THE RISE AND FALL OF LILY BART IN EDITH WHARTON'S THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

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Abstract: Edith Wharton's usual categorisation as a novelist of manners does not enirely do her justice, as it leaves out her preocupation with the moral realm according to her conviction that every literary work, much like life itself, has an underlying moral issue.

Thus, this paper aims to analyse Wharton's first big literary success, The House of Mirth (1905), from the viewpoint of its illustration of both social and moral conflicts, in the attempt to prove that they inevitably intersect in her works and that, in this particular case, the rise in morals of the main character, Lily Bart, paradoxically brings about a fall in the social realm, which ultimately kills her.

Keywords: rise, fall, social conflict, moral conflict, Edith Wharton.

Introduction

Edith Wharton was categorized in the American literary history as a novelist of manners, very successful in rendering turn of the century upper-class life. But critics would not go as far as to say that her writings were also moralizing. In one of the first critical studies of her work, Blake Nevius declared: "It should be clear, at any rate, that we are deceiving ourselves if we try to account for the compelling interest of *The House of Mirth* by the nature or intensity of the moral conflict." (Nevius 1976: 58) Indeed, this may not have been Wharton's main purpose, but we will have to disagree with him as far as his opinion that there are no moral conflicts. In the words of Carol J. Singley, Edith Wharton is not only a contributor to the novel of manners but she is "also a novelist of morals: a writer not only of society but of spirit; a woman who, in life and art, searched for religious, moral and philosophical meaning." (Singley, *Matters of Mind,* 1998: x)

In *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), Wharton clearly states that

> any subject considered in itself must first of all respond in some way to that mysterious need of a judgement on life of which the most detached human intellect, provided it be a normal one, cannot, apparently, rid itself. […] In vain has it been attempted to set up a water-tight compartment between 'art' and 'morality.'[…] A good subject, then, must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience. (Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* 1997: 23-24)

In other words, it is in the human nature to relate to those moral judgements which are inherent in the very behaviour of mankind, so by describing this behaviour in fiction, the writer cannot separate one from the other. Carol Singley goes on to say that Wharton "is not didactic, insistent or judgemental in her treatment of moral issues," (Singley 1998: x) but we might argue that her irony in depicting the lack of moral conflicts in some of her characters'

minds is, by any standards, judgemental. At any rate, the author's upper-class background did not prevent her from addressing moral issues, not in an absolutistic way but by finding a "necessary balance between individual morality and group convention." (xi)

As a consequence, much of Wharton's fiction presents characters facing moral choices and longing for nonmaterial values, but most critics have missed these instances, probably because the author did not choose to accentuate them.

Lily Bart's Moral Dilemmas

In our opinion, Lily Bart's last year of life as it is presented in *The House of Mirth* is one of the most obvious and extended instances of moral conflict in Wharton's works. At twenty-nine years old, Lily is still a beautiful and intelligent young woman who is expected to find a rich husband to support her luxurious life-style as a member of the upper-class. However, she isn't willing to marry just anyone, especially since she likes Lawrence Selden, a lower-rank bachelor. Her reputation is ruined step by step as she is seen in the company of different men and is set up by one of her friends, Bertha Dorset. As Lily refuses to fight back using some compromising letters because they were addressed to Selden, her aunt leaves her only 10,000 dollars on her death, which barely covers her debts. As a consequence, she is forced to work in order to earn a living, first as a secretary and then as a seamstress. In her current state, not even Simon Rosedale, a cunning financier who wanted to use her name to enter the inner circle wants to marry her anymore. After a failed attempt to declare her love for Selden, Lily takes an overdose of chloral and dies. It is too late for Selden's visit the next day, as he discovers that she had used her entire inheritance to pay her debts and had died alone and rejected by all of her friends.

Like so many other characters in Wharton's works, Lily Bart faces inner battles between personal feelings and outward conventions, which are so ingrained into her self that she end up defeated in the process. This is because Wharton's characters do not usually have a strong moral code of their own, to guide them through their decisions and supply arguments for their choices. Their sense of morality is empirical at best, simply because society only provided them with rules and conventions, not with principles for decision-making. One may have read books on ethics, but in important matters he or she relied on the rules of the tribe, rather than those of philosophical reasoning.

