

# Challenging the Social Norms

تحدي الاعراف الاجتماعية

(A Study of Women's Structure  
in Edith Wharton's the House of Mirth)  
(دراسة في كفاح المرأة في رواية بيت المرح للكاتبة اديث وارتون)

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## Abstract

For a long period of time, women were oppressed by the patriarchal society. They were not allowed to express themselves freely. They were forced to remain with either father or husband just to have a roof over their head. They have been denied a university degree or even searching for a job, because it is believed that women are good only at rearing children and serving their husbands. Yet, with the empowerment of women, the female became able to regain their usurped rights, especially in establishing a life of their own. One of the tools of empowerment is writing a literary work that defends the rights of women. Hence, *The House of Mirth* is stemmed. *The House of Mirth* is one of the be one of the chief main novels written by Edith Wharton (1862-1937) in 1905. It is considered a well-known work that reflects the life of the New York society in *Gilded Age*. It stresses the suffering of women under the patriarchal society and how women manage to overcome the constrictions imposed on them.

The study is divided into three parts. The first part is the introduction that gives an overview about the historical context in which the novel is written. The second part sheds light on Wharton, as her life is in accordance with the life of the heroine of the story. The third part is devoted to the data analysis of this study. This section is followed by a conclusion that sums up the finding of the study.

**KEY WORDS:** Patriarchal society, Edith Wharton, Simon de Beauvoir, *Gilded age*.

## الملخص

لقد كانت المرأة مضطهدة من قبل المجتمع الأبوي لفترة طويلة من الزمن. حيث لم يُسمح لهن بالتعبير عن أنفسهن بحرية. وقد تم أجبرهن على البقاء مع الأب أو الزوج لمجرد البقاء تحت المراقبة. لقد تم حرمانهن من الحصول على شهادة جامعية أو حتى البحث عن عمل، لأنه يُعتقد أن المرأة لا تجيد سوى تربية الأطفال وخدمة أزواجهن. ومع تمكين المرأة ودعمها، أصبحت قادرة على استعادة حقوقها المغتصبة لا سيما في بناء حياة خاصة بها. ومن وسائل دعم المرأة كتابة عمل أدبي يدافع عن حقوق النساء. ومن ثم، ظهرت رواية بيت المرح التي كانت واحدة من الروايات الرئيسية التي كتبتها إديث وارتون (1862-1937) في عام 1905. وهي تعتبر عملاً مشهوراً يعكس حياة مجتمع نيويورك في العصر الذهبي. ويشدد على معاناة المرأة في ظل المجتمع الأبوي وكيف تتمكن المرأة من التغلب على القيود المفروضة عليها.

تنقسم الدراسة إلى ثلاثة فصول. الفصل الأول هو المقدمة التي تعطي لمحة عامة عن السياق التاريخي الذي كُتبت فيه الرواية. الفصل الثاني يلقي الضوء على وارتون وكيف أن حياتها تتماشى مع حياة بطلة القصة. الفصل الثالث مخصص للجانب التحليلي من هذه الدراسة. يُتبع هذا القسم بخاتمة تلخص نتائج الدراسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المجتمع الأبوي ، إديث وارتون ، سيمون دي بوفوار ، العصر الذهبي.

## **1) INTRODUCTION**

In the American history, the Gilded age is certainly regarded as a controversial one, because of the fact that the loss of ethics, dishonesty and corruption were constituting the cornerstone for the rapid development and industrialization. During this historical era, women struggled to keep pursuing their independence in the society they lived in, which is characterized by being patriarchally dominated. Because of the fact that women's appropriate and proper living was totally conditioned by suitable marriage, they lived in an endless struggle to make their future as securing as possible (Griffith 200).

Actually, society and culture played an important role in defining the women's identity and shaping their way of living. In contrast with males, females were momentarily affected by society and culture for the reason that they shackled their rights, freedom and independence, giving men privilege over women. The city of New York is meant to be the place of chances and opportunities for the new affluent comers who were in a constant searching for the social status that could be comparable or equivalent to the one of the original high society settlers (Meriem 5).

