

原著

Tragedy of a Nonconformist: Lily Bart's Choice in *The House of Mirth*

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非順応者の悲劇：『歓楽の家』におけるリリー・バートの選択

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SUMMARY

Lily Bart is a 29-year-old attractive girl and she has been seeking a marriage partner who can afford to give her pecuniary strength in New York upper society, taking advantage of her beauty and artistic sensibility. Without having an enough fortune, Lily is a marginal member in the society where the social norms are explained as “conspicuous consumption” coined by Thorstein Veblen, and one’s pecuniary strength promises one’s reputation. While desiring the life of the leisure class, Lily seeks to be beyond the norms of the society. After all, Lily is driven into a corner, because she is not able to gain pecuniary strength and is expelled from the society by a trumped-up scandal. Meanwhile, She happens to have the letters with which she could avenge the scandal and get back to the society as its reputable member. However, as she has realized what she has truly and heartily been seeking is not material satisfaction but spiritual fulfillment, she decides to throw the letters into a fire, and consequently she dies. Lily’s decision makes her a morally innocent American Eve, not a calculating conformist to the money-oriented society. Moreover, because of her noble choice causing her destruction, Lily can be regarded as a tragic heroine. By describing Lily’s tragedy, Edith Wharton, who, herself, used to be a member of the leisure class, criticizes the money-oriented society.

要 旨

両親を亡くし、財産も少ない29歳のリリー・バートはその美貌と洗練された感性を駆使し、華やかなニューヨーク社交界に受け入れられようと、金銭的な力を持つ結婚相手を求めている。ソースティン・ヴェブレンの言う「顕示的消費」が社会的規範となっている社交界では、個人の金銭的な力が社会的名声と直結する。有閑階級の生活を手に入れようとする一方で、リリーはその社会的規範を超越したいという願望を持っている。結局、金銭的な力は手に入らず、でっち上げられたスキャンダルによって社交界を追放されたリリーは、自活する術ももたず、窮地に陥る。たまたま手にしていた手紙によって、リリーは自分を陥れた相手に復讐し、社交界に返り咲くという手段が残されていたが、自分が本当に求めていたものは、物質的ではなく精神的な充足であると気付いたリリーは、その手段を使うことなく、命を落とす。金銭至上主義社会の順応者になることを放棄し、人間として正実な道を選び死んだリリーは、道徳的にイノセンスを貫いたという点では、アメリカのイ

ヴェに、人間として気高い選択をして破滅したという点では、悲劇のヒロインと見ることができる。自分自身も社交界の中心にいた作者イーディス・ウォートンは、リリーの悲劇によって金銭至上主義となった社会を批判している。

Keywords: leisure class, pecuniary strength, tragic heroine, quest

Edith Wharton's best-selling novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905), depicts New York upper society at the turn of the late 19th century from an insider's viewpoint. Wharton was born in the wealthy Anglo-Dutch descendant family in New York in 1862. While she led a spectacular leisure life as a member of the high society, Wharton had a keen eye for social circumstances. She also had a talent for a storyteller. She could not be content with her married life in the leisure class, and she ultimately decided to live independently as a writer. When it was taken into consideration that in the leisure class to which Wharton belonged, it was rare and rather disgraceful even for a man to have a professional occupation, her decision to be a writer was regarded as astonishing. Besides, it required so much courage and determination. Having such a background, Wharton established her position as a famous woman writer.

The title, *The House of Mirth*, implies what the author intends in the novel. The title is taken from Ecclesiastes 7.4: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of the fools is in the house of mirth." As Shari Benstock mentions: "Lily is the instrument of Edith Wharton's attack on an irresponsible, grasping, and morally corrupt upper class" (309), Wharton unmask the awkward reality of New York upper society by Lily's struggle to live her own life.

Lily Bart is a 29-year-old attractive girl who has been seeking a marriage partner who can give her a reputable life in New York upper society. Without her parents and an enough fortune, she has to make her way with her beauty and "artistic sensibility" (117). However, she vaguely feels that she won't be satisfied only with the leisure class life she tries to gain. After all, she has failed in finding a wealthy man to marry her, and she is expelled from the leisure class owing to a trumped-up scandal. Consequently, she is economically and socially driven into a corner and dies from an overdose of chloral. Lily cannot be a calculating conformist to the society where she was born and raised, because her vague quest for true happiness makes her feel hollowness in the money-oriented society. Her choice not to be a conformist has ultimately destroyed Lily. Yet, it is this choice of hers that makes her a morally innocent heroine.