In one of Wharton's letters, referring to the *House of Mirth*, she explicitly states that

> *no* novel worth anything can be anything but a novel 'with a purpose,' & if anyone who cared for the moral issues did not see in my work that *I* care for it, I should have no one to blame but myself – or at least my inadequate means of rendering my effects. (qtd. in Singley 1998: 6, emphasis in the original)

Lily Bart is a singular case in Wharton's fiction. Other characters facing moral choices have the inner strength to live with the consequences of their decisions, but Lily is such a specialised product of 'Old New York,' almost Victorian ways, that she cannot evolve into a new woman: "she was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate." (*HOM* 8) It's not that the manacles cannot be broken, but she will not survive outside the glass conservatory of her upbringing. In analyzing Lily's moral life, we must consider the fact that she was a woman and that she lived in the early 20th century upper-class milieu. Back then, women were considered morally superior to men only to the extent that they were "completely innocent of

wordly knowledge." (Preston 2000: 33) They were intentionally kept in the dark about anything considered improper, which included studying, books, politics or business and social experiences except chaperoned visits. In other words, girls were not taught anything except the art of being dull, well-mannered and looking pretty and they were not given the opportunity to learn anything by themselves either. We may actually say that they knew only what was proper and improper, not what was good and bad. Society had replaced morality with convention. In her autobiographical fragment *Life and I*, Wharton confesses that this was also true for herself:

My mother's rule of behaviour was that we should be 'polite' – my father's that one should be kind. Ill-breeding – any departure from the social rules of conduct – was the only form of wrong-doing I can remember hearing condemned. (qtd. in Singley 1998: 91)

In the same way, Lily Bart realises that using Bertha Dorset's letters to save herself is in fact a moral choice she consciously makes only at the end of the novel when she really considers using them against their addressee.

Although we are asked to believe that two sides of her personality are struggling for possession, there is no possibility of a genuine moral conflict until near the end of the action when as a result of suffering she experiences the self-realization which is the condition of any moral growth. (Nevius 1976: 57)

Because of her upbringing, she can only have "the loosest theoretical grasp" (57) of Selden's principles of marrying for love and being appreciated for who she is rather than for her "decorative" role. She realises that, but she also knows it is not her fault:

Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product that she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That it is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples? (*HOM* 350)

It is the first time when Lily realises that she is in the middle of a moral conflict and she makes a conscious decision: to burn the letters. She also chooses to die because she knows she is not fit for the new world, where women work and support themselves without marrying. She develops a kind of "hyper-morality" (Tyson 1992: 8) in the last chapters of the book because this is the way she thinks she will be admitted in Selden's 'republic of the spirit.' Because she has not internalised the moral principles on which it is based, she sees things in black and white and therefore cannot save herself, even though, in reality, she does not have to hurt Selden or anyone else except Bertha Dorset. Lily and Selden cultivate a moral fastidiousness which leads to no practical use: he does not help Lily when she needs him and she dies thinking there is no more hope for specialised products like herself.

The Morality of "Pure" Characters

Both Lily Bart and May Welland from *The Age of Innocence*, with whom Lily has a lot in common in terms of their own upbringing, are presented as the embodiment of the leisure class' utmost ideal of feminine perfection and purity. Through the eyes of Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth* and Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, Lily and May are introduced in the first chapters of the respective novels as objects of affection and admiration, the best representatives of their elitist tribe. They have the perfect combination of beauty, ignorance and submissiveness to convention that society requires, so they are fully equipped to be prestigious members of their community. And men appreciate these qualities precisely because they do not set the two women apart from the crowd. Newland, "in spite of the cosmopolitan views on which he prided himself, [...] thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind." (*AOI* 26) At the same time, Selden mocks Lily's conventional intentions to marry well, but does not break the rules in so far as proposing to her himself. She is "highly specialized" (*HOM* 5) in contrast with the dinginess of the average women at the railway station but, in fact, she is no more than a highly polished product of her own class' background, because "the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external." (5)

