



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

FAILURE OF ADAPTABILITY AND PASSIVE ACCEPTANCE IN EDITH WHARTON'S
THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

K.KALPANA KARTHI¹, T. K. HEMALATHA²

¹Research Scholar, Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

²Associate Professor, Department of English, Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India



ABSTRACT

Edith Wharton's uniqueness as a novelist can be distinctly perceived in two different features, one as a satirist, who aims at the moral follies of the society of the old order and the other, as a compassionate anthropologist, who is able to choose and express its weaknesses and struggles with the delicate and fine sensibility. The protagonist, Lily Bart, is intelligent, attractive, talented, unmarried and poor but is born and brought up in a New York society of wealth and heritage. This society celebrates her not for herself but for her beauty and it is possible to trace Lily's whole life in the changes of her physical appearance as she gradually gets older. Her beauty is her only asset and she tries to trade on it, but her conscience does not allow her to make profits out of it. She is a woman who has been trained from childhood to work for her materialistic wellbeing, investing her beauty in the bargain. Lily loses the bargain because of her distinct qualities in terms of intellectuality and morality.

KEY WORDS: Emaciated, imitative, femininity, materialistic

©KY PUBLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton's place in the history of American fiction is markedly unique and the difference between her and every major American novelist of the nineteenth century is her assertion of order, form, standards and disciplines which obstructs romantic individualism. Her writing questions the impossibility of perfection in human nature and its craving for unexplainable material progress. The increasing desire to produce uniquely American literature and culture, with the war of 1812, a number of key new literary figures emerged and it is significant to place Edith Wharton in this milieu. The growing proliferating society of America, with its tensions and ironies created by the conflicting social and political ideals are clearly reflected in the novels of these writers and they created a body of literature, unsurpassed in its exploration of moral, psychological and metaphysical ideas at the context of individual's interactions with the society

As Wilbur Scott states, "The tendency to associate art and society is natural and intrinsic, to the realistic movement" (123), Edith Wharton's novel, *The House of Mirth* depicts the true settings of the old New

York, where she realistically reflects the period of her life span, through her characters set in the American elite society. The protagonist Lily Bart, immersed in the norms and codes of this society becomes the author's vehicle of expressing her sympathies and disapprovals of its ways and behavioral patterns. Marriage and the ideology of domesticity is the framework within which Wharton most often places her heroines. The laws of gender and their role when it comes to a woman marrying is made strikingly clear in *The House of Mirth* and the fate of its twenty - nine year old heroine, Lily Bart. She is the typical representative of this society whose portrayal conforms that "art's relations to society are vitally important and the investigation of these relationships may organize and deepen one's aesthetic response to a work of art. Art is not created in a vacuum; it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, to a community....."(123)

Lily, at the age of twenty-nine, has retained the girlish smoothness and the purity of a young girl. She is completely conscious of the effect that her beauty produces on the onlooker. She has been aware, right from her birth, in order to have secured life, she has to use her beauty as a tool. As she grew older she starts preserving and polishing this tool to gain social status. She has to buy fashionable clothes, for which she must marry a rich man or rather go into partnership with him to sustain. She does not fail to sarcastically comment on her plight, half comically, for she realises that she emerges from this fun-loving, materialistic society and that is the only world she has known from her birth.

Lily sans this ambition of social acceptance seems to have the ability to live her life. She is lovely, charming, and adaptable enough to suit herself in this fashionable world. She is able to move smoothly and effortlessly towards a conventional marriage. Even before the novel opens she has missed too many opportunities and when Selden taunts her saying that marriage is her vocation and women of her category have been brought up for it, she sighs and accepts it. She also tells him that she can't marry any man but a man with requisite qualifications. She has thrown away a few for she realizes that mere financial comfort would not suffice. At the same time she is aware of her predicament, "I am horribly poor and very expensive. I must have a great deal of money". (10). She underscores that happiness in marriage is not defined by money alone ,and at the same time, she cannot live without the luxuries and comforts offered by a wealthy partner.

Lily is caught between the opposites of her inherent being and practical demands of doing. She has to choose between the desires of her heart and loss of luxurious life. Her inability to bestow good marriage proposals is because of whimsicality and contempt for the prize she has been trained to work for. Lily can be identified with the girls who "marry merely to better themselves, to borrow a significant vulgar phrase, and have such perfect power over their hearts as not to permit themselves to fall in love till a man with a superior fortune offers."(Wollstonecraft, Mary. 76). The interest in Lily grows as she blooms losing interest in luxury and materialism, giving an insight into herself and the world. Thus Lily progresses from New York society toward a new sense of communion morally strong through traumatizing experiences.

