

The House of Mirth



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDITH WHARTON

Edith Newbold Jones was born during the American Civil War into a wealthy, long-established New York family. Despite publishing a variety of poems and translations by the age of eighteen, Edith was subjected to the negative pressures of society, which encouraged her to marry young instead of dedicating her energy to literature. At the age of twenty-three, Edith thus married Edward Wharton, although she never found in him an artistic and intellectual equal, and later divorced him after nearly thirty years of marriage. In the meantime, Edith Wharton proved a highly prolific and successful writer, establishing her reputation as one of the most important literary figures of the period. Among the forty volumes of work she published during her lifetime, she is best known for her novella *Ethan Frome* (1911) and novels such as *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920)—for which she received the first Pulitzer Prize ever awarded to a woman—which depict the life of New York’s high society with vivid realism and irony. Throughout her life, Edith Wharton formed part of the intellectual and artistic circles of the time, and also devoted her energy to international affairs. During World War I, she set up various programs in support of the French war effort, for which she was later appointed Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, France’s highest award.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After the American Civil War (1861-1865), the United States experienced rapid economic growth in the North and the West, while the South remained economically devastated and plagued by racist violence. This period, known as the Gilded Age (1870-1900), allowed the U.S. to establish its position as the world’s dominant economic, industrial, and agricultural power. At the same time, rapid industrialization also brought inequality to unprecedented heights. As most of the wealth became concentrated in the hands of the rich, the working-class, largely composed of millions of poor immigrants from Europe, was forced to live in squalid conditions. The following decades, known as the Progressive Era (1890s-1920s), saw a rise in political activism aimed at fighting poverty and making politics more democratic. The first wave of feminism culminated (and ended) during this period, as in 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment gave white women the right to vote. The Progressive Era also impacted America’s international relations. In 1917, moved by a belief in bringing democracy to the world, despite widespread public opposition, President Woodrow Wilson decided to enter World War I (1914-1918),

which allowed the Allied powers to win the war.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905) and, later, *The Age of Innocence* (1920) belong to a category of novels known as the “novel of manners.” Aiming to describe the conventions, habits, and ideology of a given society in all of its complexity, the novel of manners usually presents one character’s efforts to fight against restrictive rules and traditions, with varying degrees of success. As in *The House of Mirth*, this often involves a woman’s effort to find freedom in constrictive domestic and public spheres. British novelists Jane Austen and William Thackeray, American writer Henry James, and French writer Honoré de Balzac are considered notable writers of the genre. At the root of this novelistic tradition lie the literary movements of realism and naturalism, which aim to represent reality faithfully, with quasi-scientific precision and detachment. French naturalist author Émile Zola, in particular, is known for depicting his characters as victims of their fate, condemned to following the cruel rules of their social world.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The House of Mirth
- **When Written:** 1905
- **Where Written:** Lenox, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** October 14, 1905 (after serialized publication starting in October 1905)
- **Literary Period:** Naturalism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** The high society in twentieth-century New York City
- **Climax:** Lily burns Bertha Dorset’s love letters to Selden
- **Antagonist:** Bertha Dorset
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Designer and Architect. Despite her success as a writer, Edith Wharton considered her skills in design and architecture to be one of her most important gifts. At the age of twenty-five, she co-authored the non-fiction book *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), which became surprisingly successful. She later designed her own estate, The Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts, and, impressed by the result, concluded that she was “a better landscape gardener than novelist.”

Tidy Drawing Rooms. Edith Wharton had a strained

relationship with her mother, who tried to stifle the young girl's early efforts at literary composition, even prohibiting her from reading novels before marriage. At the age of eleven, Edith showed her mother a short story she had written, which began with a woman complaining about having to tidy the drawing-room for a guest. She later described her mother's reaction: "Never shall I forget the sudden drop of my creative frenzy when [my mother] returned it with the icy comment: 'Drawing rooms are always tidy.'"



PLOT SUMMARY

Set in New York at the end of the 19th century, *The House of Mirth* describes Lily Bart's efforts to maintain her elevated position in high society. Despite being born into an important, wealthy New York family, Lily, a beautiful twenty-nine-year-old woman, remains impoverished after her father goes bankrupt during her teenage years. Now, her only hope to stay in upper-class society is to marry a rich and powerful man, so that she can acquire the social credit and financial clout she needs to lead a luxurious life.

The novel opens on a hot afternoon in September, as Lily has just missed a train to go to Bellomont, where her friends Judy and Gus Trenor are organizing a party. Her acquaintance Lawrence Selden, who runs into her at Grand Central Station, spends a few hours with her, distracting her waiting alone in the hot city. When Lawrence asks Lily if she wants to have tea in his apartment, the young lady accepts, although she knows that it is considered risky for a young woman to spend time in a man's apartment alone. Over tea, Lily and Selden share a moment of surprising intimacy, and Lily asks Selden if he would accept to be her friend, since she sorely lacks sincere friends around her. Though clearly taken with Lily's grace and beauty, Selden feels that she always behaves in a calculating, premeditative way, aimed at reaching a hidden goal.

After Lily takes her leave from Selden, she runs into Simon Rosedale, a rich man who is desperate to enter the high society Lily belongs to. As Rosedale makes sly comments about the fact that Lily must have just left Selden's apartment, Lily invents an excuse about going to her dress-maker. The excuse backfires against her, as Rosedale owns the Benedick, the apartment complex where Selden lives, and knows that there is no dress-maker there. Lily then hurries off to the train station, rejecting Rosedale's offers to accompany her. Later, she scolds herself for potentially ruining her reputation by being seen with Selden and for rebuking Rosedale, who might one day reach a position of social prominence. She also reflects on the injustice of being an unmarried woman, since men and married women have infinitely more freedom than her, and can live independent lives without constantly worrying about preserving a reputation of chastity.

On the train to Bellomont, Lily sits next to Percy Gryce, a rich but boring man whom she tries to seduce so that he will offer to marry her. During Lily's stay at Bellomont, her efforts to attract Gryce's attention and respect seem to succeed until Lawrence Selden unexpectedly arrives. Intrigued by Selden's presence, Lily wants to find out if Selden has come for her or for Bertha Dorset, with whom he previously had an affair. When Lily and Selden go on a walk, Selden admits to Lily that he only came for her, and Lily feels that she is falling in love with him. However, the two of them only talk about marrying each other in a playful tone and do not discuss the matter further.

When Lily and Selden return from their walk later than they had planned, everyone sees that they spent time together. Bertha becomes extremely jealous and, to take her revenge on Lily, decides to tell Percy Gryce that Lily's attitude of purity and self-restraint is only an illusion. Bertha references rumors about Lily borrowing money from a man—although Lily later tells her friend Judy Trenor that the man she borrowed from is part of her family and that she repaid him—and this comment frightens Gryce, who leaves Bellomont the next morning.

Despite the severe blow of Bertha's betrayal, which reminds Lily of her difficult financial situation, Lily succeeds in convincing Gus Trenor to invest some money for her on the stock market, since he has been benefiting from a successful "tip" given to him by Simon Rosedale. Lily believes that she can manipulate Gus to do this favor for her by behaving kindly toward him, but what she does not realize is that this conversation with Gus marks the beginning of his attraction to her. Over the course of the next few months, Lily's financial investment seems to bear fruits, as Gus hands her thousand-dollar checks. However, in the meantime, Lily also learns that Percy Gryce is now engaged to Evie Van Osburgh, and realizes that her opportunity to secure a safe financial future for herself is once again compromised.

One day, Mrs. Haffen, the cleaning woman at the Benedick, where Selden lives, comes to Lily's house with a packet of **love letters** that she believes Lily has written to Selden. However, when Lily examines the letters, she recognizes Bertha Dorset's handwriting and decides to buy the letters to protect Selden's reputation. Although Lily initially plans on destroying them right away, she remembers Bertha's cruel behavior toward her and decides to keep the letters instead. The knowledge of these letters makes Lily feel like she has power over Bertha, and allows Lily to renew her friendship with her.

Lily's social popularity reaches its climax when she performs in a party organized by Mr. and Mrs. Wellington Bry, a couple desperate for social climbing. Lily appears on stage on her own as a *tableau vivant* and impresses everyone with her striking beauty and grace. After the performance, she spends some time alone with Selden in the garden. When Selden declares his love for her, the two of them kiss. However, suddenly moved by the thought that they cannot be together, Lily stands up and

leaves. The next day, though, she receives a note from him asking to see her and she accepts, knowing that she cannot resist her feelings for him and the sense of the power she has over him.

In the meantime, Lily goes to dinner at her friend Carry Fisher's and then to the Trenors' house, where she believes she is going to meet her friend Judy. Once she arrives at the Trenors', though, Gus is there alone and reveals that he has tricked Lily in coming to his home. Ultimately, he reveals that the money Lily thought she was receiving from him as part of her original investment is in fact his own money, which he has given to her as a gift, expecting sexual favors in exchange. Horrified at this idea and scared about being trapped alone in Gus's house, Lily insists on leaving. When Gus finally gives in and Lily steps out of the house into a cab, she believes she sees a familiar figure at the corner of the street, but does not pay attention to it.

In the meantime, after eating at his cousin Gerty Farish's, Selden goes to Carry Fisher's to look for Lily. When he hears that she has already left, he decides to go for a walk. Ned Van Alstyne accompanies him and, when the two men approach the Trenors' house, they see Lily walk out and leave Gus behind. Believing that Lily is having an affair with Gus, Selden abruptly leaves, angry and hurt.

