily’s interactions with other characters come to life. The intimacy of conversation with Lawrence Selden is apparent against the comparison of cold and awkward conversation with Percy Gryce.

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Edith Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth* pairs classical aspects of tragedy with modern cultural ideas in order to make a contribution to the social, cultural and political discourse of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in the areas of

feminism and gender roles. Lily is limited by her society but grows increasingly aware of her place within that society throughout the novel. Although Lily is conscious of her decline, she makes choices within a very limited range of options for her life. The death and suffering which are central foci of Lily's tragedy are highlighted in Dawn Keeler's stage adaptation of the novel. Keeler's adaptation frames Lily's story as a tragedy by focusing on her death from the opening of the play. Reading *The House of Mirth* as a tragedy demands not only that we pay close attention to its plot—Lily's life as a downward slope towards her ultimate and unavoidable death—but also to her evolving consciousness of her own decline.

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