Lily, who begins as a foolish, superficial heroine, journeys from humiliation and rejection to maturity. As Margaret McDowell says," At the same time that Lily moves toward tragedy, she moves toward understanding of herself and others and reveals that she is in essence superior to those who had formerly represented to her all the social graces". (43-44) But the movement is a halting one, as Lily fights insight every step of the way, yet eventually, Lily can see, exactly how little she has lost and how much more, morally, she has gained.

Lily's original misfortune is in having extravagant parents who become bankrupt, both financially and socially. Though the death of her mother leaves her emotionally emaciated in her teens, she is morally energized to making a living. She will for the time being have to become a useful companion to women of wealth and be obliged to make a suitable marriage which will be lucrative. These necessities become still more pressing at the death of Lily's mother, leaving her at the mercy of this materialistic society. Although she travels and lives with the rich, obliged to please them all the time, she is not of that kind. She is accepted for her ornamental value but always her status is that of an intruder. Later Lily realizes that she is displaced from her ambiguous role of being attached to the elite society and at the same time belonging to the highest level

of society. She descends from the hereditary non-mercantile society to that of new investors to the still newer moneymaking climbers, to the less affluent fringe. Despite her struggle to adapt and embrace reality, she loses her life in the end.

Lily does not understand the difference between sex and money and believes them to be one and the same. Just as she had seen her father exploited by her mother, she later saw Gus Trenor and Geroge Dorset exploited by their wives and she, by default, expects to exploit her husband when she finds one. She is accepted in the moneyed society for her ornamental value and her utilitarian value. She knows that nobody will want her if her beauty fails to attract and add to the aesthetic value of a place she is invited to. Men in her society indulge themselves in admiring her beauty and the women like Mrs. Trenor or Mrs. Dorset make use of her to substitute the slot they detest to put themselves in. Treated as a commodity herself, she does not hesitate to use others on the same way if necessary. Lily is so calculating about the marriage market that she is just as ready to use men as financial objects as they are to use her as a sexual object

Lacking a constant figure with whom she can attach herself, Lily always goes to the mirror looking for some meaning to her existence. She follows her mother's teaching, but what raises her above her greedy mother is that her father's fondness for poetry. This inspires an artistic purpose and which in turn dilutes her gross mercantile objectives. Although Lily adopts her mother's values, she adds a few sentiments to them "which gave an idealizing touch to her most prosaic purposes." (36). With a poetic sensibility, she likes to think of her beauty as a power for good where she will be in a position to influence diffusion of good taste and refinement. Lily is not prepared to marry a man who is merely rich as she is secretly ashamed of her mother's crude passion for money. "Lily's preference would have been for an English nobleman with political ambitions and vast estates; or for second choice an Italian prince with a castle in the Apennines and heredity office in the Vatican." (36-37). Hence Lily tries to convert the coarse materialism into a kind of sentimentalism.

CONCLUSION

The women in Lily's Society, whom she is trying to imitate, achieve a strong financial status through marriage. With marriage, comes a new moral license where these women indulge in affairs to satiate their longings. Lily, who has been trying to adopt the standards of this frivolous, mercenary society, gradually starts disengaging herself from it. This movement away from the wealthy patriarchal world, her failure to adopt its standards of morality and femininity pushes her into the abyss of destruction. Failure in imitating the codes of feminine phase decentralizes her existence and the derailing leads to devastation. Edith Wharton positions Lily as a woman who is encapsulated to play a fixed role. She delineates Lily's plight caught in a series of stereotypical poses of imitating the standards set by the society. She has no power to interfere or oppose and hence yields to become a part of the orthodox system. She resists grossness, but she lacks conscious faith in eradicating the evil. She tries evading the horrors but does not rise above it as she is weak and powerless and hence surrenders to the inducements of the soulless society.

WORKS CITED

- McDowell, Margaret B. Edith Wharton. Boston: Twayne Publishers. A Division of G.K.Hall & Co. 1991. Print.
- Scott, Wilbur. *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism*. London: Collier - Macmillan Ltd. 1967. Print.
- Wharton, Edith. *Novels: The House of Mirth, The Reef, The Custom of the Country, The Age of Innocence*. New York: The Library of America. 1985. Print.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1996. Print.
-