

THE TREATMENT OF FEMALE CHARACTERS  
IN EDITH WHARTON'S *The House of Mirth*  
IN THE LIGHT OF  
AMERICAN GENDER THEORY AND HISTORY  
IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

An Essay by  
BIRGITT FLOHR

When reading Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*<sup>1</sup> the reader of the 1990s encounters a world he or she is no longer familiar with. Lily Bart's assessment that "the real difficulty of her situation [was] incommunicable to any one whose theory of values was so different from her own" (HM 263) characterizes exactly the problem of the present-day reader. Our problems are connected with the focus points of Edith Wharton's novel: The situation of women and the life of the leisure class. Both the position of women and the value of a leisure-life have changed dramatically since the turn of the century so that in order to understand, for example, Lily Bart's conviction that she is definitely not made for productive work but for decoration only, we have to learn something about her theory of values. Two influential books published at the end of the nineteenth century offer us insights into the historical situation: In 1898 Charlotte Perkins Gilman presented her analysis concerning the economic situation of the women of her time and the effects of this situation on their behaviour in *Women and Economics*<sup>2</sup>. In 1899 Thorstein Veblen published his *Theory of the Leisure Class*<sup>3</sup> which does not only examine the development and values of an upper class that demonstrates its superiority by "conspicuous consumption" and "conspicuous leisure" but at the same time implies a theory of gender by discussing the different roles of men and women in this scheme of life.

Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* is based on the assumption that during the development of Western human society two factors gained usefulness as an indicator of social superiority: property or its excessive consumption and the exemption from industrial occupation. The latter developed out of a distinction between worthy and unworthy labour. Those employments which belong to

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<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, (Penguin Books: New York, 1985, 1993) in the following text the novel is quoted as HM with pagenumbers in parenthesis

<sup>2</sup>Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women & Economics: The economic factor between men and women as a factor in social evolution*, (Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc: New York 1966, originally published by Small, Maynard & Company: Boston 1898) in the following text the book will be quoted as WE with pagenumbers in parenthesis

<sup>3</sup>Thorstein Veblen *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, (George Allen & Unwin Ltd: London 1925, 1949), in the following text the book will be quoted as ThLC with pagenumbers in parenthesis

the sphere of women and slaves were more and more regarded as unworthy since they “imply subservience and submission” (ThLC 15) while the employments which belong to the sphere of men are considered as worthy because they “involve an assertion of prowess” (ThLC 14). This distinction becomes a canon of conduct “so that no employment . . . is morally possible to the self respecting man . . . except such as proceeds on the basis of prowess.” (ThLC 14) Veblen argues that the distinction between worthy and unworthy employments is still the basis of the distribution of work between the classes of society. Productive labour, since it is connected with weakness and subjection to a master, marks inferiority and because “the performance of labour has been accepted as a conventional evidence of inferior force . . . it comes itself, by a mental shortcut, to be regarded as intrinsically base.” (ThLC 38) This of course leads to the conclusion that superior members of society have to avoid productive labour so that “conspicuous abstention from labour [i.e. leisure] . . . becomes the conventional index of reputability” (ThLC 38); not only because productive labour is regarded as “intrinsically base” but also because the person who can afford a life of leisure possesses “the readiest and most conclusive evidence of pecuniary strength” as long as he can live in ease and comfort. (ThLC 38) A person who can afford to consume time non-productively obviously displays wealth.

At the same time there develops another more visible habit of “comparison of one person with another in point of efficiency” (ThLC 16). Starting with the possession of women as trophies the possession of goods becomes a means of measuring success. But “in order to gain and hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth and power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence.” (ThLC 36) A means to put wealth in evidence is of course conspicuous consumption not only of a certain quantity but also of a certain quality of goods.

Apart from consuming time and goods on his own the member of the leisure class will employ his wife and servants to display even more leisure and consumption which is paid by him. Veblen notes that although wife and servants live a life of leisure they do not belong to the leisure class proper since their consumption “is not normally or primarily directed to their own comfort” (ThLC 59-60) but is a performance to increase the reputability of the head of the household. Another way to increase his reputation will be the “giving of valuable presents and expensive feasts and entertainments” (ThLC 75) which are also meant to prove that he can afford much more than he can consume alone.