Lily, meanwhile, realizes that she cannot bear the idea of being alone in her room. Therefore, she resolves to go see Gerty Farish, an innocent woman separate from high society whom Lily realizes is her only true friend. Lily spends the night there and, the next day, returns to her aunt Mrs. Peniston's house, where she lives. After calculating what she owes Gus Trenor, she resolves to ask her aunt for money, but Mrs. Peniston refuses to help her niece when she discovers that some of her debts are related to gambling. She scolds Lily for her rash behavior and privately condemns her for allowing rumors about accepting romantic advances from Gus Trenor and George Dorset to circulate about her.

In this dire situation, the only thing Lily can still look forward to is Selden's visit. However, instead of Selden, Rosedale comes to Mrs. Peniston's house and asks Lily to marry him. Lily, who feels nothing but repulsion for Rosedale, tells him she needs time to think about it. The next day, she reads in the newspaper that Selden has left for the Caribbean. Around the same time, she receives an invitation from Bertha Dorset to join her on a cruise through the Mediterranean, which Lily accepts, feeling that this is her only way of leaving her troubles behind.

Three months later, at Monte Carlo, Lily finds herself in a potentially explosive social situation, as everyone knows that her role on the trip is to distract George Dorset while his wife Bertha takes part in an adulterous relationship with the young, innocent Ned Silverton. This fragile situation collapses after George catches Bertha with Ned. To detract the attention from her own adulterous behavior, Bertha invents lies about Lily, accusing the young girl of trying to seduce her husband. As a

result, Lily becomes ejected from her social circle. Weeks later, when Lily returns to New York, she realizes that everyone has turned against her and that people only believe Bertha's version of the story, for the simple reason that Bertha is rich and powerful. In addition to this state of affairs, Lily learns that her aunt, who died suddenly, has disowned her and is leaving her just barely enough to repay her debt to Gus Trenor.

Aided only by Carry Fisher and Gerty Farish, Lily finds a series of jobs to support herself. She begins by joining the social circle of Mr. and Mrs. Gormer, although Bertha Dorset influences Mattie Gormer in rejecting Lily. Lily then serves as social secretary for a rich divorcée from the West, Norma Hatch, but soon has to leave when Norma is involved in a scandal with Freddy Van Osbourne. Rumors spread about Lily's involvement in this scandal, further harming her reputation. Lily is then forced to accept a job at Mme. Regina's, a hat-maker's, although bad health and poor hat-making skills cause her to get fired. In the space of a few months, Lily thus finds herself condemned to living a working-class life, far from the comforts of her previous circle.

However, Lily remains convinced that she needs to find a way to reintegrate high society and become rich and powerful—her lifelong dream. Moved by desperation, Lily considers following Rosedale's suggestion to use Bertha's letters against her as a form of blackmail, so that Lily might reenter high society. Although Lily hesitates at length about whether or not she should do this, she finally experiences a moment of moral illumination and concludes that she cannot let herself behave in such an unethical way. To put an end to this temptation, she burns Bertha's letters.

In the meantime, Lily has admitted to Lawrence Selden that his love for her has always helped her and that she has always kept the Lily Bart he knows safe in her heart. Upon returning home from Selden's apartment, extremely weak because of constant worrying and lack of sleep, Lily runs into Nettie Struther, who Lily recognizes as a woman she had helped through Gerty's charity. Seeing how ill Lily herself seems, Nettie takes Lily to her apartment, where she tells her all about her life, describing how, thanks to her personal strength and her husband's faith in her, she has succeeded in escaping poverty and reaching happiness. After leaving Nettie, Lily is inspired by her impressive tale of courage and determination, and realizes that poverty is not a sign of moral degradation.

Lily then returns to her boarding-house, where she finally receives a check with the full amount of her aunt's legacy. In order to resist the temptation of not repaying her debt to Gus Trenor, Lily writes a check to Gus immediately. Then, moved by a desperate desire to escape her dire situation and sleep, she takes a higher dose of sleeping drugs than she should. Before falling asleep, she decides that she should declare her love to Selden.

The next day, people discover that Lily has died from her drug

overdose. Selden, who in the meantime had resolved to ask Lily to marry him, sees Gerty at the boarding-house and learns that Lily is dead. Overcome by sorrow, Selden begins cleaning Lily's room and discovers Lily's letter to Gus Trenor. At that moment, he becomes fully aware of Lily's strong moral principles. Overwhelmed with grief, Selden finally kneels by Lily's side. Despite knowing that they will never be able to live together and express their love for each other, he takes comfort in knowing that their love is stronger than death.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lily Bart – The twenty-nine-year-old protagonist, Lily distinguishes herself from all other members of New York's high society through her grace, intelligence, and, ultimately, moral righteousness. Although Lily is desperate to reach a stable position of wealth and power, and occasionally uses manipulation to achieve her goals, she proves unwilling to sacrifice her moral principles to the vicious social dynamics of high society. Instead, she remains committed to repaying all her debts and refusing to use blackmail against Bertha Dorset, despite the fact that Bertha's cruel attitude condemns Lily to poverty and social isolation. Lily undergoes a moral transformation over the course of the novel, as she realizes that money does not necessarily bring happiness and that poverty is not synonymous with moral degradation. She also comes to realize that love, particularly her relationship with Lawrence Selden, is what has encouraged her to be a good person.

Lawrence Selden – A young man who comes from an impoverished yet respectable family, Lawrence Selden impresses Lily Bart with his capacity to take part in some aspects of high society while keeping from becoming a prisoner to its rules and norms. Despite criticizing Lily for her interest in materialistic things, Lawrence is in love with her, admires her intelligence and social shrewdness, and believes that there is a deeper part of her personality that does not come across in social settings. This attitude reveals his aversion to cynicism and his willingness to believe in elevated, spiritual ideals. He also proves reliable in trying to help Lily and protecting her from her harmful environment as best he can.

Carry Fisher – A twice-divorced woman who is adept at making the men around her give her money, Carry Fisher is in charge of organizing other people's parties and integrating them in high society, which she does for Mr. and Mrs. Wellington Bry as well as Mr. and Mrs. Gormer. Despite initially following the other upper-class women in rejecting Lily Bart after the young woman's separation from Bertha Dorset, Carry later proves that she is in fact a loyal friend to Lily. She repents for her actions and actively helps Lily with both emotional and job-

related support, proving that she is both honest and reliable. However, Carry's loyalty ultimately proves limited, as she distances herself from Lily when she fears becoming involved in a social scandal, proving that her desire to remain part of high society is stronger than her friendship.

Bertha Dorset – A woman universally known for her manipulation and cruelty, Bertha Dorset feels threatened by Lily Bart and experiences no remorse at taking revenge on her, ultimately condemning her to poverty and social exclusion. Bertha's lack of morals also comes to light through her various adulterous relationships, which demonstrate a complete lack of regard for her husband, George Dorset, whom she manipulates at will. However, Bertha's utter lack of feeling or morality does not keep her from becoming one of the most powerful members of society, as her impressive wealth is sufficient to make everyone want to be on her side.

George Dorset – Bertha Dorset's husband George is weak and easy to manipulate. Although he shows sincere affection and interest in Lily Bart, he ultimately proves extremely cowardly, failing to defend Lily from his wife's lies. His self-obsession and lack of courage later become even more obvious when he begs Lily to marry him, proving that he lacks even the boldness to divorce Bertha on his own. He is also characterized by physical weakness, as he constantly suffers from indigestion, which he claims is the result of jealousy about his wife's adulterous affairs.

Simon Rosedale – A rich man who experiences extraordinary success on the stock market, Simon Rosedale is initially rejected by the high society he wants to integrate into. However, his financial savvy and his fierce determination to succeed at social climbing ultimately bear fruit, as he becomes increasingly accepted in upper-class circles. In love with Lily Bart, he often surprises her with his refreshing straightforwardness, which is at odds with the conventions of New York's high society. At the same time, he shows little regard for moral principles when he tries to convince Lily to use Bertha Dorset's **letters** to regain social clout, highlighting society's cruelty and hypocrisy as justification for unethical behavior such as blackmail. Although Lily is initially repulsed by him, she comes to admire his sincerity and loyalty, as he proves committed to helping her even when she is living a working-class life.

Judy Trenor – Characterized by a sincere enjoyment of her duties as a hostess and a concern for people to enjoy themselves at her parties, Judy Trenor initially appears to be one of Lily Bart's most reliable friends, as she actively helps Lily in her effort to seduce Percy Gryce. However, Judy is also highly sensitive to financial matters, such as women borrowing money from her husband Gus Trenor, and later punishes Lily for doing so by rejecting her from her social circle. Judy is also a keen social observer, and admits that she only accepts Bertha Dorset's friendship because she knows it is better to keep

potentially dangerous people on one's side instead of antagonizing them.

Gus Trenor – An unsophisticated, physically repulsive man, and Judy Trenor's husband. Gus falls in love with Lily Bart after agreeing to help her invest her money on the stock market. Despite his traditional social upbringing, Gus proves socially incompetent, unable to grasp Lily's subtle verbal cues and often giving way to aggressive excitement instead of self-restraint. A manipulative, violent, and vengeful aspect of his personality comes to light when he tries to force Lily to give him sexual favors in exchange for money.