Women of the high society were depicted in the literary works of that time as the personification of physical stylishness and perfection. Such literary works motivated the people of middle-class to step into and be part of the aristocratic world. The middle-class women have attempted to climb the social ladders, and they have copied the styles and fashions which were advertised in the publications of that era.

In addition, they had the access to the handbooks of etiquette to acquire the knowledge concerning the behaviors and manners of the high social classes. The handbooks of art, etiquette and media provided the middle-class women with the opportunity of competing the women of upper class, especially in the exclusive fashion show which is represented as a demand for a more auspicious social status (ibid. 6).

Moreover, the novel is written at a period where man is seem to be the breadwinner and he had to go to work, participating in social activities whereas women are constrained to do the duties of their house, because it is believed that woman is good for nothing, except rearing children and supporting her husband. Women had to be calm, submissive and obedient. They had to learn how to be meek. The societal standards, traditions and norms gave men the privilege over women who are thought to be of less importance. As a result, they gain less respect, power and status than men (Griffith 217).

More precisely, females have lived under the social rules that are manly-oriented. That is why the women's role is determined as being secondary individuals in society. However, at the end of nineteenth century and the commencement of the twentieth century, women sought liberaation from the old rigid social traditions, norms and conventions. Janet Beer and Elizabeth Nolan announced that "this was the era of the new woman; she rejected the traditional stereotypes of women as delicate, passive and domestic; she demanded and began to move towards obtaining education, careers, dress reform and suffrage" (Potočková 8).

Consequently, the idea of the new female signifies the rejection of women to the old domestic roles. As a result, the female authors, writers and novelists were totally enthusiastic to express the hardship, agony and suffering of women in their literary works, calling for and supporting the independence of women, and vying with male writers. The writings of those female writers portrayed the quest of women for freedom and independence in that manly-oriented and dominated society. They even were capable of changing the marriage perception as a decision to obtain safeness and security into a mere useless choice. Therefore, to be a wife is no longer the uppermost ambition for women, because of the fact that they renewed their potentialities, abilities and powers, attaining a high level of self-awareness and realization. They became ready to fracture the traditional and conventional stereotypes of domestic roles (ibid. 12).

Accordingly, the new females are characterized by uniqueness, liberty, self-confidence and self-determinacy. The new heroine model was actually confirmed in magazines and novels of women as well as the media that is fueled by the early feminist thinkers and writers. Females were depicted as not being satisfied with idea of marriage. They had a journey of self-definition and spiritual illuminations. They comprehended the fact that the real love does not dwell in marrying a male, but in holding dear one's self. Actually, they were even capable of leading self-governing life. Instead of being entangled themselves with a husband, they would rather have a lover. For these women, the real gratification is not existed in marriage, since feelings are unreasonable to the new radical females. Consequently, being a wife and childbearing would be suspended (Crittenden 36).

## **2) EDITH WHARTON IN A NUTSHELL**

Edith Wharton was an American novelist, short story writer and a designer. Her literary works are based on her own experience in the aristocratic upper-class society of New York. She realistically depicted the lives and morals of Gilded Age. Remarkably, she was not satisfied with her marriage. Because of the difference and incompatibility as well as the deterioration of her husband's mental health, she divorced him, and consequently she witnessed an emotional and psychological damage. Leaving United States, she traveled to France in order to be surrounded by her companions. Actually, she felt her need to invest her emotional experiment in literary works (Lee 9).

She chose marriage and divorce to be the main subjects of her writings that reflect the facets of her lifetime: "the whole domain of the marriage question was the domain in which Edith Wharton sought the truth of human experience; it was where she tested the limits of human freedom and found the terms to define human mystery" (White 157).

Though Wharton was actually an American author and the first female who won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, she was so affected by the civilizing and cultural streams of England. In a harmony with Victorian women authors, Wharton defied the male-oriented culture of her era and its cruelty. She aimed at criticizing society and its set of rules and expectations regarding females. She attacked the society of the upper-class in New York by revealing the endless struggle of her heroines, and displaying the way they are dismissed by their society and how they are left to die lonely, as it is the case with Lily who is the main character in *The House of Mirth* (Johansson 3).