Veblen argues that since “the leisure class stands at the head of the social structure in point of reputability . . . the observance of these standards, in some degree of approximation, becomes incumbent upon all classes lower in scale.” (ThLC 84) In the lower classes, most visibly in the lower middle class, the effort to observe the standards set by the leisure class even leads to the situation that the man in the household can enjoy no leisure at all but has to earn as much money as possible in order to enable his wife to “carry on the business of vicarious leisure, for the good name of the household and its master.” (ThLC 81) It is worth

stressing that Veblen does not regard her business as the more advantageous part in this division of labour although he acknowledges that the reader might be tempted to do so:

She is petted, and is permitted, or even required, to consume largely and conspicuously – vicariously for her husband or other natural guardian. She is exempted, or debarred, from vulgarly useful employment – in order to perform leisure vicariously for the good repute of her natural (pecuniary) guardian. These offices are the conventional marks of the un-free, at the same time as they are incompatible with the human impulse to purposeful activity. (ThLC 358)

Like every unfree person women are denied the right “to aspire to a self-directing, self-centered life” (ThLC 355). For Veblen this is evidence “to the effect that in the modern civilised scheme of life the woman is still, in theory, the economic dependant of the man, – that, perhaps in a highly idealized sense, she still is the man’s chattel.” (ThLC 182) Her sphere is “the system of honorific expenditure and conspicuous leisure” by which the reputation of the head of her household is sustained and her sphere is therefore “ancillary to the activity of the man” (ThLC 354) Her whole life is only a vicarious one “the merit or demerit of which is . . . to be imputed to some other individual who stands in some relation of ownership or tutelage to the woman” (ThLC 354). In fact, her life is merely “an expression of the man’s life at the second remove” (ThLC 356). Clearly not in her own interest is she forced to “abstain more consistently from useful effort and to make more show of leisure than the men in the same social class.” And not for her own sake but for the sake of her “keeper” does it “grate painfully on our nerves to contemplate the necessity of any wellbred woman’s earning a livelihood by useful work.” (ThLC 179) It is her task to “beautify” and to be the household’s “chief ornament” (ThLC 180) and everything else would be indecent, unwomanly, unfeminine (ThLC 355) and would – worst of all – damage the reputation of her “master”. In the meantime the woman is damaged by “the canon of pecuniary decency, which requires the observance of ceremonial futility” (ThLC 359) and counteracts her strong impulse “to live her own life in her own way and to enter the industrial process of community at something nearer than the second remove.” (ThLC 358)

The greatest damage is done when the woman believes that the life of leisure, consumption and futility is not only her fate but also the only fate she is capable of.

The relevance of Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* for *The House of Mirth* is obvious. The social setting of the novel is the leisure class, more specifically the leisure class women, and none of the women of this class earns her living by productive work. Instead they perform their function as displayers of their men’s wealth, thereby sustaining the men’s reputation as superior members of society.

Conspicuous consumption and leisure is everywhere. Leisure class women consume large quantities of high quality dresses from the best dressmakers, “having just the right dress for every occasion” (HM 266), and they are adorned with precious jewellery in order to display luxury most effectively. The wealth they can not consume on their own is shared with the other members of their class in expensive feasts, weekend entertainments and luxurious presents. A perfect way of wasting time and money in the same instant is the Dorsets’ “cruise in Mediterranean” with its additional possibility to prove their ability to risk money in Monte Carlo.

There are but two prominent women in the book who are not occupied with the display of luxury and wealth for men although they are associated with the leisure class and none of them has to engage in “unworthy”, i.e. productive labour to support herself. Gerty Farish spends her time with charities for working class girls, which is, according to Veblen, a socially acceptable outlet for female productive energy by not being too conspicuously productive on the one hand and by demonstrating the ability to waste at least time on other people on the other. Carry Fisher besides trying to get financial support from other women’s husbands develops a profession out of teaching social newcomers equipped with the necessary amount of money but not with the necessary life-style the right way of conspicuous leisure and consumption.

