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The Destruction Of Lily Bart: Capitalism, Christianity, And Male Chauvinism

When Edith Wharton sat down to write *The House of Mirth*, she had decided it would be about "fashionable New York," but, in her own words, "the problem was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another." She went on to say: "The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart."¹ What happens to Lily shows how the ideology which upholds the "frivolous society" functions. As in all money-centered, nonandrogynous societies, every choice offered Lily requires that she compromise her dignity and self-respect. In accord with the capitalist ethic, she must be willing to sell herself; in accord with the Christian ethic, she must be submissive and self-sacrificing; in accord with the male chauvinist ethic, she must be beautiful and pure even if that means being penniless and, therefore, dependent.

The destruction of Lily Bart is rooted in her socialization and her subsequent inability to act with conviction as her socialization dictates or totally in opposition to it. One way this dilemma is represented within the novel is through Lily's not being able to choose either the "house of mirth" (the fashionable world of Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset) or the "house of mourning" (the righteous but dingy world of Gerty Farish). Wharton is toying with an idea found in Ecclesiastes 7:3-4:

Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

To stay in the house of mirth Lily must marry a rich man, for she has no money of her own; however, each time she has almost captured a wealthy husband her impulse for freedom and self-respect causes her to

¹Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), pp. 206, 207.

behave in such a way that she spoils her so-called opportunity. She doesn't go to church with Percy Gryce as she had promised, she rejects Gus Trenor and George Dorset, she refuses to use Bertha Dorset's letters to Selden to clear her own name in order to marry Rosedale. Her refusal to prostitute herself by giving beauty and sex in exchange for wealth spells failure in the frivolous society. Even more ironic is the fact that she is eventually excluded from that world for *appearing* to do what married women in that milieu actually did with impunity—namely, have affairs and borrow money. What is all right for Bertha Dorset or even the divorcee Carrie Fisher is not all right for the twenty-nine-year-old woman who has no husband, not even an ex-husband, to protect her.

Both before and after her rejection by those within the house of mirth, Lily sees her other alternative to be the house of mourning—represented by Gerty Farish's way of life. Gerty is dazzled by the wealthy and charitable to the poor, but, being lower middle-class and plain herself, she is resigned to the dinginess of her world, and just as Lawrence Selden does not want to marry a "nice" girl, Lily refuses to be a "good" one.² In a conversation with Selden she rejects Gerty's house of mourning: "But we're so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy" (p. 9). Both Wharton and Lily reject the Christian and aristocratic pretense that money is not important; indeed, as the novel progresses Wharton exposes the absurdity of what she herself had been taught as a child, the kind of advice given to the poor and to women by wealthy, powerful males: "Never talk about money and think about it as little as possible."³ Lily feels "shame" for wanting money, yet as she descends the social scale from the Trenors through the Dorsets, the Brys, the Gormers, and Norma Hatch to the girls working in the millinery, she becomes increasingly aware of the importance of money in a money-centered society. For example, she sees how her efforts to make herself indispensable to the Gormers are thwarted by the influence of Bertha Dorset: "That influence, in its last analysis, was simply the power of money: Bertha Dorset's social credit was based on an impregnable bank-account" (p. 270). Similarly, Lily rejects the Biblical suggestion that the house of mourning should be preferred to the house of mirth; indeed, as the novel progresses, she becomes more and more "conscious of the steepness and

²Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: The New American Library, 1964), p. 160. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition.

³Quoted by Aldred Kazin, "Two Educations: Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser," *On Native Grounds* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1942), p. 74.

narrowness of Gerty's stairs and of the cramped blind-alley of life to which they led." Wharton has us share Lily's vision of

dull stairs destined to be mounted by dull people: how many thousands of insignificant figures were going up and down such stairs all over the world at that very moment—figures as shabby and uninteresting as that of the middle-aged lady in limp black who descended Gerty's flight as Lily climbed to it!