The writings of Wharton emphasized her interest in the idea that the social traditions and individual morals are opposing each other. Such theme is actually reflected in her literary works such as *The House of Mirth*, *The Costume of the Country*, *The Reef*, *The Age of Innocence* and *The Mother*. These works are built on characters from the upper-class who have personal needs and ideals that contradict the morals, standards and traditions of the society they live in. In her preface to *Roman Fever and Other Stories*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff sheds light on Wharton's concentricity on the inconsistency between one's self and his/her society:

Much of Wharton's ... [works] proceed by demonstrating the ways in which a corrupted social system will inevitably distort character and curtail the possibility for happiness. Indeed, perhaps the universal characteristic in all of Wharton's work is a profound concern with the ever-changing relationship between individual liberty and social context (Wolff xi).

In order to scrutinize the relations amongst individuals and the social atmosphere, Wharton puts her characters in controversial conditions regarding the manners, cultures and customs of a number of societies. Despite the fact that her characters are misfortunate, humiliated and imperfect, their struggle is not underestimated by Wharton. Rather, she attempts to find out the sense and the reasons behind their pursuit (Meriem 37). This situation can be perceived in *The House of Mirth* where a variety of critics have extremely evaluated this literary work, particularly from a feminist

vantage point, discussing the way in which Wharton attacked the male-oriented society. For instance, it has been argued that *The House of Mirth* portrays the marriage "as a patriarchal institution designed to aggrandize men at the expense of women" (Ammons 26), inferring that Lily was "murdered by her culture" (Ammons 42). Concentrating on the eyes gazing of Selden on Lily, Cynthia Griffin Wolff explained that the readers can realize the criticism of Wharton of Seldon's "judging and imperceptive eyes". The latter keep watching Lily "as a moral-aesthetic object" (Wolff 332) to the extent that Lily has been transformed into an object by Selden's gaze. The crucial point of such arguments is that Lily's marriage problem and the conservative gender policies are built on the distinction between males and females.

In fact, Wharton, throughout her character, Lily, defied the society by flouting social rubrics of behavior. In her literary writing, she violated the social traditions and rules that are constituted for female authors, portraying the life of women outside the domestic boundaries. She worked as hard as she could to be equivalent to male writers, although she was disturbed by her profession as an author and her status in the society as a female (Johansson 3).

Wharton, in *The House of Mirth*, emphasized the roles of gender. She aimed at criticizing the expectations of the society concerning women throughout Lily's voice. It is assumed that Lily is the double of Wharton herself. Like Lily, Wharton was expected to be feminine pretty woman, and that she does not think of herself as intellectual, sexual and creative girl. However, she interested in reading books and started writing since her childhood, when she was only

eleven years old (Showalter 315). The desire of Wharton for writing and reading was actually associated with vulgarity by her mother who seemed to be uninterested in her daughter's first novel:

My first attempt (at the age of eleven) was a novel, which began: "Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Brown?" said Mrs. Tompkins. "If only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing room". Timorously I submitted this to my mother and never shall I forget the sudden drop of my creative frenzy when she returned it with the icy comment: "Drawing-rooms are always tidy". (Wharton 58)

Wharton was learnt from her mother the commonly expected submission to men. Nevertheless, Wharton, rather than obeying and listening to the rules of men, protested to be a writer and attempting to create her own life, as a reaction against her mother as well as the societal imprisonment of females to the passive householding roles. Wharton rebelled in her writings against the life of women in the domestic realm in an era that most American female authors were still focusing, in their writings, on their domestic work. Those writers were concerned with obeying social traditions and expectations of domestic responsibility (Showalter 312). Therefore, she considered women and men as being equal, writing a novel about a stubborn female rather than a male. This female is Lily. In fact, she is a young female who lives in a completely man-dominated society.