The only women who have to do productive work are those whose husbands are not able to support their households on their own. The char-woman for example has to earn money and her motivation for blackmailing Lily is the fact that her husband has lost his employment. Since, again according to Veblen, the necessity for productive labour marks social inferiority, working class women in – or rather outside of – *The House of Mirth* are generally depicted in an unfavourable light which does not appeal to our sympathy with their situation but tends to cause contempt and disgust. This contempt is, above all, provoked by descriptions of their physical ugliness. The char-woman with her “broad sallow face, slightly pitted with small-pox, and thin straw-coloured hair through which her scalp shone *unpleasantly*” (HM 13, emphasis mine) is, in Lily’s view, simply a “creature” and only at best a “poor thing” (HM 14). The women who are employed with Lily in the “fashionable millinery establishment” show the same negative effect of productive work on women: “Their own faces were sallow with the unwholesomeness of hot air and sedantary toil, rather than with any actual signs of want” (HM 282). Although they are “fairly well clothed” because they are “well paid” they look “dull and colourless”. (HM 282) Clearly, these women are no longer able to “adorn and delight”. They are useless as ornaments and this seems to imply that they are useless human beings in general. Paradoxically, because they do not waste time and money they waste femininity and womanhood which, at least in the eyes of Lily Bart, is the real crime.

An exception from this rule is Nettie Struther, the working woman Lily meets again in the last hours of her life. Although she is “poorly-dressed ” and her face has “the air of unwholesome refinement which ill-health and over-work may

produce ... its common prettiness was redeemed by the strong and generous curve of the lips." (HM 312) But we also learn that Lily Bart's point of view has changed by now. In the past "she had known Nettie Crane as one of the discouraged victims of over-work and anaemic parentage: one of the superfluous fragments of life destined to be swept prematurely into that social refuse-heap" (HM 313). Now she is no longer a mere creature but the woman who lives and escapes the refuse-heap while Lily Bart is swept into it and dies.

But Nettie Struther is no real alternative to the leisure class scheme of life. Like everybody else in the novel she accepts its standard as her norm. Already her kitchen is "almost miraculously clean", thereby following the, as Veblen points out, exaggerated and unproductive standards of cleanness established by a class whose women have nothing else to do. She, moreover, thinks that it would be "too lovely for anything" if her daughter could grow up to be just like Lily Bart (HM 316) and Lily Bart is, after all, *the* leisure class woman.

There is, however, an important difference between Edith Wharton's depiction of the leisure class and Veblen's theory of it. For Veblen the whole institution was established for and by men. It measures their efficiency and their superiority. Other persons who depend on these men may profit from a higher standard of living and from the possibility to abstain from hard work, but, as Veblen stresses, both serves primarily the men's comfort. Rosedale, for example, after getting all the money he always wanted needs the woman who can display his superior wealth by "mak[ing] all other women feel small" by "hold[ing] her head higher the more diamonds [he] put[s] on it." (HM 176)

In *The House of Mirth* it is the comfort of women and their own reputation which is the main point of interest among Edith Wharton's leisure class women. In Veblen's theory the woman is a mere extension of the man who performs an essential function for him. In Wharton's novel men look much more like the extension of women by bringing money in their possession, thereby securing their luxurious standard of living and the women's reputation as an influential member of society. Compared with the servant-like female in Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* the women in *The House of Mirth* are enormously powerful. They control their sons, their husbands, the husbands of other women, the arrival of social newcomers, and last but not least they control each other. Gus Trenor has to ask Lily Bart and his wife to make Rosedale socially acceptable by speaking to him in public or by inviting him to a dinner. Wellington Bry and Mr. Gormer are not driven by their own ambition but mainly by the "indomitable social ambitions" (HM 112) of their wives. About Mrs. Bry we are even told that she "had already sacrificed one husband, and sundry minor considerations, to her determination to get on" (HM 112). If the man does not work properly he is simply exchanged for one who performs his function in a better way. Lily's mother imprudently ruins and more or less kills her husband by needing more and more money to live in the luxury she feels entitled to and when he starts to die she only feels "grim unflagging resentment" (HM 33) for a creature that has become a useless burden. Finally, it is neither Sim Rosedale nor Gus Trenor

who destroy Lily's reputation and cause her exclusion from her social set but a woman: Bertha Dorset.