Gerty Farish – Lawrence Selden's cousin Gerty Farish is Lily Bart's most devoted friend. Living in a working-class apartment on her own, Gerty demonstrates both a strong capacity for independence and a rejection of materialistic values. Despite having feelings for Selden, Gerty distinguishes herself through her self-sacrifice and compassion when she agrees to help Lily, although she initially blamed Lily for taking Selden away from her. Gerty also proves devoted to charitable causes and naively believes in other people's goodness, sometimes to the point of not noticing their selfish motives.

Mrs. Bart – Lily Bart's mother dies when Lily is in her early twenties. Mrs. Bart has a strong influence on Lily's attitude toward life, as she convinces her daughter that she will succeed in becoming rich by using her beauty to find a rich husband. Mrs. Bart's ideology and spending habits instill in Lily a conviction that she belongs to no other class than the upper class, that money brings happiness and moral worth, and that it is also an inherently unstable possession, meant to bring alternate feelings of elation and worry. However, Lily differs from her mother in a crucial respect: her aversion to marrying a rich man for the sake of money alone.

Julia Peniston – Lily Bart's aunt, Mrs. Peniston is a rich social recluse who abides by conservative values. Although she showed a degree of compassion in taking Lily in after Mrs. Bart's death, she is not involved in Lily's personal life. She is less interested in helping her niece than scolding her on a moral level, blaming Lily for the rumors that exist about her. She later proves particularly cruel in choosing to disinherit Lily, thus leaving the young woman in a situation of poverty.

Jack Stepney – Lily Bart's cousin, Jack Stepney proves a shrewd social observer and just as capable of social calculation as Lily when he foresees that Simon Rosedale will become an important member of high society. When Lily sees him with his future wife Gwen Van Osburgh, she realizes that he is in a similar situation as her, since he is marrying for money and is bound to live a life that will bore him.

Percy Gryce – An extremely rich man of conservative, puritan values, Percy Gryce is universally known to be boring. Although he is initially fascinated by Lily Bart and considers marrying her, he later demonstrates his utter fear of socially unacceptable

behavior when he flees Bellomont after hearing a rumor that Lily has borrowed money from a man.

Grace Stepney – Mrs. Peniston's niece and Lily Bart's cousin, Miss Grace Stepney proves resentful and unforgiving. After blaming Lily for excluding her from a fancy dinner at Mrs. Peniston's house, Grace nurtures a lifelong grudge against Lily and refuses to help her when the young woman finds herself penniless. She uses morality and social convention as an excuse to take revenge on Lily, convincing Mrs. Peniston of Lily's immoral behavior and blaming Lily for leading a degraded life.

Louisa Bry – A rich woman intent on integrating high society, Mrs. Bry depends on Carry Fisher to serve as her social intermediary. Organizing lavish parties to attract public attention, she proves particularly demanding in wanting to join the most elevated circles in society. At the same time, her exaggeratedly aristocratic attitude alienates important members of society, such as the Duchess of Beltshire.

Mattie Gormer – Mattie Gormer belongs to a social circle below Wellington and Louisa Bry's, and initially seems more interested in throwing exciting, relaxed parties than in social climbing, but she ultimately proves just as vulnerable as other members of society to ambition and manipulation. Despite her apparent affection for Lily Bart, Mattie does not hesitate to reject Lily after becoming friends with Bertha Dorset, proving just as unreliable and unfaithful as members of high society.

Mr. Ned Van Alstyne – A member of the long-established, wealthy Van Alstyne family, Lily Bart's father's cousin tries to protect Lily's reputation by telling Lawrence Selden to keep quiet about seeing her with Gus Trenor. At the same time, his crude comments about Lily's physical qualities shock Selden, who considers him a typical example of the intellectually unrefined circle Lily wants to be a part of.

The Duchess of Beltshire – A member of English aristocracy, the Duchess of Beltshire is known for living a liberal, potentially immoral life of unrestrained pleasure. She appreciates Lily Bart's presence and personality enormously and integrates the young woman into her London circle, yet Lily recognizes that spending time with the Duchess might ultimately have a negative effect on her reputation.

Norma Hatch – A rich divorcée from the West, Mrs. Hatch lives at the Emporium Hotel, where she enjoys a lavish, disorganized life of easy pleasures. Though shunned by formal high society, she entertains many members of society informally. Lily Bart works for her as a social secretary but resigns as soon as she discovers that Norma Hatch is trying to marry Freddy Van Osburgh—an event that later turns into a social scandal, because of the stark difference in social importance between the two characters.

Mrs. Haffen (the charwoman) – The cleaning woman at the Benedick, where Lawrence Selden lives, and at Mrs. Peniston's house. She initially adopts a defiant attitude toward Lily Bart

when she sees her leaving the Benedick, seemingly assuming that Lily is one of Selden's lovers, and later launches negotiations for Lily to buy Bertha Dorset's **letters**, revealing both her bargaining skills and her financial difficulties.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Wellington Bry – Although Mr. Bry plays a less prominent social role than Mrs. Bry, members of high society such as Carry Fisher and the Duchess of Beltshire consider him funnier and more agreeable than his wife.

Ned Silverton – A young, naïve man who enjoys writing poetry and is addicted to gambling, Ned Silverton falls in love with Carry Fisher and Bertha Dorset, although he fails to understand how calculating these high-society women can be.

Nettie Struther – A woman whom Lily Bart once helped through Gerty Farish's charity, Nettie Struther impresses Lily with her strength and determination. Having overcome illness and poverty, Nettie now lives a happy life with her family, which proves to Lily that low means and moral worth are far from incompatible.

Lord Hubert Dacey – A gentleman who takes part in the festivities at Monte Carlo, Lord Hubert Dacey seems genuinely interested in Lily Bart's personality and well-being, as he comments to Lawrence Selden that the Duchess of Beltshire has a bad influence on the young woman.

Gwen Van Osburgh / Mrs. Stepney – Jack Stepney's wife is a rich but boring member of the wealthy Van Osburgh family. Although she is not described at length, she is characterized by indifference and lack of compassion, as Lily fears that Gwen might refuse to take her in when Bertha kicks Lily off the *Sabrina*.

Evie Van Osburgh – Leading an equally monotone and wealthy life as Percy Gryce, Evie Van Osburgh ultimately becomes engaged to him. This angers Lily Bart, who feels that she should have been the one to marry Gryce.

Lady Cressida Raith – The Duchess of Beltshire's sister is a rich, religiously conservative woman whom Judy Trenor fears might ruin her party at Bellomont.

Paul Morpeth – An artist who forms part of Sam and Mattie Gormer's circle, he admires Lily Bart's beauty and wants to paint her portrait. He is responsible for designing the *tableaux vivants* at Wellington and Louisa Bry's party.

Mr. Dabham – A journalist at Monte Carlo, Mr. Dabham proves ruthless in his desire to spread rumors about the upper class's relationships. In particular, he spreads the rumor that Lily Bart and George Dorset returned alone from Nice, which gives credibility to Bertha Dorset's later lies about Lily's relationship with George.

Freddy Van Osburgh – An innocent, young boy who recently graduated from college, Freddy Van Osburgh seems in love with

Norma Hatch, and unaware of the scandalous nature of his relationship with her. To keep Freddy from marrying the rich divorcée, members of high society send him away to Europe.

Melville Stancy – Norma Hatch's lawyer, intent on scheming to make Norma marry Freddy Van Osburgh.

Miss Jane Silverton – Ned Silverton's sister, who asks Gerty Farish for financial help after Ned ruins the family because of his gambling addiction.

Sam Gormer – Mattie Gormer's husband.

Mme. Regina – The milliner for whom Lily Bart works. Mme. Regina is initially reluctant to hire Lily, who lacks crucial hat-making skills, but accepts to do so at Carry Fisher's insistence. However, she later fires Lily because of the young woman's frequent absences and incompetence.

Miss Haines – Lily Bart's supervisor at Mme. Regina's. She demonstrates resentment and cruelty toward Lily by mocking her for not being skilled at making hats.

Miss Kilroy – Lily Bart's coworker at the milliner's. She proves kind and compassionate to her, insisting that Miss Haines behaved in a cruel way toward her.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MONEY AND HAPPINESS

Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* explores the rewards and dangers of living in New York's high society. Lily Bart, a young woman of moderate means, wants to secure her position among the rich upper crust. Convinced that her main purpose in life is to live in luxury and dazzle the people around her with her beauty, she strives to marry a rich man and secure her wealth. However, plagued by reckless spending habits and an inability to secure a stable source of income, Lily soon finds herself in serious financial troubles. Over time, Lily's economic difficulties lead her to reconsider her entire conception of life. She realizes that her pursuit of material comforts has led her to neglect a much more important aspect of her life: her personal happiness. Through Lily's descent into poverty, *The House of Mirth* ultimately shows that, while money might bring transient pleasures, luxury and materialism alone do not bring happiness. Rather, happiness depends on an individual's internal strength, which can come to light in any set of material circumstances.

Fascinated by the power and comfort that money brings, Lily believes that money will make her happy in life. For much of the

novel, it appears that money does indeed make her happy, as the young woman thrives in elegant environments, deriving a sense of power, excitement, and amusement from what money brings. Lily's ambition consists of becoming rich and powerful. Lily believes that being poor—what she calls “dinginess” or “living like pigs”—is a form of moral dishonor that she must avoid at all costs. Paradoxically, though, her attitude derives less from actual wealth (since her means are low) than from the conviction that spending money is a noble activity. As a result, Lily's desire to integrate into upper-class society leads her to spend more money than she actually possesses. “I am horribly poor—and very expensive,” she tells her friend Lawrence Selden, revealing a central paradox in her attitude toward money.