She is depicted as a rebellious for the reason that she is probable to get married for love instead of money as the rest of the females of her class who give privilege to money over love. Though Lily really needs money, she does not have the will to marry someone without being in love with him. As a result, she is shattered between her own desire and the norms of her society which is the main reason behind her conflict between the independent and dependent self (Johansson 6-7).

### **3) DATA ANALYSIS**

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily is treated as an object rather than a woman of flesh and blood. She is regarded as the product of her society where females do not have the means of subsistence that is socially satisfactory other than marriage. One of the critics declared that Lily is "a completely and typically the product of her heredity, environment, and the historical moment ... as a protagonist of any recognized naturalistic novel"(Meriem 31).

Actually, Lily is portrayed as a heroine who does not fit her traditional role. Moreover, Lily is even described by Wharton herself as a "girl... who rouged, smoked, ran into debt, borrowed money, gambled, and... went home with a bachelor friend to take tea in his flat!" (qtd. in Goodwyn 61). Wharton rejected to make her heroine accomplishing the role of submissive and meek woman who is frequently depicted in the traditional novels. She preferred to make her character die at the end of the novel rather than making her obedient. This sudden death of Lily disturbed the readers, and one of them addressed Wharton, saying that "it was bad enough that you had the heart to kill Lily. But here you are, shamelessly parading the streets in a red hat!" (Benstock 155).

Essentially, this kind of reaction is what Wharton aimed at, and it fulfilled her desire of being a unique female who stands against the restrict ideas of her society (ibid. 156).

Wharton puts Lily into positions of failure and suffering, hindering her at each stage of her efforts to grasp the societal ambitions that she is really striving for. Through the series of situations that Lily is subject to, such as the threat of rape, debts, deprivation of inheritance and the falling from the social grace, the novelist compelled her heroine to search for self-identity which was a thing that is totally prohibited at that time. In the novel, Lily tries her best to challenge the social norms by doing many rebellious actions.

From the very beginning of the story, Lily seems to be different in the viewpoint of her society, particularly when Rosedale sees her after she departs the house of Selden. She has a viewpoint that is completely inconsistent with the society she lives in. Therefore, she confesses to Selden that (Johansson 10):

What a miserable thing, it is to be a woman...I ever know a girl who lives in a flat... Oh I know but I said marriageable ... your coat is a little shabby... but who cares... if I were shabby, no one would have me; a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as herself. (Wharton 11-12)

This confirms that Lily has thoughts and ideas which are totally different from the ones of New York society. In fact, she is the product of false traditions, artificiality, family misconceptions and societal life in general. Lily starts her search for self- discovery by occasionally departing the

house of Mrs. Peniston which is "as dreary as a prison"(Wharton 114), because Mrs. Peniston is insisting on finding a husband to Lily. The latter has not only failed in catching a husband, but she also has realized that marriage for money and social position leads her to wealthy, "dull and ugly people" (Curtis 371). Later, Lily is hunted by a sense of alienation and loneliness which are not merely based on the incapability of finding a partner, but also on her realization and awareness that her behaviors, gracefulness and training are really tinged with false values.

Thus, she discovers that marketing her attractiveness and beauty is her only advantage, which has nothing related to her emotions and her inherent values. She accepts the fact that her status is just an attractive commodity, nonetheless she defies the conception of her society concerning women identity as a marital decoration (ibid. 372).

It is worth mentioning that the root of Lily's dilemma exists in her family, before the male-oriented society. Lily's mother, Mrs. Bart, imposes on her the idea that "whatever it cost, one must have a good cook and be decently dressed" (Wharton 27). Even when the family of Lily has lost its own money, Mrs. Bart does promise that the appearance of Lily's beautiful face would provide the family with the assistance to regain the loss: "but you'll get it all back – you'll get it all back, with your face. (Wharton 25). Mrs. Bart has apparently valued Lily as a commodity and she has amused with the idea that her attractiveness would soon attract a rich man who would support them financially. Therefore, the beauty of a woman is generally of extreme significance in upper-class society.