The reason for women's need to control and manipulate men is of course the fact that they depend economically on them. No matter how ambitious they may be, there is no direct way for them to make big money and live in wealth. If Mr. Rosedale wants to be rich and influential he can work for it. If Mrs. Bry wants the same thing she can only marry the man who will achieve it for her. This economic dependence of women on men is the basic theory of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics*. She complains that "the economic status of the human race . . . is governed mainly by the activities of the male: the female obtains her share in the racial advance only through him." (WE 9) The woman gains this share by entering into a "sex-relation" with a man which therefore is at the same time her economic relation to the world. Since her only way to secure her living is the attraction of a mate "she is modified to sex to an excessive degree." (WE 39) She specializes in sex-attraction and develops the traits that are most useful for her survival. Gilman surely provoked her contemporary readers by comparing marriage-market so directly with prostitution.

The consequences of this specialization in sex-attraction are described as extremely damaging for the woman and for society in general. Essentially the woman is denied the right to develop the full potential of humanity. Above all "the power of production is checked" in women while their "power of consumption is inordinately increased." (WE 118) This leads to the development of an "unnatural greed generated by the perverted condition of female energy" (WE 119). Deprived of other outlets for her energies the woman becomes the "priestess of the temple of consumption" (WE 120). Like Veblen Gilman acknowledges "the demand in women . . . for their own work for the sake of personal expression." (WE 157) She states that "human labor is an exercise of faculty, without which we should cease to be human; that to do and to make not only gives deep pleasure, but is indispensable to healthy growth" (WE 157). Most completely deprived of this possibility to be human and to grow are the women of the upper class:

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. (WE 170)

Since upper class women are so totally exposed to economic dependence it seems only natural to conclude that they are in an equally extreme way subject to the "vice" the sexuo-economic relation promotes. (WE 312) Among these vices are "all kinds of deceit and imposition", the "desire to get without giving" (WE 227),

“pure egoism” produced by a state of economic isolation (WE 325), an “inordinate self-interest” (WE 337) and “a childish, wavering, short-range judgment” (WE 337). Gilman goes as far as claiming that “the condition of woman has always been a doorway of evil. The sexuo-economic relation has debarred her from the social activity in which, and in which alone, are developed the social virtues.” (WE 329) The sexuo-economic relation inhibits not only the development of social solidarity but also women’s ability to plan and undertake activities independently since their survival is based on “the adaption of the dependent one to the source of her supplies” (WE 333). Equally inhibited is women’s “power to think and judge for themselves”. (WE 335) This impairs, above all, her moral judgment. Because woman “was denied the moral freedom of being mistress of her own action and of learning by the merciful law of consequences what was right and what was wrong . . . she has remained, perforce, undeveloped in the larger judgment of ethics.” (WE 335) It becomes obvious that the woman who is accustomed to the sexuo-economic relationship is, in Gilman’s opinion, not a fully grown human being. An illustration of this opinion can be found in *The House of Mirth*.

In the whole novel women display the childish traits of the not fully developed and grown person Gilman describes. A case in point is Bertha Dorset. Like a child whose toy has been taken away she punishes Lily Bart for the first time when Lily destroys her illusion that Lawrence Selden has only come to Bellomont to see her. And like a child she takes revenge by destroying, in turn, what is left of Lily’s opportunity to marry Percy Gryce. She is driven by an immature and “inordinate self-interest” acts out her impulses in a completely uninhibited way. Equally uninhibited does she pursue her love affair right in front of her husband and has finally no scruple to destroy the reputation of Lily Bart in order to save her own wealth and position.