As the naive Gerty soon realizes, "Lily was not of those to whom privation teaches the unimportance of what they have lost" (pp. 272-73). Wharton evidently feels that Lily should have some other choice than the ones she has, namely to marry for money or to accept the dinginess and self-sacrifice of Gerty's lower middle-class life. By her charitable work in the house of mourning, Gerty helps repair the evils done to the members of the lower class in order to enrich the capitalist class which inhabits the house of mirth. Although Lily does not reject Gerty's way of life on that basis, she does imply that if "goodness" means dinginess and self-sacrifice, she prefers money, but if to get money she must, as her last name suggests, barter herself, she will prefer death. Thus Lily's impulse for life leads her to reject both the capitalist "house of mirth" and the Christian "house of mourning." Both are the products of the inequitable distribution of work, wealth, and power within society.

Edith Wharton uses the images of the rose and the lily to convey a dual impression of Lily Bart. Near the end of *The House of Mirth*, which in typescript was entitled "The Year of the Rose," Wharton describes Lily as "some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty" (p. 329). Moreover, Selden "had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her" (p. 7). As Robert McIlvaine has pointed out, this language echoes a much publicized statement made in 1902, three years before Wharton's novel was published, by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.:

The growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest. . . . The American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business: It is merely the working out of a law of nature and a law of God.[†]

[†]Robert McIlvaine, "Edith Wharton's American Beauty Rose," *Journal of American Studies*, 7 (August, 1973), p. 184. He is quoting from William J. Ghent, *Our Benevolent Feudalism* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1902), p. 29.

This remark, coinciding as it did with the publication of Ida Tarbell's "History of Standard Oil," became, as Rockefeller later admitted, "a rallying point for criticism."⁵ McIlvaine describes a cartoon on May 6, 1905, in *The Literary Digest*:

Above the caption, "The American Beauty rose can be produced in all its splendor only by sacrificing the early buds that grow up around it," is pictured John D. Rockefeller in the guise of a gardener, standing with pruning shears in hand before a tall rose bush with one gigantic bloom labeled "Standard Oil Co." The base of the stem is littered with many little skulls, representing the pruned early buds (p. 184).

Wharton expresses her disapproval of capitalists like the Rockefellers in *French Ways and Their Meaning*: "If a man piles up millions in order to pile them up, having already all he needs to live humanly and decently, his occupation is neither interesting in itself, nor conducive to any sort of real social development in the money-maker or in those about him."⁶ In her novel, she associates the image of the rose with the house of mirth and with Lily as the beautiful product of its wealth and its value system (McIlvaine, p. 183). But the decadence and exploitation which upholds that beauty is symbolized by the "pyramid of American Beauties," whose reappearance early in the book on the Barts' luncheon table disturbed Lily, because "their rose colour had turned to a dissipated purple" (p. 34). Lily suggests they need some "fresh flowers" like "jonquils or lilies-of-the-valley" (p. 35).

As her name suggests, Lily is not only the rose of the "house of mirth," she is also the Biblical lily. J. E. Cirlot's *A Dictionary of Symbols* describes the lily as an "emblem of purity, used in Christian—and particularly mediaeval—iconography as a symbol and attribute of the Virgin Mary."⁷ With its connotations of innocence and fragility, the name represents that aspect of Lily Bart which is both created and destroyed by the house of mirth.

To be accepted in the house of mirth Lily must not only be beautiful, she must wear beautiful clothes. To receive those clothes or to be visible at parties she must sacrifice some of her dignity and hence her purity. For instance, she has to do secretarial work for Judy Trenor and flirt with and entertain both Gus Trenor and Bertha's husband, George

⁵McIlvaine, p. 184, quoting from Raymond B. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: A Portrait* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. 130.

⁶Quoted by James W. Tuttleton, "Leisure, Wealth and Luxury: Edith Wharton's Old New York," *The Midwest Quarterly*, 7 (Summer, 1966), p. 337.