This fact seems to be obvious in the case of Simon Rosedale, an affluent business man who aims to climb the social ladder, and he is searching for a wife to "make all the other women feel small a woman —who'll hold her head higher the more diamonds I put on it" (Wharton 157). He looks for a female similar to Lily who is, as he thinks, fashioned only to "adorn and delight" (Wharton 264), and he regards her as an instrument of increasing his social rank.

Such statement can be seen in the theorizing of Simon de Beauvoir in which she said "her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly" (Beauvoir 660). In her "The Second Sex", Beauvoir affirms that women have a subordinate role in the patriarchal society. A woman has no existence in relation to the existence of a male. She is the male's other.

Beauvoir approached the issue of feminism from an existentialist point of view. Existentialism actually refers to the fact that the essence doesn't proceed existence; one acquires his essence after his being. Historically, man is the absolute type from which a woman is driven. The Woman does not have her own essence apart from man. She is imminence, as she is chained by the conditions of her social life. Therefore, she is unable to transcend and she is belittled throughout the history (Beauvoir 667).

Consequently, Lily pays attention to the fact that in the society of New York, males compete with each other in fights for gaining great fortunes. Whereas the duty of the wife is restricted to consume as much products as she can to show material success of her husband rather than creating a haven for the comfort of her husband. These females idolize their society and, in contrast with the public requirements,

they do not share any sense of loyalty, private affection, or faith amongst the females in their group. Therefore, it is claimed that the relations between beautiful things are competitive and hostile rather than being supportive.

Elizabeth Ammons, for example, asserted that the male-oriented system in New York is the one that is intended to "keep women in divisive and relentless competition" for a few prestigious positions controlled by men" (Ammons 140). Elaine Showalter confirmed that the mentality of the patriarchal society has driven the values of feminism such as relatedness, feeling and self-identity out of the social culture:

Forbidden to aggress on each other directly, or aggress on men at all, women prey on each other—stealing reputations, opportunities, male admirers—all to parlay or retain status and financial security in a world arranged by men to keep women suppliant and therefore subordinate. (Showalter 140)

Thus, Lily exposes her extremely developed masculine mentality side after she expresses to Selden her views concerning "what is like to be a part of the" society of New York: "I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, when one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time" (Wharton 49-50). Lily is not satisfied with this relatedness manner for the reason that the relations are dishonest:

When she had ceased to amuse Judy Trenor and her friends she would have to fall back on amusing Mrs. Peniston; whichever way she looked she saw only a



future of servitude to the whims of others,  
never the possibility of asserting her own  
eager individuality. (Wharton 106)

These lines show how much effort it costs Lily to keep her prosperity. Even she disgusts herself for the things she desires. Explicitly, she works like "a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic" (Wharton 197). Despite the fact that Lily is doubtful about the idea of independent selfhood as well as the core concept of Selden's "republic of the spirit", she experiences a moment of "throbbing inwardly with rush of thoughts" (Wharton 67):

There were in her at the moment two  
beings, one drawing deep breaths of  
freedom and exhilaration, the other  
gasping for air in a little black prison-  
house of fears. But gradually the captive's  
gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less  
heed to them; the horizon expanded, the  
air grew stronger, and the free spirit  
quivered for flight. (Wharton 68)

Because she is "throbbing inwardly", Lily feels that she is dangling between hopelessness and intoxicating urgency of triumphant enthusiasm. The "little black prison-house of fears" is the embodiment of conventional norms along with the marriage market. In this universe, Lily should always stay on guard and take the benefit of all the chances that she could find. Indeed, she gives herself the permission to spend a long time alone in order to be temporarily free, breathing the fresh air of nature (Lee 49). She discovers that the two

contradicted beings that resident inside her are in a struggle with each other, fearing that she is incapable of controlling those "certain closed doors" of her mind that "she did not open" (Wharton 85). Therefore, Lily's quest to reach self-reliance can be achieved by liberating her imprisoned soul from "a little black prison-house of fears". Her mission begins with taking a new insight at the society where she plans to succeed, questioning the standards of achievement (Lee 50).