Lily Barts moral sensitivity appears to be more developed but she is still caught in a phase where “she lives in a forcing-bed of sensitiveness to moral distinctions” without “the broad judgment that alone can guide and govern this sensitiveness” (WE 335). She lacks the “width and clarity of vision of a full-grown moral sense” (WE 337) or, as Edith Wharton’s narrator tells us: “there had been nothing in her training to develop any continuity of moral strength: what she craved, and really felt herself entitled to, was a situation in which the noblest attitude should also be the easiest” (HM 262) and Lily herself is finally frightened by the knowledge that “she could not count on her continuity of purpose”. (HM 295) It is this immature combination of existing moral sensitivity and lacking broad, governing judgment that turns out to be, literally, fatal for Lily. She is sensitive enough to have “lingering scruples” (HM 85) when Gus Trenor offers to speculate for her at Wall Street, but these scruples do not prevent her from entering the deal. They only cause her to close her eyes as much as possible and to take Trenor’s convenient assurance for granted that “her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied” and that “this miracle would take place within a short time” (HM 85). In the same way Lily Bart does feel “unusually

virtuous” and in the “mood of self-approval” when she manages to resist the temptation to buy a dressing-case (HM 111), but this feeling is not enough to motivate her to change her way of life and spend money according to her means, quite the contrary: After giving a part of her dressing-table budget to Gerty Farish for her “working girls” she “by some obscure process of logic . . . felt that her momentary burst of generosity had justified all previous extravagances, and excused any in which she might subsequently indulge.” (HM 112) When Gus Trenor describes the whole dimension of her debt she is, interesting enough, not angry with him for deceiving her but feels that she is “a bad girl” (HM 164). She feels “horror” and “disgust” but “not so much compunction” (HM 168) which might offer a clearer vision of her situation. Moral scruples trouble Lily but she cannot judge a situation adequately. Her scruples are either not troubling enough or too troubling in the wrong cases. Lily’s determination to remain with the Dorset’s during a crisis in their marriage is the misjudgment that will cost her the most. Of all opportunities she chooses this one to practice “compassion” and altruism. (HM 208) It is not really possible to argue that Lily is “too good” to survive in the such corrupt surroundings. Her faculty to assess a situation properly is simply impaired so that she is left with “a fatalistic sense of being drawn from one wrong turning to another, without ever perceiving the right road till it was too late to take it.” (HM 127)

Connected with this not fully developed capacity for ethical judgment is, as already mentioned, the lack of social solidarity Gilman diagnoses in women and, indeed, the whole *House of Mirth* is mainly motivated by egoism and self-interest. Men are married out of the self-interest to secure a living and the same principle governs the relationships of women with each other. Lily Bart complains that “the other women – my best friends – well, they use me or abuse me; but they don’t care a straw what happens to me” (HM 9) while practicing exactly the same “utilitarian classification of her friends” where “Mrs. Trenor ranks as the woman who was least likely to ‘go back’ on her.” (HM 41) In the end Judy Trenor does go back on Lily Bart to defend her most important self-interest. She finds out that Lily took money from her husband, thereby using a source of income meant to be an exclusive supply for his wife. Most of Lily’s friends turn away from her to secure their own interests, namely their good relationship with the wealthy and therefore powerful Bertha Dorset, and those who do not turn away have less or nothing to lose. Even Gerty Farish’s care for Lily is at least not free from egoism. When she encourages her friend to turn to Selden for help her main motive is, ironically, her own love for him although she perceives Lily as her rival. Since Gerty loves Selden she has to see him in the noblest light which, of course, implies that he will be as willing to help Lily as she is. This sacrifice then motivates every further care: “Having ones helped Lily, she must continue to help her; and helping her, must believe in her” (HM 236) A whole chain of altruistic acts is put into motion by self-interest. More obviously self-interested are Lily Bart’s excursions into philanthropy. Since “the other-regarding sentiments had not been cultivated in Lily” (HM 111) her main attraction to Gerty’s “working-