Lily was brought up to accord with the values of the upper society, though her family were marginal members. Her mother tried to live the life of the leisure class and consumed much more than her husband could afford:

Mrs. Bart's worst reproach to her husband was to ask him if he expected her to "live like a pig"; and his replying in the negative was always regarded as a justification for cabling to Paris for an extra dress or two, and telephoning the jeweller that he might, after all, send home the turquoise bracelet which Mrs. Bart had looked at that morning. (48)

Mrs. Bart raised Lily according with the norms of the upper class: "she [Lily] had been brought up in the faith that, whatever it cost, one must have a good cook, and be what Mrs. Bart called "decently dressed" (48). Unfortunately, Mr. Bart went bankrupt, and soon after that, he became weak and died.

Mrs. Bart was eager to climb the social ladder by taking advantage of her attractive daughter, saying to Lily “But you’ll get it all back, with your face” (47). Naturally, Lily comes to hate to “live like a pig,” like her mother, and longs for a wealthy life that would give her a sense of security: “She was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in” (45). In order to live decently, Lily has to look for a husband who can afford to give her the life of the leisure class.

Lily might sound too materialistic, but her way of thinking completely accords with the social norms at that time. Thorstein Veblen observed American culture at the end of 19th century and made a severe comment on it. He coined a phrase “conspicuous consumption.” Veblen mentions in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*: “Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure” (47). He further argues: “Conspicuous waste and conspicuous leisure are reputable because they are evidence of pecuniary strength; pecuniary strength is reputable or honorific because, in the last analysis, it argues success and superior force” (111). Veblen also claims that a wife is her husband’s “chattel in theory” (52) and “chief ornament” (110), who is to contribute to establish her husband’s reputation by consuming valuable goods. Lily’s as well as Lily’s mother’s hatred toward poverty and shabbiness is well explained from Veblenian view point. Poverty is the evidence of one’s dishonor in the leisure class. It is natural for Lily to seek pecuniary strength which would give her reputation and security in the society. She knows that she has to marry a man who can afford to promise her a wealthy life that would secure her against dishonor, and she does look for a proper partner. Therefore, she cannot marry Lawrence Selden, a lawyer, though his detached stance from the norms of the leisure class attracts her. The fact that he is a lawyer shows his not being a proper member of the leisure class, which implies that he cannot give Lily pecuniary strength promising her reputation in the society. As Veblen mentions that “expenditure on dress” is the most effective way to put “one’s pecuniary standing in evidence” (103), Lily points out to Selden that she is not socially allowed to be poorly dressed:

“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. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don’t make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? . . . “ (33)

Lily has to follow the social norms in the society, as long as she tries to be its reputable member, as her mother has taught her to be. She completely understands what being well-dressed means in the upper society. She knows that if she married Selden, she would have to give up being a reputable member of the leisure class.

Hoping to secure herself from “liv[ing] like a pig,” she expects to marry Percy Gryce, a conservative and wealthy young man. Lily is sure that she can attract him with her charms and have him propose to her. She understands that she has to be a husband’s “chief ornament” whose role is conspicuous consumption to contribute to her husband’s reputation: “she determined to be . . . the one possession in which he [Percy] took sufficient pride to spend money on it” (65). With the prospect that she will marry Percy, Lily feels relieved, but at the same time she cannot but think that it is uncertain that she will be

happy with such marriage: “The certainty that she could marry Percy Gryce when she pleased had lifted a heavy load from her mind, and her money troubles were too recent for their removal not to leave a sense of relief which a less discerning intelligence might have taken for happiness” (65). After all, Lily cannot marry Percy, and he gets married to Evie Van Osburgh, who is a daughter of a conservative and wealthy family. Ill-intentioned Bertha Dorcet, who thinks Lily has interfered her relation with Selden, exposes Lily’s gambling debt to Percy and he leaves her. Lily cannot decline to play bridge in order to keep company with her rich friends. It is one of her strategies to keep away from “liv[ing] like a pig,” but her lack of pecuniary strength gets her into a more difficult situation. When she is informed of Percy’s proposal to Evie, she cannot help regretting: “Life was too stupid, too blundering” (101). Lily misses a chance to gain the life of the leisure class.