In her way of challenging the social norms, Lily joins the Girls' Club headed by her friend, Gerty. The aim of this club is "to provide comfortable lodgings, with a reading-room and other modest distractions, where young women of the class employed in down town offices might find a home when out of work, or in need of rest" (Wharton 87). It also offers the working girls a chance for having a valuable education, serving as a haven for those women who look for substitutes to the imprisonment of domestic sphere and the obsequiousness of males (Lee 35).

At the very beginning, when Lily unintentionally meets Gerty at shopping and is informed about the financial lack of the females in the Girls' Club, Lily offers Gerty an amount of money that she herself has spared for personal stuff. Lily asserts that she has to aid the Girls' Club, believing that:

These were young girls, like herself; some perhaps pretty, some not without a trace of her finer sensibilities. She pictured herself leading such a life as theirs — a life in which achievement seemed as squalid as failure — and the vision made

her shudder sympathetically (Wharton 88).

Participating in the activities of the Girls' Club, Lily is satisfied in finding "a new interest in herself as a person of charitable instincts"(Wharton 89). Her charitable works are part of her self-discovery in which she has to support the girls, protecting them from the cruel male-oriented society (Johansson 15). Charity provokes "a sense of self-esteem which she naturally attributes to the fruits of altruism" (Wharton 90). On the other hand, when Lily leads her own way in society and liberates herself, she has nowhere to go. In other words, her society offers no place for her as if she is an intruder, because she breaks its norms. Therefore, as a sign of rejection, her society dismissed her, and she is doomed to die alone:

The blind was down, the irresistible sunlight poured a tempered golden flood into to the room, and in its light Selden saw a narrow bed along the wall, and on the bed, with motionless hands and calm unrecognizing face, the semblance of Lily Bart (Wharton 95).

Towards "the end of the novel, Lily was hardly recognizable to her old friends. Her beauty and charm had weathered away, leaving behind nothing more than a weak body. However, Lily's death is not in vain, because she does not fail entirely". She triumphs "in her determination to become a responsible adult by her final rejection of her empty self" (Potočková 19). She "resists the constrictions of her social surroundings by making her own decisions. By

letting Lily die at the end of the novel, Wharton stressed the importance" of a woman's worth:

women like Lily at the turn of the century were still struggling to articulate and cope with the knowledge of their paradoxical position within an ideological terrain that was both determined by their material reality and constantly reproduced ideology of gender in which they lived (Wharton19).

Lily's death mirrors the conflict confronted by many women of her time. It reflects the fact that women strive to find their own way in a society that regards them as merely a thing. Nevertheless, Lily prefers to die in her quest of challenging the social norms rather than being treated as a puppet in the hands of the cruel society she lives in (Potočková 20).

## CONCLUSION

In her *The House of Mirth*, Wharton exhibits not only the oppression of women under the forces of male-oriented society and social norms, but also the struggle of women in order to achieve their independence, pursuing their happiness as a way of breaking the social traditions. Since marriage was the only purpose of a woman's life according to the patriarchal society, the protagonist Lily Bart refuses to be identified as the other women of her society.

Her distinctiveness is socially unacceptable, because it contradicts the established social norms. Nevertheless, she tries her best to free herself from the restrictions of this society until the last moment of her life before her tragic death.

Accordingly, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily is suffocated by the inescapable social conditions. In an environment where women have to marry a wealthy man to keep their position in society, Lily is unwilling to marry without love. She is still on the marriage market at the age of twenty-nine. She signifies that type of woman who tries her best to rebel and resists the constrictions of patriarchal culture. Unfortunately, she becomes a victim of her society which is the only one to be blamed for the death of Lily. Nevertheless, her death is a clear sign of powerful reaction and profound rejection of the social norms that stifled the course of her life.

Thus, Wharton in her novel criticizes the artificiality of society with its expectations of women and its ruthlessness. She uncovers the dilemma of women being living under the patriarchal domination.

Those women are striving, because they are suppressed by the social environment, enduring the hardships imposed on them. Therefore, this novel can be regarded as the last bullet used by Wharton to defend her community of women.

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