girls” is the interest and admiration she arouses in them.(HM 151) And finally, even the most sacred element in the traditional plot of a woman’s life, Lily’s romantic attraction to Selden, is to a strong degree caused and influenced by her self-interest. Lily is most of all fascinated by the unknown “self of hers which he alone had the faculty of drawing out” (HM 95). She likes “the quicker beat of life that his nearness always produced ” (HM 137) and her vanity is flattered by the fact that he “always made her feel that she was worthy of better things” (HM 174). She appears to be more in love with Selden’s image of herself than with him. When Selden falls in love with her, her strongest sensation is a feeling of triumph. Selden demonstrates to her that “no philosophy was proof against her power” (HM 139) At the same time she feels annoyed by the new “complication” he brings into her life. She decides, nevertheless, to see him again, not because she loves him so much but because “nothing in life was as sweet as the sense of her power over him.” (HM 139) Only when all other possibilities to escape her entanglement with Gus Trenor fail she really considers to turn to Selden. She obviously regards his help as her last and probably least attractive chance. There remains, of course, the fact that Lily never uses and finally burns Bertha Dorset’s letters and with them her only means for gaining social rehabilitation, in order to protect Selden. But this act does not only protect Selden who, as Lily argues herself, would suffer the least from their use (HM 105) . Above all it also keeps intact the self he creates in her, the image of a Lily Bart worthy of better things. In fact her last thought before she burns the letters is that this self “must still continue to be hers” (HM 309) . More than anything else the burning of the letters is an act of self-preservation.

Lily Bart is not only characterized by self-interest but also by another trait of dependent womanhood pointed out by Gilman.She appears to be disabled by a general inability to plan and undertake an action from beginning to end in an independent way without being distracted by other people’s ideas or by counteracting impulses inside of herself. According to Gilman this trait is a consequence of a long life of adaption to different sources of support and I want to argue that it is above all this inability and not a moral superiority which causes her obvious failure to secure her living by marrying a rich husband. When Lily sees the – most likely – younger and more attractive son of an Italian prince she forgets about marrying his father. When she feels the presence of the declared society despiser Lawrence Selden she cannot follow her former determination to marry Percy Gryce. When she encounters wealth and luxury she cannot be content with the standard of living Selden’s republic of the spirit can offer her. Typically, Lily Bart acts on hints (HM 19), on sudden impulses which react to signals from her momentary environment. The reader is told that

poor Lily, for all the hard glaze of her exterior, was inwardly as malleable as wax. Her faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people’s feelings, if it served her now and then in small contingencies, hampered her in decisive moments of life. She was like a water-plant

[Lily] in the flux of the tides (HM 53).

Since Lily Bart follows the “centripetal force” (HM 55) of those people who, literally, attract her the most in a given environment, since she is “unfailingly adaptable” (HM 56) it is possible that her sudden enthusiasm for Selden’s republic of the spirit is as much an adaption to Selden’s feelings and thoughts as the display of passivity is an adaption to her aunt Mrs. Peniston or the growing acceptance of the leisure class beliefs and judgments is an adaption to Percy Gryce. No adaption offers a final outline for Lily Bart’s personality, no impulse and attraction leads to a final intention and, therefore, Lily Bart never arrives anywhere. Her goals are always changing. Even her suicide is not really intended but caused by “the physical craving for sleep” which then “was her only sustained sensation.” (HM 322). Lily dies as she lives, driven by the strongest impulse of the moment and without “consider[ing] the question very closely.” (HM 322) This does also mean that Selden’s search for the “real Lily Bart” is as futile as his assumption is naive that the person he encounters in her three or four times in his life is her “real self”. Persons who are “unfailingly adaptable” do not tend to have a real self at all. They change with their environment just like Lily Bart does with her “faculty for renewing herself in new scenes” (HM 196).