Despite the obvious risks that this extravagant lifestyle entails, as Lily does not have a stable source of income to justify her extravagant purchases, she is used to instability and the constant possibility of financial ruin: “All her life Lily had seen money go out as quickly as it came in, and whatever theories she cultivated as to the prudence of setting aside a part of her gains, she had unhappily no saving vision of the risks of the opposite course.” Instead of seeing her inability to save money as a crucial defect, Lily considers her mode of life “heroic”—filled with danger and instability, perhaps, but also with a sense of adventure. Lily thus proves ready to sacrifice economic stability in favor of glamor and excitement.

However, on a more unconscious level, Lily also realizes that she is unwilling to sacrifice her own future for the sake of money alone. Indeed, despite Lily's professed desire to marry someone rich, her actual behavior reveals the very opposite. On numerous occasions, Lily fails to take advantage of the opportunities that arise for her to marry rich men such as Percy Gryce, George Dorset, and Sim Rosedale, who are attracted to her and would gladly marry her, but whose personalities she finds immensely boring. The novel states, “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.” This attitude puts Lily in an impossible bind: wanting to live an extravagant, materialistic life without being ready to make the necessary concessions (like marrying a rich man she does not love) to sustain it. Lily thus puts herself in an untenable situation, in which it becomes apparent that she will soon have to decide which kind of life she truly wants: one in which she sacrifices the possibility of marrying for love and happiness, or one in which she sacrifices her desire to belong to high society.

Life ultimately makes that choice for her. When Lily realizes that what she believed to be an honest business deal with Gus Trenor is nothing but a subterfuge, Lily suddenly finds herself plagued with debt and an inability to sustain her expensive ambitions. As a result, she is forced to join the lowest ranks of society. In this context, the only way for Lily to regain control of

her life and achieve a sense of satisfaction is to accept that a less glamorous lifestyle does not equal moral degradation.

Lily is forced to re-examine her views about poverty when she joins working-class life. At first, she views poverty as moral failing: “To Miss Bart, as to her mother, acquiescence in dinginess was evidence of stupidity; and there were moments when [...] she almost felt that other girls were plain and inferior from choice.” Since Lily's downfall is not actually the result of “stupidity” or “choice,” but, rather, the product of an unfortunate series of circumstances, Lily is forced to accept that poverty is not a sign of moral deficiency or intellectual inferiority.

This mode of thinking crystallizes when Lily meets Nettie Struther, a young woman who has worked hard to recover from illness and achieve economic stability. Lily soon feels inspired by Nettie's energy and optimism and realizes that being poor is not a disgrace. “It was no longer [...] from the vision of material poverty that she turned with the greatest shrinking. She had a sense of deeper impoverishment—of an inner destitution compared to which outward conditions dwindled into insignificance.” Undergoing a moral illumination, Lily redefines the very concept of poverty, concluding that true poverty relates to *internal* life, a poverty of the mind, not to *external* circumstances.

This thought has the potential to allow Lily to begin her life anew, free from the self-imposed pressure to constantly achieve higher wealth. Although Lily soon dies of an overdose of sleeping pills, this moment serves as a beacon of hope in Lily's life, proving to her that happiness can emerge in any set of material conditions, and that, like Nettie, she too can find the inner strength to overcome her circumstances.



MORALITY VS. HYPOCRISY

In twentieth-century New York high society, people's social fortunes are determined by their social reputation. Like so many other members and aspirers of the upper class, Lily Bart follows the rules of the game and takes part in deceit and manipulation to secure her social standing. However, when Lily herself suffers from defamation and is then given the opportunity to take revenge on her enemy, Bertha Dorset, through blackmail, Lily is forced to confront the moral validity of her actions. She has to decide whether she is willing to sacrifice her moral principles in favor of the social codes of high society (according to which blackmail is an effective and therefore acceptable means to preserve her reputation), or whether she will give up on her ambitions for social power in order to defend her integrity (according to which blackmail is an immoral act). In the end, Lily makes a choice that will define her entire life: to side with truth and justice, and give up on her dreams of social and material comfort. Lily's decision, which highlights the moral depravation of high society, proves that individual uprightness is infinitely

more valuable than the pressure to conform to society's degraded norms of behavior.

In the high society of which Lily Bart aspires to be a member, people do not hesitate to defend their reputations through lies and deception. Too eager to become part of this world, Lily is initially willing to participate in manipulation to obtain the power or money she desires.

While Lily does not actively seek to harm others, she does engage in social manipulation of her own. In her effort to marry a rich man, Lily is ready to lie about her true self. When she tries to seduce Percy Gryce, a rich, boring man with puritan values, Lily pretends to be someone she is not: a conservative woman who attends church regularly and has never gambled or smoked cigarettes. The fact that Lily is actively duping her potential future husband does not strike her as inherently wrong, since she considers it a logical step in her social game. Believing that her end goal, money and power, is a noble ambition, she does not bother to dwell on the moral validity of her actions (although she does feel averse to sacrificing her own happiness for money alone).

This attitude is reflective of a general environment in which truth matters less than public appearances. "What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe," Lily cynically tells her friend Gerty Farish. Lily has experienced such hypocrisy herself, after her "friend" Bertha invented a lie accusing Lily of trying to seduce Bertha's husband, George, to detract public attention from the accusations of adultery that Bertha herself faces. Even though most people know that Bertha is lying and that Lily is innocent, Bertha's accusation condemns Lily to social isolation, since Bertha has a powerful "social credit" that Lily sorely lacks: money. Truth and justice are thus considered irrelevant in a world where people's wealth determines their public credibility.

Although Lily accepts that her social world does not follow traditional rules of justice, Lily herself retains moral values that keep her from harming people intentionally. Lily's actions also occasionally reveal her interest in helping others. Once, she surprises herself by giving money to Gerty Farish for charitable work, even investing some of her time and energy by joining one of the charity's meetings. While Lily's motives aren't purely selfless, since she derives a sense of power and self-esteem from this action, she still discovers that an aspect of her personality is remotely interested in social justice: "Lily felt a new interest in herself as a person of charitable instincts: she had never before thought of doing good with the wealth she had so often dreamed of possessing." Lily thus becomes aware of the possibility of thinking beyond her narrow desires and interests, and of using her power to do good.

In addition, Lily exhibits strong moral principles about repaying her debts. After she discovers that she is deeply indebted to Gus Trenor, she becomes convinced that she needs to find a way to pay him back, even though she lacks the means to do so.

By the end of the novel, when Lily has lost so much money that she is condemned to a working-class life, she remains committed to her moral principles and addresses a check of nine thousand dollars to Gus—a decision that she knows will condemn her to financial ruin. This show of honesty reveals Lily's underlying moral principles, which keep her from accepting money for free.

These conflicting aspects of Lily's behavior—her sometimes-strong moral compass coupled with her desire to do whatever it takes to secure her spot in high society—are put to a test at the end of the novel, when Lily has the opportunity to blackmail Bertha Dorset in order to re-enter high society. Lily's ultimate decision to refrain from immoral behavior reveals that she has taken a permanent stance: she will not engage in dubious moral acts for the sole purpose of social advancement. Rather, she prefers to remain an honest, upright person, even if this means giving up on her dreams.

When Lily gains possession of **letters** that Bertha Dorset wrote to Lawrence Selden, with whom Bertha once had an adulterous affair, Lily has the opportunity of using these letters to blackmail Bertha. Lily even receives a promise from Sim Rosedale, a rich man who is attracted to her, that he will marry her if she succeeds in returning to high society—which would secure Lily's economic situation for the rest of her life. After contemplating her desperate situation and hesitating at length about what to do, Lily is finally struck by a moment of moral enlightenment and decides that she is not capable of blackmailing Bertha. Instead, she decides to burn Bertha's letters so that she will never again be tempted to use them for her own advancement.

This decision condemns Lily to poverty and social isolation, but elevates her on a moral and spiritual level. As Lily understands that justice and self-worth are more important than social and economic advancement, she denounces the degradation of high society, arguing that it should be rejected in favor of greater ideals. Lily's decision is morally inspiring, revealing the importance of investing in moral integrity instead of social advancement.



GENDER, CLASS, AND FREEDOM

As a young unmarried woman in twentieth-century New York high society, Lily Bart is forced to abide by a series of rules regulating her sexual and social behavior. In this context, in which she constantly needs to protect her reputation from potential accusations of impropriety, Lily feels that she can never be free. At the same time, Lily cannot conceive of life outside of the restrictions of high society and finds herself bending to prevailing norms and habits instead of trying to build an independent life of her own. Over the course of the novel, she becomes increasingly frustrated by this double bind: her simultaneous desire to be economically free (by joining high society) and socially free (by

rejecting high society's norms). Lily's death tragically resolves this issue, as it finally severs her from all social obligations. Her death thus serves both as a symbol and a warning, highlighting the importance of cultivating one's spiritual, social, and economic independence against the suffocating pressures of society before it is too late.

In conversations with her friends Lawrence Selden and Gerty Farish, who do not belong to the same high society as her, Lily often denounces the way life as an upper-class woman restricts her freedom. Part of Lily's lack of freedom derives from her unmarried status, which forces her to maintain an appearance of sexual purity. Lily frequently complains about the injustice of double standards regarding the sexual behaviors of women and men, or married and unmarried women. For example, she denounces the fact that unmarried women are condemned for going alone to a man's apartment, whereas men never suffer from such accusations of sexual promiscuity. A married woman, too, is free to visit single men as long as her husband shows approval or indifference to her actions. Thus, Lily must learn to navigate a rigid social world in which, paradoxically, her only means to achieve freedom is to marry.

