

The House of Mirth (The Penguin English Library)

By Edith Wharton

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With an essay by Hermione Lee.

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Edith Wharton's shattering novel created controversy on its publication in 1905 with its scathing portrayal of the world's wealthy and the prison that marriage can become.

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The House of Mirth (The Penguin English Library) By Edith Wharton Bibliography

- Rank: #960411 in eBooks
- Published on: 2012-04-26
- Released on: 2012-04-26
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
"The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth," warns Ecclesiastes 7:4, and so does the novel by Edith Wharton that takes its title from this call to heed. New York at the turn of the century was a time of opulence and frivolity for those who could afford it. But for those who couldn't and yet wanted desperately to keep up with the whirlwind, like Wharton's charming Lily Bart, it was something else altogether: a gilded cage rather than the Gilded Age.

One of Wharton's earliest descriptions of her heroine, in the library of her bachelor friend and sometime suitor Lawrence Selden, indicates that she appears "as though she were a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing room." Indeed, herein lies Lily's problem. She has, we're told, "been brought up to be ornamental," and yet her spirit is larger than what this ancillary role requires. By today's standards she would be nothing more than a mild rebel, but in the era into which Wharton drops her unmercifully, this tiny spark of character, combined with numerous assaults by vicious society women and bad luck, ultimately renders Lily persona non grata. Her own ambivalence about her position serves to open the door to disaster: several times she is on the verge of "good" marriage and squanders it at the last moment, unwilling to play by the rules of a society that produces, as she calls them, "poor, miserable, marriageable girls.

Lily's rather violent tumble down the social ladder provides a thumbnail sketch of the general injustices of the upper classes (which, incidentally, Wharton never quite manages to condemn entirely, clearly believing that such life is cruel but without alternative). From her start as a beautiful woman at the height of her powers to her sad finale as a recently fired milliner's assistant addicted to sleeping drugs, Lily Bart is heroic, not least for her final admission of her own role in her downfall. "Once--twice--you gave me the chance to escape from my life and I refused it: refused it because I was a coward," she tells Selden as the book draws to a close. All manner of hideous socialite beasts--some of whose treatment by Wharton, such as the token social-climbing Jew, Simon Rosedale, date the book unfortunately--wander through the novel while Lily plummets. As her tale winds down to nothing more than the remnants of social grace and cold hard cash, it's hard not to agree with Lily's own assessment of herself: "I have tried hard--but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else." Nevertheless, it's even harder not to believe that she deserved better, which is why *The House of Mirth* remains so timely and so vital in spite of its crushing end and its unflattering portrait of what life offers up. --*Melanie Rehak*

From Library Journal
Wharton's account of the ill-fated life of Lily Bart receives a perfunctory treatment in this audio program. It is New York in the early 20th century; Lily loves Lawrence Selden, but he sees her as a fortune hunter, with tragic consequences. The author excels at delineating the ways money, romance, and social standing intertwine in the society of the time. Included is a lengthy introduction by Wharton biographer R.W.B. Lewis that sets the work in the context of the writer's life and career. Casual listeners may consider the preface too long and scholarly, and those coming to the novel for the first time may be put off by learning the outcome and by hearing Lewis's uncertainty about whether it is a masterpiece. Anna Fields handles the narration adequately but strains to create masculine voices and makes most of the women too flighty. As a result, the characters seem more trivial than Wharton intended. Not recommended. Michael Adams, CUNY Graduate Ctr.

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Review
With an introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick,
Contemporary Reviews, and Letters
Between Edith Wharton and Her Publisher

" A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys."--Edith Wharton

Lily Bart knows that she must marry--her expensive tastes and mounting debts demand it--and, at twenty-nine, she has every artful wile at her disposal to secure that end. But attached as she is to the social world of her wealthy suitors, something in her rebels against the insipid men whom circumstances compel her to charm.

"Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape," Lily muses as she contemplates the prospect of being bored all afternoon by Percy Grice, dull but undeniably rich, "on the bare chance that he might ultimately do her the honor of boring her for life?" Lily is distracted from her prey by the arrival of Lawrence Selden, handsome, quick-witted, and penniless. A runaway bestseller on publication in 1905, The House of Mirth is a brilliant romantic novel of manners, the book that established Edith Wharton as one of America's greatest novelists.

" A tragedy of our modern life, in which the relentlessness of what men used to call Fate and esteem, in their ignorance, a power beyond their control, is as vividly set forth as ever it was by Aeschylus or Shakespeare." --The New York Times

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in
1920 for The Age of Innocence. But it was the publication of The House of Mirth in 1905 that marked Wharton's coming-of-age as a writer.

Users Review

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David Swanson:

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