But there is more continuity in Lily Bart than continuous change. With her vocation for marriage (HM 9), with her upbringing in the leisure class she belongs to “a special kind of people bred of the economic environment in which they are compelled to live.” (WE 4) In agreement with Gilman’s theory of social determinism Lawrence Selden sees Lily as “the victim of the civilization which had produced her” and he feels that “the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.” (HM 7) Her fate is – on one hand – her almost physical need for luxury and beauty. Lily herself is convinced that “an atmosphere of luxury ... was ... the only climate she could breath in.” (HM 26) What she hates is “dinginess” and “to her last breath she meant to fight against it” (HM 39). But when she finally lives in a dingy boarding-house she feels and almost fears that she could adapt to this new environment (HM 319). What appears to be much more restricting for her is the function she was trained to perform: “She had been fashioned to adorn and delight” (HM 301), “she had been brought up to be ornamental” (HM 297). Lily Bart perceives herself as a “highly specialized product” created by inherited tendencies combined with early training. And as such an organism she is “as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock.” (HM 301) The sphere she is completely helpless in is production. Lily tries to learn a craft and experiences failure. She is “forgetful, awkward and slow to learn.” She is convinced that she is unable “to serve any practical purpose” (HM 297). The only object she seems to be allowed to produce is herself as an ornament. Lily Bart is a master of this process. Even when she is alone she arranges herself in the most effective way and keeps the potential spectator constantly in mind. When she is asked to take part in the performance of *tableaux vivants* she feels to be “in her element” (HM 131) and

driven by “the exhilaration of displaying her own beauty” (HM 131). But exactly because it is her task to turn herself into an ornamental and delightful object she is ultimately denied the right to take part in ongoing production.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman imagined that women would be able to change with a growing participation in the process of production and she seems to believe that any industrial labour would serve this purpose. Edith Wharton offers us the working-woman Nettie Struther as a character who “had found strength to gather up the fragments of her life, and build herself a shelter with them.” (HM 320) She experiences the “solidarity” and “continuity of life” (HM 319) Gilman was hoping for. But it hard to see the working class women as the most privileged members society. Like Lily Bart they are denied what Gilman and Veblen point out as one of the most important elements of production: self-expression. Toni Morrison makes a very different suggestion for her heroine Sula and it might be worth considering for Lily as well:

In a way, her strangeness, her naivité . . . was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings . . . she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Bertha Dorset Lily Bart is not a real danger for others, but she turns out to be danger for herself. And since she feels that she could get used to a dingy boarding-house it is a pity that she does not get the opportunity to try a more genuine and less ornamental art form than the “creation of ever-varied settings for the face of fortunate womanhood” (HM 282). May be this is the reason why there is no way out of *The House of Mirth*: It does not seem to be the ideal environment for an artist.

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<sup>4</sup>Toni Morrison, *Sula*, (Penguin, 1982), p. 121

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Edith Wharton's novel is mercilessly frank in its description of 19th-century New York society, says Gemma Kappala-Ramsamy. Edith Wharton's acutely observed novel poses this question as it follows Lily's tragic path through the country houses, card tables and drawing rooms of New York's beau monde at the turn of the 20th century. Lily is a socially adept, intelligent and attractive young woman but her dependence on high society is her Achilles heel. Fashioned for a life of luxury and ease, she conducts herself as if she is entitled to such an existence, despite being unable to afford it, and she scorns those who lead alternative lifestyles.

In this essay, I explore the way in which Wharton drew on artistic representations of women with deep cultural resonance for her audience that served to underscore her critique of Victorian mythology and to garner sympathy for the characters victimized by that mythology. Export citation. Copyright. Dijkstra contends that the ideal female figure itself came to resemble a lily and that, by the late 19th Century, the pure woman in art was "œup to her neck in flowers" (pp. 9, 17). 16. The House of Mirth was serialized in Scribner's Magazine as were many of Wharton's early novels. American Gender Theory and History in the Early Twentieth Century. An Essay by Birgitt Flohr. When reading Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth the reader of the 1990s encounters a world he or she is no longer familiar with. Lily Bart's assessment that "œthe real difficulty of her situation [was] incommunicable to any one whose theory of values was so different from her own" (HM 263) characterizes exactly the problem of the present-day reader. Two influential books published at the end of the nineteenth century offer us insights into the historical situation: In 1898 Charlotte Perkins Gilman presented her analysis concerning the economic situation of the women of her time and the effects of this situation on their behaviour in Women and Economics.