Lily knows that only reputable marriage will save her from money troubles and give her pecuniary strength and reputation in the society. On the other hand, she senses that she misses something in her attempt to gain seeking the leisure class life: “She would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich: she was secretly ashamed of her mother’s crude passion for money” (53). It is because of Lily’s vague aspiration for spiritual content that she is attracted by Selden, who inspires her with his ideal of “republic of the spirit” (81). When Lily asks Selden about his definition of success, which Lily thinks is “to get as much as one can out of life” (81), he answers:

“My idea of success,” he said, “is personal freedom.”

“Freedom? Freedom from worries?”

“From everything — from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit — that’s what I call success.” (81)

Lily is impressed by his “republic of the spirit,” because he embodies what she vaguely quests for. Moreover, Selden suggests that Lily might not be fulfilled only with reputation brought by pecuniary strength even if she gained it. He says to Lily: “Ah, my dear Miss Bart, I am not divine Providence, to guarantee your enjoying the things you are trying to get!” (84). Lily sees what he means, saying: “Then the best you can say for me is, that after struggling to get them I probably shan’t like them?” . . . “What a miserable future you foresee for me!” (84). Lily senses that even if she gained the life of the leisure class as she and her mother had hoped, she would not be happy and fulfilled. However, she is not strong and independent enough to give up the house of mirth and devote herself to quest for what she truly and heartily seeks. Therefore, the destination of her quest remains vague and she cannot decide to marry Selden.

Lily actually has a vague aspiration for being beyond the society where pecuniary strength matters. As Yoshiko Yamaguchi argues, Lily is one of Wharton’s heroines who are heretics who crave for an escape from the community to which they belong (43-4). Yamaguchi points out that Lily’s “grey seal with *Beyond!*” (156) symbolizes her longing for an escape (44). Lily has indeed wasted her chances to be a wife of a wealthy man, but it seems that Lily unconsciously avoids the marriage urged by the norms of the society. Mrs. Fisher, who is clever enough to make her way in the society, despite her divorce, and who is also Lily’s helpful friend, mentions: “Sometimes . . . I think it’s just flightiness - and sometimes I think it’s because, at heart, she [Lily] despises the things she’s trying for” (183-4). Gerty Farish, who

is Selden's cousin and can support herself, also observes Lily: "Lily might be incapable of marrying for money, but she was equally incapable of living without it" (162). Lily seems to seek pecuniary strength which is necessary in the society to which she has been taught to cling, but it is possible to say that at heart she aspires to be beyond it and to get something spiritual not material. Naturally enough, Lily's vague quest for "republic of the spirit" is an obstacle to her worldly success in the leisure class.

Simon Rosedale's strong determination to succeed in the leisure class shows clearly that Lily's desire for success is weak and inconsistent. Rosedale is a Jewish man "at a stage in his social ascent" (36). He is clever enough to make a fortune on the stock market, and he is also ambitious to get into the upper class though he is hated by the members of the exclusive high society. He has no hesitation to follow the social norms of the leisure class and he vigilantly succeeds. He completely grasps what he needs in order to go up the social ladder, and he even proposes to Lily, claiming that Lily and he can compensate with each other. He is sure that Lily needs pecuniary strength and he needs an ideal wife as "chief ornament" for his conspicuous consumption:

"I generally *have* got what I wanted in life, Miss Bart. I wanted money, and I've got more than I know how to invest; and now the money doesn't seem to be of any account unless I can spend it on the right woman. That's what I want to do with it: I want my wife to make all the other women feel small. I'd never grudge a dollar that was spent on that." (174)

Lily knows accepting his proposal would release her from her insecure state, but it is impossible for her to do so. It should be remembered that Rosedale is just a successful conformist, not a base profiteer, as his humane attitude toward Lily in a predicament indicates. Rosedale is kind enough to offer help to Lily in poverty and misery after being expelled from the society. Rosedale's ambition and determination reveals Lily's unconscious hesitation to follow the norms of conspicuous consumption.