The pressure to marry also impacts the financial cost of being a woman in high society. To Lawrence, Lily criticizes the fact that women have to spend their money on elegant fashion: "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. [...] 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." Socially and economically, women are thus forced to bear pressures that limit their possibility to build a life on their own.

However, even though Lily understands that being part of high society necessarily restricts her freedom, her desire to live among the very rich forces her to abide by these social conventions: "She was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself. But what manner of life would it be?" Any time Lily considers abandoning the obligations that society places on her, she is forced to accept that she is not yet willing to break away from the luxuries and power it provides.

Beyond external constraints, Lily is also constrained from within, as social conditioning has kept her from developing original thoughts and conceiving of an independent way of life that would respect her feelings and emotions. Many of Lily's views about high society are the direct product of her upbringing and, in particular, of her mother's example. Throughout her life, Mrs. Bart convinced Lily of the need to keep away from "dinginess" and to constantly thrive for greater wealth and power. This upbringing has exerted a deep influence on Lily, who finds herself tied down to a narrow conception of life, without being intellectually able to explore alternative

lifestyles. Lily's friend Lawrence Selden explains: "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." Lily's personal ambition for wealth is a product of social conditioning that keeps her from developing her individuality.

Lily's lack of freedom is thus external as much as internal, and her awareness of this fact only heightens the tragedy of it. Although she admires Selden for his capacity to ignore the rules of high society, she finds herself unable to imitate his behavior: "[Lawrence] had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom." Lily thus knows that she could choose another way of life, but she also knows that something in her—something as invisible as a glass bottle—prevents her from doing it. Incapable of picturing her life outside the "cage" of high society, Lily is forced to relinquish her independence of spirit to the force of habit.

As a result, Lily lives her life unthinkingly and unfeelingly, as though she were incapable of true emotion: "When had Lily ever really felt, or pitied, or understood? All she wanted was the taste of new experiences: she seemed like some cruel creature experimenting in a laboratory." Lily's abidance by a life of superficial pursuits, such as buying expensive clothes, has kept her from developing personal freedom—the freedom to explore the world beyond the artificial "laboratory" of high society.

Paradoxically, Lily's only escape from the constraints of society takes place in death. Through an overdose on sleeping medication that remains highly ambiguous, as it is impossible to ascertain whether it is accidental or self-inflicted, Lily finally finds peace from society's constraining laws. This tragic ending reveals the difficulty of achieving freedom in a life so heavily regimented by social obligations. It also suggests that lack of social and economic independence can lead to desperate behavior. True freedom, the novel concludes, is a spiritual quest, one that must be cultivated separately from the artifices of civilized life—otherwise, without it, the burden of society might be too much to bear.



LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

In twentieth-century New York's high society, Lily Bart belongs to a social world in which friendships are constantly limited by self-interest. In the same way that people use her for social advancement, Lily uses her so-called "friends" to enhance her own prestige and financial

resources. However, as Lily becomes better acquainted with people such as Gerty Farish and Lawrence Selden, who do not belong to the same circle as her, she realizes that the friendships she has experienced in the upper crust are superficial and dissatisfying. By contrast, the affection Lily receives from Gerty and Lawrence has not only brought her unconditional support, but has also contributed to shaping her character, inspiring her to become a better, more honest person. Over time, Lily concludes that, as high society corrupts relationships, the only way to build sincere, intimate relationships is to escape hierarchies of power. This also involves making herself vulnerable—not only to receiving the support and care she needs in her most desperate moments, but also to becoming the honest person she has always known she could be.

In the competitive, potentially vicious world of high society, friendship is limited to ties of power and money, as people use each other to achieve greater social prestige. Lily, who is committed to remaining part of this social sphere, thus seems bound to live a life deprived of sincere affection. Following the example of her peers, Lily organizes her friends according to a “utilitarian classification” based on who is more or less likely to support her in the advent of trouble. However, the difficulty of taking into account other people’s own thirst for power makes such relationships fraught with instability and danger. For example, when Lily asks Gus Trenor to invest her money on the stock market for her, she manipulates him by making him think that they share a special friendship. In turn, though, Gus believes that helping Lily financially will allow him to ask for sexual favors from her—an assumption that later puts Lily in a dangerous position, as she has to preserve her reputation and her honor against Gus’s advances. The two characters’ beliefs that they can use each other for their own self-interest reveals that such friendships are nothing more than a form of transaction, aimed at asserting power.

Lily’s descent into poverty forces her to re-examine her life and her relationships, as she realizes that true friendship can only exist outside of relations of power. After Bertha Dorset spreads slanderous lies about Lily, the divorcée Carry Fisher is the only person who initially shows Lily affection. Over the course of months, she helps Lily befriend the wealthy Sam and Mattie Gormer, and finds her a job with Mrs. Hatch, a rich woman in need of a social secretary, and, later, with Mme. Regina, a hat-maker. However, when Mrs. Hatch is involved in a scandal, Carry fears becoming connected to that scandal and cuts ties with Lily, indicating that her own reputation is more important than her devotion to her friend.

It is only once Lily becomes better acquainted with Gerty Farish, who is not part of high society, that she discovers what true friendship involves. Gerty, who has no reputation to defend, places little value on Lily’s social or financial status. In delicate social and financial situations, Lily realizes that the only

person she can turn to is Gerty, since her high-society friends would not be willing to help her without receiving anything in return.

As Lily’s increasing financial troubles force her to give up on her previous friendships, she realizes that true friendship and love not only *helps* people in life, but also serves to *define* who one is or can become. Through love, Lily finally gets in touch with her true self.

The only people who have always trusted in Lily’s goodness are Gerty Farish and Lawrence Selden. These two characters believe that beneath all of Lily’s social artifice lies “the real Lily,” who is capable of noble sentiments and of honoring values greater than materialism. However, for most of the novel, it remains ambiguous whether or not this “real Lily” actually exists, since Lily herself often ignores her true feelings in her quest for money and power. By the end of the novel, though, she admits to Lawrence, who has always loved her and with whom she too is in love, that she has kept “the Lily Bart you knew” with her throughout her life, adding that the knowledge of Lawrence’s love “has always helped me.” Lily thus admits that Lawrence’s affection has not only given her comfort in difficult times, but has also impacted her character, reminding her that she could be more than a self-interested member of high society.

Lily’s views about the impact of love on one’s sense of self coalesce when she meets Nettie Struther, a woman who Lily once helped through Gerty’s charity. Seeing the way Nettie has fought against poverty with the support of her husband, Lily becomes convinced that “it had taken two to build the nest; the man’s faith as well as the woman’s courage. [...] Her husband’s faith in her had made her renewal possible.” Applying this thought to herself, Lily becomes aware that she, too, could hope to thrive through Lawrence’s love. Lily concludes that true love elevates human beings, magnifying their goodness and allowing them to connect with each other in a way that makes both sides stronger.

Therefore, it is only once Lily escapes the suffocating world of high society that she understands that her worth as a human being is based as much on her own actions as on the quality of her relationships with other people. Lily becomes convinced that love can reveal to vulnerable human beings what their true potential is—and perhaps, over time, help them realize it. Against an ideology of individuality, the novel thus shows that people’s capacity to connect with each other on an intimate level reveals their deepest, noblest humanity.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BERTHA'S LETTERS

During Bertha Dorset's affair with Lawrence Selden, Bertha wrote the young man love letters that he failed to destroy. When Lily Bart comes in possession of these letters, she realizes that Bertha's reputation is in her hands, since these letters serve as incriminating evidence of Bertha's adultery. Therefore, after Bertha spreads lies about Lily and ejects her from their social circle, the possibility for Lily to use these letters to blackmail Bertha represents a tempting opportunity, as it would allow Lily to regain her position in high society without creating a public confrontation. Although Lily's visceral reaction to such a strategy is moral revulsion, she later feels tempted to use it to escape her desperate financial and social situation. Over the course of the novel, Bertha's letters thus represent the difficult choice that Lily is going to have to make between two opposites: living a righteous life but being condemned to poverty, or sacrificing her moral values to re-enter the high society she so desperately wants to belong to. When Lily finally destroys these letters for good, she demonstrates her incapacity to behave in a way that is contrary to her principles, even if this means giving up on a lifelong dream. Bertha's letters thus highlight the ways high society can be debased and immoral. They suggest that, to avoid its unethical temptations entirely, all an individual might be able to do is escape.

beauty and elegance, which sets her apart from most other women (what he disparagingly describes as “the herd of her sex”). Selden's admiration for Lily leads him to reflect on a central paradox: how can Lily be so unique, yet at the same time fit into the trivial nature of high society? Is Lily's essential nature shallow and materialistic (which would explain why she fits so well in high society) or, on the contrary, original and unique (but trivialized by the conventions of high society)? As Selden reflects on the possible relationship between Lily's nature and environment, he uses the metaphor of molding an object into a certain shape (“clay,” “a coarse texture,” “a high finish”) to reflect on the perplexing nature of Lily's personality. Ultimately, he concludes that society is responsible for distorting Lily's fundamental refinement.

This conclusion determines Selden's entire attitude toward Lily during the novel, as he refuses to accept that Lily is as small-minded and vulgar as the high-society environment she finds herself in. Instead, his trust in Lily's basic goodness and uniqueness emphasizes that Lily should belong to a more elevated milieu.