⁷*A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), p. 180.

Dorset; later she compromises herself by living from money invested for her by Gus Trenor; finally, she gives advice to the *nouveaux riches* in exchange for room, board, and social visibility. In this context, the implicit reference to Matthew 6:28-31 is an ironic one, calling into question Christian dependence on the belief that God will provide or the patriarchal assertion that wives should not “demean” themselves by thinking about money because the husband/God will provide:

And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithall shall we be clothed?

Lily had been raised not to spin or toil but just to *be*. To be beautiful was thought for a woman to be enough. After her fall and as she fails in her job in the millinery, Lily is perfectly conscious that she failed because she had been raised merely to exhibit herself within a luxurious environment: “Every dawning tendency in her had been carefully directed toward it, all her interests and activities had been taught to centre around it” (p. 329). Having been raised as a “flower,” it was too late for her “to remake her life on new lines, to become a worker among workers” (p. 311).

What Lily has to confront and recognize before her death is the exact nature of her socialization and its role in her destruction. She was trained to be useful only as an esthetic object which a man can possess, boast of, show off, and spend money on. Should she marry Percy Gryce, for example, she knew she would have to make herself “the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it.” In Wharton’s words, “she knew that this generosity to self is one of the forms of meanness, and she resolved so to identify herself with her husband’s vanity that to gratify her wishes would be to him the most exquisite form of self-indulgence” (p. 53). Thus, the woman is an extension of the male ego, and because she has no money she has no identity or independence. Rosedale, for instance, wants to spend his money “on the right woman” and the right woman is the one who will “make all the other women feel small.” Rosedale, who is himself a ruthless *arriviste*, can say, “I know there’s one thing vulgar about money, and that’s the thinking about it; and my wife would never have to demean herself in that way” (p. 185). It is not surprising, then, that both Lawrence Selden and Rosedale are

shocked at the idea that Lily Bart must earn her living. Neither can conceive of her anywhere "but in a drawing-room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume" (p. 106).

Wharton's use of both the house-of-mirth and the lilies-of-the-field passages is double-edged. Both force us to take a Jesus-like glance at the excesses of the wealthy society and declare the inhabitants of that world "fools"; it is a sterile world of promiscuous sex and no love; none of the couples has children. It is also a world which places too much emphasis upon making and spending money. Yet the fictional context which calls these passages to mind simultaneously makes us view the rejection of mirth and money with a critical eye. For Lily to choose to live in the house of mourning as the Bible advises would mean the abandonment of her pride and the adoption of an attitude of resignation, self-sacrifice, and submission. Not to earn money means financial dependence and control of her life by the person or persons who provide her with what she eats, drinks, and wears. Thus Lily's wish for self-respect and independence justifiably leads her to reject both Gerty's life of self-renunciation and society's expectation that she see herself as an esthetic object which is up for sale. Lily's rejection of Christian counsel involves non-conformity and rebellion; and the price her society makes her pay for that is death.

Lawrence Selden, whom Lily comes closest to loving, adds another dimension to her role as a "lily," for he expects a woman to be not only beautiful but also pure. He wants her to remain detached and aloof from the house of mirth. Throughout the novel he successfully functions as Lily's conscience, and as her social situation worsens, she longs for him to "save" her.

Wharton clarifies this aspect of Lily's predicament by showing how her story is similar to, but different from, the myth of Perseus and Andromeda. Andromeda was chained to a rock and exposed to a sea monster to appease the dieties offended by her mother, Cassiopea, who had set her own beauty above that of the sea-nymphs. In her worship of beauty, Mrs. Bart may be seen as a parallel to Cassiopea. When Mr. Bart went bankrupt, Mrs. Bart looked upon Lily's beauty as "the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt" (p. 37), and she told Lily to get all the money back "with [her] face" (p. 32). In accord with the Perseus and Andromeda myth, then, Lily's plight may be blamed indirectly on her mother but ultimately on the society whose value system Mrs. Bart had adopted. Andromeda is saved from her plight by Perseus, who wants to marry her, but Selden, the novel's inadequate

parallel to Perseus, repeatedly loses faith in Lily and fails to rescue her from the house of mirth. He never acts upon his "saviour" fantasy:

But he would lift her out of it, take her beyond! That *Beyond!* on her letter was like a cry for rescue. He knew that Perseus' task is not done when he has loosed Andromeda's chains, for her limbs are numb with bondage and she cannot rise and walk, but clings to him with dragging arms as he beats back to land with his burden. Well, he had strength for both—it was her weakness which had put the strength in him. It was not, alas, a clean rush of waves they had to win through, but a clogging morass of old associations and habits (p. 167).

In order to be Lily's saviour, Selden must love her; but Lily and Selden discover that love is difficult in a nonandrogynous society. Selden expects Lily to imitate him in remaining detached from and superior to the house of mirth; he wants her to join him in what he calls the "republic of the spirit." He forgets, however, that not being educated as he is, she cannot share his intellectual life, and that not having a profession as he does, she is not economically independent. These differences are the consequence of culturally defined sex roles. At the very beginning of the novel, Lily expresses her envy of his freedom; visiting his apartment, she says, "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman" (p. 9). She also points out to him how much freer he is to dress as he pleases: "Your coat's a little shabby—but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself." She likewise judges it unfair that while a woman "must" marry, "a man may if he chooses" (p. 14). The double standard is evident too in his freedom to have affairs—even openly with a married woman—and in her obligation, not shared by Selden, to do whatever her hostesses request as payment for being included among their guests. Yet Selden, with all the freedom and security he has as a male, harshly criticizes Lily for her efforts to find security and an identity within the house of mirth. As Cynthia Wolff points out, Selden "luxuriates in [Lily's] studied decorative quality" but "would have her absolutely reject the material world that sustains it."⁸

Although Selden wants Lily to give up her quest for a rich husband, they both assume from the beginning that Selden himself earns too little money to be able to marry her. At the two ecstatic moments when Selden is ready to love her, it is the recollection of his financial situation which

⁸"Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death," *American Literature*, 46 (March, 1974), p. 30.

breaks the spell. On the first occasion Lily suddenly asks him somewhat vehemently, "Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me if you have nothing to give me instead?" (p. 76). When Selden explains that it is "natural" that he should "belittle" what he cannot offer her himself, she observes: "But you belittle *me*, don't you . . . in being so sure they are the only things I care for?" (p. 77).

Lily does not encourage Selden's love both because she is conditioned to see him as an inadequate male provider and because his attitude toward her is chauvinistic. At the same time that he puts her on a pedestal, he despises her for being the person she is conditioned to be. When he goes to take her away from her demeaning job with Norma Hatch, she perceives that it is not an act of love. Because she sees again his disdain for her and his failure to understand her economic situation, she has to resist his meaningless act: "To neglect her, perhaps even to avoid her, at a time when she had most need of her friends and then suddenly and unwarrantably to break into her life with this strange assumption of authority was to rouse in her every instinct of pride and self-defence" (p. 288). Realizing that he came not on his own but upon Gerty's instigation, her "hurt pride" turns "to blind resentment of his interference" (p. 290).

Ironically, at the last moment Selden does "save" her but not via marriage and the personal happiness she craves. Because of his moral influence, she gives up her last chance to marry a wealthy man and she repays her debts, thus leaving herself destitute. By not using Bertha's letters and by repaying Gus Trenor, Lily regains her innocence, but to keep it and her beauty, she must, in a sense, freeze the moment in which she still possesses both purity and beauty—the moment in which, therefore, she is Selden's ideal woman. Ironically, to be pure she must be penniless; she realizes that were she to live she would be forced to abandon her purity:

There was the cheque in her desk, for instance; 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; she dreaded to fall from the height of her last moment with Lawrence Selden (p. 333).

