

# Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

## THE HOUSE OF MIRTH by Edith Wharton

---

- Wharton took the title for her novel from a verse in Ecclesiastics—"The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in *The House of Mirth*." Does Lily Bart's allegiance to the follies and superficialities of society mean that she has the "heart of a fool" or is she trapped by the dictates of her upbringing and the expectations of the times?
- What does Wharton mean when she describes Lawrence Selden as a man with "*the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean's delight in them*" [p.152]? Are his scorn and aloofness attitudes only a man could assume in the society Wharton depicts? How genuine are they? Does his readiness to attend certain social events and to indulge in gossip and flirtations with Lily belie his chosen role as a "spectator"?
- The people in Lily's circle disdain the "new" millionaires who acquired their money in business rather than through inheritance, yet in many ways their social world is predicated on a business ethic. How does the language of the novel reflect this? In what ways do the social "exchanges" among the characters mimic business dealings, even when they don't involve the actual exchange of money?
- Lily rejects both Sim Rosedale, a fabulously rich man of "unacceptable" lineage, and Selden, a man she clearly admires who cannot support her in style. Do these rejections represent an unrealistic, perhaps inflated, view of her own worth and potential? Are they purely selfish or do they reflect an underlying sense of morality on Lily's part?
- Even early in the novel, Wharton offers hints that foreshadow Lily's public humiliation by the Trenors and the Dorsets, her abandonment by Carry Fisher, and her aunt's decision to disinherit her. What events alert you to the true nature of the other character's feelings and attitudes toward her? Is Lily too naive to grasp the significance of these events? Does she genuinely misunderstand her financial arrangement with Gus Trenor or simply choose to ignore its "obvious" implications? When she agrees to accompany the Dorsets on the cruise, is she unaware of her role as a mask for Bertha's affair with Ned Silverton?
- What does Lily's great success in the tableaux vivants symbolize within the context of the novel? Does it reveal, as Selden believes, "*the real Lily Bart*"? [p. 134] Why does Lily respond to his enthusiasm and his confession of love afterwards by saying, "*Ah, love me, love me—but don't tell me so*"? [p. 138] What other examples are there of Lily's consciously adopting a pose, either literally or figuratively, to please an audience?
- Both Lily's cousin, Grace Stepney, and Selden's cousin, Gerty Farish, live in genteel poverty on margins of society. How are their attitudes about their positions reflected in the way they treat Lily?



**Skokie Public Library**

5215 Oakton Street  
Skokie, Illinois 60077  
847.673.7774 / 847.673.7797 fax  
www.skokieliibrary.info

Skokie Public Library Trustees: John Graham, President;  
Diana Hunter, Vice President/President Emerita; Zelda Rich, Secretary;  
Susan Greer; Eva Weiner; John M. Wozniak; Dayle Zelenka

Director: Carolyn A. Anthony

- Lily and Selden have five intimate conversations: at his apartment in the opening chapter; at Trenors' country home, Bellomont; at the Brys after Lily's stunning performance in the tableaux vivants; in Mrs. Hatch's hotel room; and once again at Selden's apartment, on the day before Lily dies. How do the tone and contents of their conversations change as Lily's circumstances change, and what does this reveal about their feelings for one another? Are either of them really capable of loving and being loved?
- Are all the women in the novel passive "victims," dependent on the power and money of men? Who really creates the rules in Lily's circle and how do they wield their powers? Why does Rosedale ultimately turn Lily away, despite his previous persistence in courting her and his aggressiveness in making his way into society? Is he right in believing that his money alone is not enough to rescue her reputation?
- Is Lily's descent inevitable? What opportunities does she have to turn things around and why does she reject them? Does her decision not to use Bertha Dorset's letters to regain her social standing make sense in society that unquestioningly accepts the manipulations of Gus Trenor, Carry Fisher, and Bertha herself?
- Edith Wharton wrote "*A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implications lie in its power of debasing people and ideas.*" Do you think *The House of Mirth* is primarily a portrait of the frivolous and corrupt social world of New York or is it the story of Lily Bart's personal tragedy?