☞ 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.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover edition of *The House of Mirth* published in 2002.

Book 1: Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?

Related Characters: Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the novel, after Lawrence Selden runs into Lily Bart at Grand Central Station, the two of them take a walk to escape the September heat. Selden admires Lily's

Related Characters: Gerty Farish, Lily Bart

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

When Lily is having tea at Selden's apartment, Lily complains about not having a living space of her own, and Selden suggests that she could be independent if she decided to live like his cousin Gerty Farish, who is poor but has her own apartment. However, Selden soon realizes that Lily could never accept to lead a lower-class life like Gerty's, because Lily cares too much about money. Selden thus realizes that Lily's obsession with money is what is keeping her away from personal liberty. Comparing Lily's expensive bracelet to manacles and identifying the young woman as a prisoner and a “victim,” Selden argues that Lily *could* think freely and independently but that her high-society milieu (“civilization”) has kept her from expressing her individuality and intelligence. Lily has been “produced” by—and remains subservient to—a society that cares only about money and looks, instead of deeper avenues for personal freedom.

This analysis, which condemns Lily to a tragic fate of senseless materialism, proves prescient, since Lily's inability to create an independent life for herself outside of the conventions and norms of high society plays an important part in her social downfall—and, ultimately, in her tragic death.

“Ah, there's the difference—a girl must, a man may if he chooses. [...] 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? 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.”

Related Characters: Lily Bart (speaker), Lawrence Selden

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

When Lily asks Selden if he would be willing to marry for material benefits only, Selden finds this idea preposterous. Lily—who anticipated Selden's reaction—then argues that his perspective is largely shaped by his gender. For men, Lily argues, marriage is optional, because they do not depend on marriage as a financial resource. For women, by contrast, marriage is absolutely necessary, since women in high society are expected to spend a lot of money on clothing—which they would probably not be able to do on their own, as single women. Lily thus concludes that, in high society, men are free in a way that women, whose appearances must constantly evoke luxury and wealth, are not.

However well-founded and convincing Lily's arguments might be, it remains ambiguous whether she believes that the emphasis her milieu places on wealth and appearances is truly *harmful*. Indeed, Lily herself frequently admits that she takes pleasure in buying expensive clothes and in being admired for her elegance. While Lily powerfully critiques a double standard affecting men and women's lives, her attitude throughout the novel thus proves contradictory, as she remains simultaneously attracted to, and critical of her milieu's expectations.

Book 1: Chapter 3 Quotes

“She knew that she hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch.”

Related Characters: Mrs. Bart, Lily Bart

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Overwhelmed by financial troubles, Lily begins to feel that her life of ceaseless spending and indebtedness is too much to bear. However, Lily also knows that the values she inherited from her mother associate poverty with moral decrepitude, and that she could never accept to live a lower life than the one she is living now. Lily thus sees her life of reckless spending as a potentially tragic, never-ending series of problems (since even success itself is “a slippery surface”), but—precisely because of its dangerous nature—also as a heroic endeavor against a terrible threat: “dinginess.”

Lily's vision of her life is thus both empowering (since she is actively fighting what she perceives to be a serious danger) and constraining (since she is giving in to someone else's values, which have conditioned hers). Ultimately, it will be Lily's capacity to re-examine her mother's values and redefine concepts such as “dinginess” and “success” that will determine her moral worth.

Book 1: Chapter 6 Quotes

“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. She could not herself have explained the sense of buoyancy which seemed to lift and swing her above the sun-suffused world at her feet. Was it love, she wondered, or a mere fortuitous combination of happy thoughts and sensations?”

Related Characters: Lawrence Selden, Lily Bart

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

When Lily and Selden take a walk alone in the woods at Bellomont, Selden takes a calm pleasure at being in nature while Lily, under an appearance of calm, is extremely agitated. As she begins to notice that she probably has feelings for Selden, she feels both free and terribly afraid. Lily's fear can be attributed to a variety of factors. It could signal her difficulty to recognize or accept what is happening to her, since she has never fallen in love before. It could also represent the social danger of being seen with Selden, since this would probably put an end to her plans to marry Percy Gryce and, on a deeper level, encourage her to give up on her materialistic, social-climbing ambitions in order to devote her life to love.

This intense emotional moment leaves Lily conflicted, since she does not know how to reconcile her feelings with her life ambitions. However, its sheer intensity foreshadows Lily's conclusion, at the end of the novel, that love is perhaps the most powerful and valuable force in life, capable of giving an individual freedom and strength.

“[...] your taking a walk with me is only another way of making use of your material. You are an artist, and I happen to be the bit of color you are using today. It's a part of your cleverness to be able to produce premeditated effects extemporaneously.”

Related Characters: Lawrence Selden (speaker), Percy Gryce, Lily Bart

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

After admitting to Lily that he only came to Bellomont to see her, Selden adds that he knows his presence will not change Lily's plans in any way. This serves as a dual confession: that he admires her and probably has feelings for her, but that he does not expect these feelings to have any concrete effect on Lily's life, since Lily is determined to marry a rich man. Selden thus correctly supposes that Lily is using her walk with him as an opportunity to make herself more interesting to another man—in this case, Percy Gryce.

Selden's words reveal his full understanding of Lily's personality. Instead of calling Lily manipulative (since she is

using him to attract another man's attention), he recognizes that she demonstrates talent and resourcefulness in achieving her goals, since she skillfully adapts to unexpected situations, such as Selden's presence at Bellomont. He humbly accepts to be used in this way, for the simple reason that he takes so much pleasure in her mere presence.

Selden's respect for Lily's intelligence reveals his ability to love someone whose lifestyle is so different from his own. However, it also highlights his belief that Lily's social behavior does not reflect her true nature—that it is artifice, an aesthetic choice, more than a reflection of the young woman's moral worth.

“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.”

Related Characters: Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

When Lily and Selden take a walk together at Bellomont, the two of them engage in an intense conversation about Lily's personality, her future, and, more generally, their differing conceptions of life. When Lily mentions that, for all her social prowess, she still has not reached the success she strives for, Selden forces her to reflect on this very concept. If Lily can only conceive of freedom and success as an escape from her current situation, in which she constantly worries about her financial state, Selden, by contrast, advocates freedom as a complete removal from the material world. In other words, Selden argues that one can find freedom and happiness *regardless* of one's material circumstances, whereas Lily's idea of freedom *hinges on* material comfort.

Although Lily finds Selden's views compelling, though impossible to apply in her own life, it is only by the end of the novel that she will fully come to terms with this concept of success. Then, she will understand that an individual's strength and happiness can only come from within—an internal realm in which true freedom can exist, since it is not constrained by rules regulating social life and standards of behavior.

“[...] the queer thing about society is that the people who regard it as an end are those who are in it, and not the critics on the fence. It’s just the other way with most shows—the audience may be under the illusion, but the actors know that real life is on the other side of the footlights. The people who take society as an escape from work are putting it to its proper use; but when it becomes the thing worked for it distorts all the relations of life.”

Related Characters: Lawrence Selden (speaker), Lily Bart

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

During Lily and Selden’s intimate walk at Bellomont, Lily argues that high society is not necessarily evil or superficial. Rather, it can be used for good and bad purposes, since money and power can be means to an end, not necessarily the end in itself. Although Selden agrees with her, he notes that the people who belong to high society tend to lose this perspective. He argues that members of the upper class forget that there is a more meaningful world outside of their narrow social circles—a narrow society that they begin to see as the world itself. This means that upper-class members lose track of the world that exists beyond elegance and luxury, and tend to live complacently without interrogating the existential meaning of their life.

Selden’s views implicitly identify a central trait in Lily’s character: her inability to give her life a greater purpose than belonging to the upper class. At the same time, though, Lily does remain at least partially separate from high society, since she does not give in to social intrigue but, rather, retains a moral code of her own. Lily’s own struggle to be both an “actor” and a “critic on the fence” thus proves that she has the *potential* to do good, but that she has not yet figured out how.

“What a miserable future you foresee for me!”

“Well—have you never foreseen it for yourself?”

The slow color rose to her cheek, not a blush of excitement but drawn from the deep wells of feeling; it was as if the effort of her spirit had produced it.

“Often and often,” she said. “But it looks so much darker when you show it to me!”

Related Characters: Lawrence Selden, Lily Bart (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

During Lily and Selden’s walk at Bellomont, Selden pessimistically predicts that, once Lily obtains the money and power she strives for so desperately, she will realize that these things do not make her happy. After Lily complains about this bleak outlook, she is forced to admit that she has already reflected on this possibility herself. This conversation underlines a paradox central to Lily’s character: even though she is intelligent and deeply lucid about her own situation, and seemingly knows that her life ambitions might bring her nothing but unhappiness, she is still incapable of making a different choice for herself. Her willingness to spend her entire life pursuing a meaningless goal seems less the product of cynicism or cowardice than of inertia, as though an invisible force were pushing her forward even as her mind tells her that it is absurd.

In the end, although Lily does realize that money does not necessarily bring happiness—and that poverty does not necessarily bring unhappiness—it remains ambiguous whether she truly accepts to forgo her upper-class dreams, as her death brings her worries and hesitations to a tragic end.

Book 1: Chapter 8 Quotes

“The fact that her immediate anxieties were relieved did not blind her to a possibility of their recurrence; it merely gave her enough buoyancy to rise once more above her doubts and feel a renewed faith in her beauty, her power, and her general fitness to attract a brilliant destiny. It could not be that one conscious of such aptitudes for mastery and enjoyment was doomed to a perpetuity of failure; and her mistakes looked easily reparable in the light of her restored self-confidence.”