As Wharton tells us, Lily's desire is "to prolong, to perpetuate, the momentary exaltation of her spirit" (p. 333). By this time she is well aware of the threatening abyss. She is horrified by the opposite of excessive wealth—the absence of any wealth at all—and the opposite of the divinely beautiful—the ugly, sordid, and dingy. She is horrified too by the

opposite of innocence and the opposite of success. She has been increasingly exposed to the realities of poverty, ugliness, guilt, and failure, and her acute awareness of the meaning of all four has transformed her consciousness into a nightmare. The only escape for her lies in "the beyond"—in the one state where she can really be "beyond the ugliness, the pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul" (p. 163). Therefore, Lily makes the ultimate sacrifice, one which is repeatedly demanded within the money-centered, nonandrogynous society—the sacrifice of life. But Selden remains unaware; he does not realize that in "saving" Lily he has actually destroyed her. Just as Mrs. Bart's guilt, like Cassiopea's, ultimately resides with the society whose values she adopted, Selden's guilt must be shared with the society that taught him to play hero without teaching him how to really be one.

Like Emily Bronte in *Wuthering Heights*, Edith Wharton conveys fully the horrific, nightmare quality of a nonandrogynous world riddled by class differences and sexist attitudes. Nevertheless, Wharton also suggests some havens within this world. To escape from its horrors Lily, like another orphan, Jane Eyre, longs for a family and a home of her own. Her ideal is symbolized by Nettie Struther, a girl from the lower class who has a husband with faith in her and, still more important, a baby. Wharton gives this impression of the Struther home: "It had the frail, audacious permanence of a bird's nest built on the edge of a cliff—a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss" (p. 332). Here Wharton's vision becomes less incisive for, even though she admits Nettie lives "on the grim edge of poverty," she fails to give us her usual double vision in presenting this equivalent of the nineteenth-century "domestic ideal"—the family where one is to find all the purity and morality and love that is absent in the outside capitalistic world. This pure world centers around the virtuous wife and mother, and it is seen as a haven for the Feminine principle. But to see the traditional, male-dominated family—and especially the poor family—as an ideal is sentimental and naive on Wharton's part. Furthermore, to confine goodness and nurturance to the home is to justify villainy in the marketplace.

Another defect in Wharton's vision is evident in the way she becomes sentimental about the working class. It is in this class, according to Wharton, that one is most likely to find the domestic ideal and the traditional values which will nourish personal happiness. In Nettie Struther's working-class kitchen, Lily gets "her first glimpse of the continuity of life" (p. 332); she has "a vision of the solidarity of life" (p. 331).

Wharton thereby suggests that Nettie's baby will have the equivalent of the "early pieties," the "grave endearing traditions," and the "slowly accumulated past" which were missing in Lily's life as she grew up (p. 331). After Wharton's accurate depiction of the capitalist and sexist forces which prohibited Lily from having "any real relation to life," it is shocking to find her suddenly attributing Lily's destruction to the absence of "early pieties" and "traditions." Indeed, it is naive and sentimental to think that those pieties and traditions can exist free from the system of exploitation and oppression Wharton has condemned throughout the book. It is even more absurd to see this working-class baby as having a less destructive fate than Lily's. The "rosy blur" of its "little face" and the "vague tendrilly motions of the folding and unfolding fingers" suggest that Lily has in her arms another pure, fragile, and beautiful flower (p. 328). Wharton's language suggests that we should ask whether the baby's life will not simply be a repetition of Lily's, that is, "rootless and ephemeral, mere spindrift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them" (p. 331). Just as in her anti-Semitic portrayal of Simon Rosedale and Lily's racist response to him, Wharton's sentimental vision of domestic life, the working class, and the early pieties and traditions, affects the integrity of the novel. Mystified by capitalist, Christian, and patriarchal ideologies, Wharton romanticizes the home life of the class she knows least well—the class which is, in fact, most oppressed and dehumanized by the inequitable distribution of power, wealth, and work. She wrongly supposes, too, that the poor had maintained traditions and pieties lost by classes more involved in the turn-of-the-century struggle for power which ousted the old aristocracy. Nettie's baby will never escape its social context; its full potential would be realized only in a just society.