Expelled from the society because of the scandal trapped by Bertha Dorcet for her self-defense, Lily tries to support herself. Through the offices of Mrs. Fisher and Gerty, Lily begins to work as a seamstress. However, Lily, who "had been brought up to be ornamental" (278), cannot earn her living and "live like a pig." It is almost impossible for Lily to live outside the upper society. She is compared to "the sea-anemone torn from the rock" (281). Lily can never live and find her place in the working class. Driven into a corner, she has one means left for her in order to make Bertha restore Lily's honor and get back to the leisure class as a reputable member. Lily has happened to possess Bertha's letters to Selden, exposition of which would deal Bertha a fatal blow. When Rosedale suggests that the letters should be a threat for Bertha, who appears to be "the pursuing furies" (277) for Lily, she is once fascinated by his suggestion: "Lily's tired mind was fascinated by this escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures" (244). After a mental conflict, Lily throws the letters into a fire. She decides to leave the house of mirth both physically and mentally. As Walter Benn Michaels mentions "In departing from the House of Mirth, Lily finally makes herself so rare, and so valuable" (228), her decision makes her a morally innocent heroine, not a calculating conformist. As Catherine Broaderick also points out that Lily is one of American Eves who are frank, innocent and independent (82), Lily can be regarded as an American heroine who chooses to be morally innocent.

Lily's aspiration to be beyond to "republic of the spirit" prevents her to be a blind conformist to

the leisure class and eventually leads her to tragic destruction. The flaw in Lily's inner quest is its vagueness. What she longs for has remained an abstract image of "republic of the spirit." Yet, what Lily ought to have quested for is implied in her encountering Nettie Crane Struther. Nettie is a working girl, and she has been saved by physically and mentally by Lily through Gerty's charities. Lily has paid for Nettie's stay in sanatorium to restore her health. Returning from the sanatorium, Nettie has married a man who she believes "cared for me [Nettie] enough to have me as I was" (293), and now she has a baby daughter. She invites Lily, who is in solitary and misery, to her home, and urges to meet her baby daughter. When Lily holds the baby in her arms, she feels happiness and vigor: "Lily felt the soft weight sink trustfully against her breast. The child's confidence in its safety thrilled her with a sense of warmth and returning life" (293). This encounter makes Lily feel "stronger and happier" (294). Lily gradually realizes that what she has vaguely been questing for is happiness in the bonds of affection. She contemplates:

the old life-hunger possessed her, and her being clamoured for its share of personal happiness. Yes — it was happiness she still wanted, and the glimpse she had caught of it made everything else of no account. One by one she had detached herself from the baser possibilities, and she saw that nothing now remained to her but the emptiness of renunciation. (297-8)

Lily now sees that she ought to have sought happy marriage to a man who trusts her and whom she trusts, and "the solidarity of life" (297) that happy marriage would bring. She also sadly realizes that she has not been courageous enough to give up her worldly success and that it is too late for her to notice the truth in life. Lily confesses to Selden:

"Once — twice — you gave me the chance to escape from my life, and I refused it: refused it because I was a coward. Afterward I saw my mistake — I saw I could never be happy with what had contented me before. But it was too late for happiness — but not too late to be helped by the thought of what I had missed. That is all I have lived on — don't take it from me now! Even in my worst moments it has been like a little light in the darkness. Some women are strong enough to be good by themselves, but I needed the help of your belief in me. Perhaps I might have resisted a great temptation, but the little ones would have pulled me down. And then I remembered — I remembered your saying that such a life could never satisfy me; and I was ashamed to admit to myself that it could. That is what you did for me — that is what I wanted to thank you for. I wanted to tell you that I have always remembered; and that I have tried — tried hard. . ." (287)

Lily recognizes her mistakes. Lily has sought social reputation brought by pecuniary strength according with the norms of the leisure class. However, she has sensed that marriage in order to gain pecuniary strength would not fulfill her. The way she has been raised by her mother and her social environment have made her quest for true happiness difficult to attain. She also notices that she has lacked strength and courage to fulfill her quest.

Lily is sensible enough to recognize that she would not be content with what her upbringing and environment require her to seek, though the norms of the society make it difficult for her to figure out what she truly seeks: true happiness in the bonds of affection. Unlike the author herself, Lily is not strong and independent enough to give up the life of the leisure class in spite of her aspiration to

escape from it. When Lily recognizes what she truly seeks, and decides to give up the upper society, the house of mirth, it is too late for her to gain it. The irony is that Lily realizes that it is impossible for her to quest for true happiness in the house of mirth, though she cannot live outside it. Readers admire Lily's final choice not to be a conformist to the money-oriented society but to be morally innocent. This admiration makes Lily a tragic heroine. Lily's noble choice, which has ultimately caused her destruction, is that of a tragic heroine. By describing Lily's tragedy, the novel strongly criticizes the awkward reality of the money-oriented society which has broken down Lily Bart.

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