Related Characters: Gus Trenor, Lily Bart

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

At Jack Stepney and Gwen Van Osburgh’s wedding, Gus Trenor gives Lily a check for 4,000 dollars, which he claims he has made for her on the stock market. Though relieved by the knowledge that she is no longer in a precarious financial position, Lily knows that this relief is only

temporary, since, lacking a more sustainable strategy such as marriage, her financial troubles are bound to return. Lily's attitude toward money is characterized by such abrupt switches in mood, as she moves back and forth from despair to a feeling of optimism and power. In general, her vision of life is defined by her belief in destiny: she trusts that she is bound to succeed, because she is too beautiful and brilliant to fail. This naïve belief that she will endure financial trials until being rewarded for her natural gifts soon proves fallacious, as Lily's financial mistakes and social setbacks force her to accept that life is not inherently fair. In the end, she is forced to realize that she cannot necessarily turn back time and repair the mistakes she made.

Book 1: Chapter 9 Quotes

☝️ [...] as Miss Bart they knew her by heart. She knew herself by heart too, and was sick of the old story. There were moments when she longed blindly for anything different, anything strange, remote, and untried; but the utmost reach of her imagination did not go beyond picturing her usual life in a new setting. She could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing-room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume.

Related Characters: Lily Bart

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

When Lily experiences a period of boredom, in which she is forced to spend whole days and weeks at her aunt's because she is not invited to as many social events as she used to be in the past, she concludes that society has tired of her. Lily is forced to confront the fact that her social persona ("Miss Bart") bores her, and that she wishes she were someone different. Although a logical step would be for Lily to marry and thus shift from a "Miss" to a "Mrs.," Lily desires something more: a complete escape from her monotonous upper-class life. However, Lily's inability to imagine what such a different life might look like makes this desire inherently tragic, since it cannot possibly exist—not even in her mind.

What Lily lacks is the capacity for intellectual and imaginative investigation. The comparison of Lily to a flower highlights that Lily behaves as an unthinking object, whose actions are determined not by free will and personal expression but by purely aesthetic characteristics (perfume, beauty). If Lily cannot construct a personal identity in addition to a social one, the novel suggests, she will remain

bound to a tragically monotonous life.

Book 1: Chapter 10 Quotes

☝️ All her life Lily had seen money go out as quickly as it came in, and whatever theories she cultivated as to the prudence of setting aside a part of her gains, she had unhappily no saving visions of the risks of the opposite course.

Related Characters: Gus Trenor, Lily Bart

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Thanks to the check for 4,000 dollars that Lily receives from Gus Trenor, which she believes is the result of her own investment, she is able to buy elegant clothes and considers this activity her only excitement in a period of social lull. However, Lily seems unconcerned by her reckless spending, since she is used to considering money an inherently unstable, volatile possession, bound to come and go unpredictably. This aspect of Lily's relationship to money suggests that her financial difficulties are at least partly of her own making. Although Gus Trenor does trick and ruin her, causing her to incur a large amount of debt, Lily could have spent her money in ways that would have allowed her to anticipate financial setbacks. Her lack of financial education—itsself the result of her upbringing—thus plays an important part in her future economic troubles, and not all aspects of her problems can be attributed to other people's malice.

Book 1: Chapter 14 Quotes

☝️ When had Lily ever really felt, or pitied, or understood? All she wanted was the taste of new experiences: she seemed like some cruel creature experimenting in a laboratory.

Related Characters: Lawrence Selden, Lily Bart, Gerty Farish

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

When Gerty Farish realizes that her cousin Lawrence Selden has never actually been interested in her but, rather,

has used his friendship with her as an opportunity to discuss the details of Lily's personality, Gerty begins to feel jealous of Lily. Gerty concludes that Lily must know that Gerty has feelings for Selden, but that she does not care. Although Gerty is mistaken in believing that Lily knows about Gerty's love for Selden, Gerty does identify an aspect of Lily's personality: her difficulty to forget about her position of power and to feel compassion for people beyond (and especially below) herself. Although Gerty's conclusion that Lily is cruel is an exaggeration, since Lily never intends to hurt anyone, Gerty does realize that much of her admiration for Lily is the result of her own projections onto her, her assumption that Lily feels the same elevated emotions as she does.

However, these thoughts represent a fleeting moment of resentment, and Gerty soon returns to her previous idea that the "real Lily" can remain separate from Lily's social persona, which is more calculative and detached. Gerty's difficulty to separate both aspects of Lily's personality—calculation from authenticity, emotion from detachment—highlight Lily's ambiguity, as well as the difficulties Lily herself encounters when she tries to come to terms with her deepest emotions.

Book 2: Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ "Sometimes [...] I think it's just flightiness—and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study."

Related Characters: Carry Fisher (speaker), Lawrence Selden, Lily Bart

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

At Monte Carlo, Carry Fisher shares her thoughts about Lily with Lawrence Selden. She tells him that, although Lily always puts a lot of effort in planning and working hard toward a certain goal, such as marriage, she always allows it to fail at the very last minute. Perplexed by this behavior, Mrs. Fisher concludes that Lily is either fickle and capricious or, on the contrary, deeply meditative about her life. This aspect of Lily's character is paradoxical, and remains largely a mystery throughout the novel. The difficulty to decide whether Lily's superficial attraction to wealth or her deeper ambivalence about the monotony of a wealthy life will ultimately prevail is meant to perplex Mrs. Fisher, Lawrence

Selden, and readers themselves. Consisting of a series of paradoxes, Lily's personality is inherently unpredictable. Even her death fails to resolve the uncertain motives guiding her behavior.

Book 2: Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ It was before him again in its completeness—the choice in which she was content to rest: in the stupid costliness of the food and the showy dullness of the talk, in the freedom of speech which never arrived at wit and the freedom of act which never made for romance.

Related Characters: Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

At Monte Carlo, Lily Bart finds herself in a complicated situation in which her own reputation is at stake, for Bertha Dorset is about to blame Lily for her own adulterous behavior. However, Selden notices how Lily's elegance allows her to rise above such vulgar machinations. When one evening, at dinner, he takes a moment to admire Lily's beauty and social refinement, he simultaneously expresses his content for other people's base motives and grossly material lives. Selden describes upper-class society as one in which everything is superficial, meant to please appearances instead of cultivating the mind. Although conversation might be pleasant, it never reaches the intensity necessary to become passionate, insightful, or interesting in any way. Selden concludes that, paradoxically, for all its wealth, high society is degraded and morally distasteful. Knowing, by contrast, how refined and intelligent Lily is, he does not understand why she might choose to remain in this milieu.

Selden's social critique suggests that money, power, and social prestige are—unlike what Lily believes for most of the novel—entirely disconnected from intelligence or moral valor. On the contrary, money and prestige actually restrict moral freedom, since people become too obsessed with the need to protect their reputation to speak their mind and express their full personalities.

Book 2: Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ “The whole truth?” Miss Bart laughed. “What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe. In this case it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her.”

Related Characters: Lily Bart (speaker), Julia Peniston, Bertha Dorset, Gerty Farish

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

After Lily discovers that her aunt Mrs. Peniston has given her only a minimal portion of her legacy, Lily realizes that she is socially *and* financially ruined, since Bertha Dorset's lies about her have excluded her from her usual circles. When Gerty Farish argues that Lily should counter Bertha's lies by telling the truth, so that people might once again accept her into their social circle, Lily cynically replies that, in high society, the truth does not matter; all that matters is a person's reputation and power. Lily's explanation highlights the lack of justice and moral values in upper-class life. This suggests that money does not generate intellectual or moral elevation but, on the contrary, a base desire for power and self-protection. Instead of abiding by moral principles, people merely follow the whims of the most powerful, choosing to abide by the status quo instead of defending what they know to be the truth.

Lily's unwillingness to follow such dishonest rules, for example by using Bertha's letters to exact revenge, reveals that her mindset sets her apart from the upper class. Her financial ruin is thus a difficult setback, but also allows her to realize that she does not embrace high-society's corrupt values.

☞ “From the beginning? [...] Dear Gerty, how little imagination you good people have! Why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose—in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for. Or no—I won't blame anybody for my faults: I'll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress [...]!”

Related Characters: Lily Bart (speaker), Gerty Farish

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

When Gerty suggests that Lily tell everyone the truth about what happened at Monte Carlo “from the beginning,” Lily ironically retorts that the reasons behind Lily's current situation lie deeper than what Gerty suspects: in Lily's very attitude toward money and power. Lily argues that what has put her in this difficult financial and social situation is of her own making as much as Bertha's. In particular, Lily identifies her obsession with fame, power, and social excitement as family inheritance, impressed in her biological constitution, which has doomed her to follow trivial goals. In this way, Lily takes responsibility for her fate. She accepts that it is her desire to socialize with other people like her, whose entire life is directed toward artificial pursuits, that has put her in such a vicious, immoral social sphere.

The apparent immutability of Lily's character remains an important force throughout the novel, as Lily often proves lucid about the superficial nature of her desires, yet mysteriously unable to do anything about it. In the end, following Lily's argument about her “blood,” it is death that tragically puts an end to Lily's thirst for pleasure, at the same time as it destroys her body and her life.