But the baby functions metaphorically in still another way. The child's "confidence" in Lily, expressed by its head's sinking "trustfully against her breast," "thrilled her with a sense of warmth and returning life" (p. 328). The baby relates to her in a way that Selden, already crippled by *his* social context, could not. As Lily slips into unconsciousness that same night under the soothing effect of the chloral, she imagines the baby's head is again on her arm. Once more it satisfies her longing for an organic, real, and loving relationship—the kind that was not available to her in the house of mirth. During those two moments—one real, the other imagined—she feels a sense of oneness with the baby. Her brief but ecstatic sense of wholeness provides an inkling of what life could be in a just

society. The kind of relationship Lily has with the baby is the kind that ideally should exist outside as well as inside the home.

As in romanticizing the Struther family and Lily's response to it, Wharton also fails to maintain her critical distance in her treatment of Lily's death. Although she sees it as a waste, she also seems caught up by the beauty and moral purity supposedly inherent in Lily's (perhaps unconscious) suicide. By dying, Lily preserves the fragile moment of total closeness between mother and child. Ironically, however, such moments are easiest to have when the child is asleep, and they parallel Selden's sense of being closest to Lily once she is dead: "They had never been at peace together, they two; and now he felt himself drawn downward into the strange, mysterious depths of her tranquillity" (p. 339). It is death that makes Selden's moment possible just as it is death that seemingly renders permanent Lily's moment of closeness with the baby. In freezing Lily's instant of intimacy, the death unites that sense of completion and wholeness with her momentary state of purity and beauty that would be dissolved by economic necessity were she to live. Death here takes on a romantic aura. It is perceived as a means of escape into the experience of Oneness.

Wharton's sentimentalization of the domestic ideal, the working class, the early pieties, and death weakens her novel. Lily's domestic ideal is no better than Selden's "republic of the spirit" (the equivalent of the academic's ivory tower); neither of these escape worlds can protect their inhabitants from the consequences of injustice and oppression; nor will the detachment and isolation implicit in both transform a society run by Wall Street. Nor is death the haven Lily imagines it to be when the drug begins to take an effect on her; her death—even if it preserves a state of closeness, innocence, and beauty—is, in fact, nothing but death—the absence of life.

Selden believes the moment at the Brys' party when he had loved Lily—a moment of "complete surrender"—"had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives," for it had revealed to each of them the possibility of what might have been: "It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction" (pp. 143, 342). One is reminded of stanza 48 in Lily Bart's favorite poem, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*:

A Moment's Halt—a momentary taste
Of BEING from the Well amid the Waste—
And Lo!—the phantom Caravan has reached
The NOTHING it set out from—Oh, make haste!

But Wharton's novel leads us to ask: Should we be satisfied with the isolated "momentary taste / Of BEING"? Can we not make the moment of unity and harmony a way of life by eliminating the causes of the "Waste"? If we take seriously the horror—not at all dated—of the patriarchal, "money-is-power" world *The House of Mirth* depicts for us, and if we see the naiveté of the solutions Wharton is able to imagine—the domestic ideal, the "republic of the spirit," death—we are left with a realization of the need to enter the struggle to create an androgynous society—one in which psychic wholeness and social justice are permanently, not "momentarily" ours. In the overwrought language of Lily Bart's favorite author, Edward Fitzgerald,

Ah, Love! could you and I with Him conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Remold it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

We may no longer respond to Fitzgerald's diction, but *The House of Mirth* forces us to agree with this sentiment, articulated in the one book Wharton's heroine "always carried . . . in her travelling-bag" (p. 70).