A lot has been said about Lily's purity in relation to her name. Cynthia Griffin Wolff has shown that it refers to a central motif of art nouveau: the representation of female purity. Lilies were adapted from Japanese art themes and can refer to different species like water lilies, Easter lilies, tiger lilies or lilies-of-the-valley. (Singley 2003: 47) It is also a name with an interesting history in 19th century writings. It designates sweetness and purity, but also sexuality. May is not the name of a flower, but designates the month of the year associated with the Greek goddess Maia, the goddess of fertility. Also, the May birth flower is the lily-of-the-valley (also called May lily) and we are told that May Welland always carried a bouquet of such flowers (sent daily by her fiance).

Lily and May had been brought up to be those "terrifying" products of the social system, girls who "knew nothing and expected everything," (*AOI* 35) but, like most of the things about the leisure class, it was all a carefully knit curtain of appearances. The two women may not have experienced sexuality or the ugliness of human relations, but they were not as innocent as they were required to appear. "You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine," (121) says May, while Lily shows Selden that she is perfectly aware of her role as a selling product in the exchange that marriage and upper-class life is: "We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop – and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership." (*HOM* 13) This reality is hidden underneath a "creation of facticious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he [the upper-class man] wanted." (*AOI* 37)

So, is there morality in this thick fog of appearances and conventions? Is women's purity entirely artificial? May Welland proves to know everything about Newland and Ellen Olenska and conspires with the clan to exclude her. She lies about being pregnant in the final attempt to push the countess away. But she does let her husband know that she is aware of everything: first through their talk at St. Augustine and then by telling him about her last discussion with Ellen. Only Newland Archer is too blind to see beyond the appearances. And so is Selden. Struggling for "the word to break the spell" (*HOM* 361) during his last talk with Lily, he doesn't notice her ultimate cry for help. She lets her go, just as Archer sinks in his marriage with May.

In the end, both Lily and May sacrifice themselves. Lily dies, while May remains trapped in a conventional marriage with a man who does not love her. But all of this is not because a strong sense of morality had dictated Lily not to use the letters or May to set Newland free. Similarly, Ellen sacrifices her love for Newland even if he was not yet married. She exagerates because “in a world Ellen has seen to be quite odious, she wants to distinguish herself and her lover by their moral rectitude.” (Cahir 1999: 12) The truth is they did not know better. Conventions had not taught them otherwise. They did not know they could be free somewhere else. But they most likely wouldn’t have survived outside the system, anyway.

Conclusions

Wharton does not deal explicitly with either social or moral conflicts. She doesn’t describe lower-class workers complaining about working conditions and protesting against factory owners and we don’t see her characters having long monologues on their passion versus duty dilemmas. She is more subtle than that. Her protagonists live in a world so aloof that it doesn’t even conceive the fact that its existence is based on such conflicts. They are brought up to ignore the unpleasant and put on a mask of conspicuous serenity. But these conflicts do exist, and they take the shape of infinitely small nuances, betrayed in the ceremonial performance of conventional rituals.

In terms of the moral component, Wharton is not didactic, but her characters do battle with their own selves and their choices are usually dramatic because the result is invariably personal defeat. Lily Bart destroys Bertha Dorset’s letters to Selden, not because she doesn’t want to hurt him (since he will probably never know about the blackmail), but because she realises she cannot live the kind of life that Gerty Farish or Nettie Struther lead. Somehow, moral conflicts are there without the characters acknowledging them, while social conflicts are similarly hidden behind a curtain of respectability and politeness.

In the end, the thing that defines Wharton’s leisure class best in her novels is concealment. Both the moral and the social conflicts are considered unpleasant, so their mentioning is repressed. It is a “hieroglyphic” world, as the author explains in *The Age of Innocence*, where the real thing is never said or even thought, but only represented through a set of arbitrary signs. However, once decoded, this language describes in detail the dynamics of different social groups.

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