Book 2: Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ Society did not turn away from her, it simply drifted by, preoccupied and inattentive, letting her feel, to the full measure of her humbled pride, how completely she had been the creature of its favor.

Related Characters: Bertha Dorset, Lily Bart

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

After Bertha Dorset ostracizes Lily from her usual circles, the young woman is bound to watch social life from the outside. When she sees her former friends' fancy carriages pass by her in the street, she realizes that high society has moved on without her, as though it had never needed her in the first place. This realization forces Lily to reflect on her identity. When she defines herself as “the creature of [society's] favor,” she argues that, in losing the wealth, elegance, and power that came with belonging to high

society, she has lost an entire part of her identity—one that was shaped by social life itself.

Although this leaves a void in Lily's life, other characters enjoin her to seek different ways to define herself. Gerty and Selden's trust that a "real Lily" exists in addition to her social persona gives an optimistic twist to Lily's distress, suggesting that she has not disappeared entirely but, rather, that she merely needs to learn to develop other aspects of her personality.

Book 2: Chapter 11 Quotes

☛☛ She lay awake viewing her situation in the crude light which Rosedale's visit had shed on it. In fending off the offer he was so plainly ready to renew, had she not sacrificed to one of those abstract notions of honor that might be called the conventionalities of the moral life? What debt did she owe to a social order which had condemned and banished her without trial? She had never been heard in her own defense; she was innocent of the charge on which she had been found guilty; and the irregularity of her conviction might seem to justify the use of methods as irregular in recovering her lost rights.

Related Characters: Bertha Dorset, Simon Rosedale, Lily Bart

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

When Rosedale comes to visit Lily at her boarding-house, showing a sincere desire to help her escape her working-class state, he forces her to reconsider his plan for her to reintegrate high society—a plan that hinges on Lily's acceptance to use blackmail against Bertha Dorset. Finding herself in a desperate situation, Lily feels tempted to use this immoral strategy against her enemy. In her reflection, she pits abstract notions such as morality against the concrete reality of the situation: her innocence, and the fact that dishonest methods have already been used against her. She argues that, in choosing an honorable, moral attitude, she is not actually following high-society rules, which only grant validity to social and economic power—and that, to be faithful to her milieu, she should only care about those things.

Lily's reflection thus forces her to realize that choosing the moral high end will lead her to social exclusion, whereas

social inclusion involves making an immoral choice. This moment proves to be Lily's most important test, as she is forced to decide what is most humiliating: abandoning her social values or living in poverty. Although Lily initially resolves to sacrifice her moral values to social integration, she later realizes that she is not capable of doing so. Her final decision thus sets her apart from high society forever, condemning her to a poor, yet innocent and morally elevated life.

Book 2: Chapter 12 Quotes

☛☛ "There is someone I must say goodbye to. Oh, not you—we are sure to see each other again—but the Lily Bart you knew. I have kept her with me all this time, but now we are going to part, and I have brought her back to you—I am going to leave her here. When I go out presently she will not go with me. I shall like to think that she has stayed with you—and she'll be no trouble, she'll take up no room."

Related Characters: Lily Bart (speaker), Bertha Dorset, Lawrence Selden

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

After Lily decides to use blackmail against Bertha, she stops by Selden's house, where she tries to tell him, in cryptic terms, that she has decided to give up on her moral goodness ("the Lily Bart you knew") to reintegrate high society. Lily thus realizes that returning to upper-class life involves giving up forever on her hopes for love, justice, and happiness—everything that her relationship with Selden potentially represents. The tragic, mournful elements of Lily's speech suggest that she feels deep regret at choosing this path, and that she is aware of the pathos of her situation.

In the end, it is precisely the intensity of these emotions that will detract Lily from her course, as she realizes that she cannot possibly accept to give up on the very core of her being. In reintegrating high society, she would essentially be forced to destroy not only her love, but also her personality and her hope for a better life. This thought is so crushing and dehumanizing that she cannot possibly bear it.

Book 2: Chapter 13 Quotes

☹☹ It was no longer, however, from the vision of material poverty that she turned with the greatest shrinking. She had a sense of deeper impoverishment—of an inner destitution compared to which outward conditions dwindled into insignificance. It was indeed miserable to be poor—to look forward to a shabby, anxious middle-age, leading by dreary degrees of economy and self-denial to gradual absorption in the dingy communal existence of the boarding-house. But there was something more miserable still—it was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the headless current of the years. That was the feeling which possessed her now—the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spindrift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them.

Related Characters: Nettie Struther, Lily Bart

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

After meeting Nettie Struther, a young woman who lives a fulfilled, lower-class life after successfully recovering from illness, Lily realizes that happiness is not incompatible with poverty. In fact, a person's happiness does not depend on material circumstances, but on their capacity to create a stable home for themselves. In this moment of quasi-spiritual illumination, Lily concludes that unhappiness and solitude are far more fearful than poverty itself. This belief overturns the values she has held on to until this moment. In following purely material ambitions, Lily has been forced to lead an inherently "rootless" life, one that has depended on shifting material circumstances and dishonest relationships, instead of a more stable core made of reliable relationships.

This realization makes Lily feel intensely lonely, but also allows her to reflect on the possibility to change her life and redefine her relationships. She ultimately does this on her death-bed, when the last thing she reflects on is her necessity to reconnect with Selden.

☹☹ As she lay there she said to herself that there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them. She tried to repeat the word, which lingered vague and luminous on the far edge of thought—she was afraid of not remembering it when she woke; and if she could only remember it and say it to him, she felt that everything would be well.

Related Characters: Lawrence Selden, Lily Bart

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

After taking the sleeping drugs that will lead to her death, Lily reflects on her life and concludes that she must share a mysterious "word" with Selden that will bring peace and comfort to her relationship with him and to her life in general. Although this word is never defined clearly, it is described in highly positive terms, thus conveying an impression of love and hope, capable of stabilizing Lily and Selden's feelings forever. It seems as though Lily has finally found the way to overcome the social obstacles that exist between them and to reach out to their deepest cores, where they have always known that they share deep feelings for each other. Although Lily dies before she is able to tell Selden this word, Selden's own decision, the next day, to tell Lily a "word" suggests that they connect on an intensely deep level, beyond the barriers of verbal and social life itself.

Book 2: Chapter 14 Quotes

☹☹ It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction; which, in her, had reached out to him in every struggle against the influence of her surroundings, and in him, had kept alive the faith that now drew him penitent and reconciled to her side.

He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear.

Related Characters: Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

Selden kneels by Lily's dead body and realizes that their mutual love has not disappeared. Rather, death has erased all differences between them, allowing Selden to focus only on his spiritual life, the deepest core of his feelings for her, which exist beyond concrete life itself.

As Lily told Selden in the afternoon of the day she died, explaining that Selden's love for her kept her sane throughout her life, Selden concludes that their mutual love has kept both of them alive throughout life—not in a

physical way, through physical existence, but through faith, a spiritual ambition that outlives life itself.

The immaterial nature of this love allows the two characters to communicate even after death, as the mysterious “word” they meant to share keeps on moving (“pass[ing] between

them”) after death. In this way, Selden and Lily have not lost all capacity for communication. Rather, the evidence of their love keeps their souls and intentions alive, even as Lily’s body remains silent forever.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1: CHAPTER 1

One busy Monday afternoon in intense September heat, Lawrence Selden sees his acquaintance Lily Bart in the middle of the crowd in New York's Grand Central Station. Although he is struck by her beauty and admires her greatly, he also wonders about her aimless attitude, as she seems to be waiting for something mysterious. As much as he is glad to see her, he also feels that she causes in him a permanent sense of uncertainty, as he feels that all of her actions are the result of calculation.

Curious to figure out why Lily seems to be waiting in the train station, Selden greets her. Smiling beautifully, Lily thanks him for saving her, to which he replies that this will always be his mission in life. Lily then proceeds to explain that she is on her way to Bellomont, where their mutual friends Judy and Gus Trenor are organizing a party. Having just missed her train and waiting for the next one, while knowing that her aunt's house is closed, Lily feels at a loss about what to do and asks Selden to take her somewhere less stuffy.

Feeling honored by such a proposal, since Selden is not used to spending time alone with Lily, he suggests going to a tea-house, but Lily fears meeting boring people there. Selden, who has the impression that Lily is deliberately making her speech both intimate and provocative, decides to call a hansom (horse-drawn carriage). However, feeling inspired by the fresh air, Lily decides that they should walk. During their walk, Selden silently admires Lily for looking superior to all the other people around her, taking pleasure in her physical closeness and the details of her body and dress. He wonders whether Lily is superior to other women only because of superficial additions to her figure, or whether—and this is his preferred hypothesis—her nature is truly unique, yet society has made her seem trivial.

In light of Lawrence's description, the reader's first impression of Lily is that she is beautiful yet potentially treacherous and manipulative. This gives Lily an aura of mystery, but it also introduces the harmful effect that her high-society milieu has had on her behavior; her calculative attitude is in fact meant to protect her reputation from slander.



The two characters' exchange about saving Lily's life shows playful exaggeration, an over-dramatization of their actual relationship, but also serves as a subtle introduction to one of the novel's main themes: the possibility for Lawrence to "save" Lily—or, through love, to inspire her to break free from her social environment. At the same time, Lily's feeling of being lost highlights that what Selden initially perceived as mystery was nothing more than confusion, and that he might in fact be attributing too much intentionality to Lily's actions.



Despite noticing what he interprets as Lily's calculating behavior, Selden feels that Lily's true nature is hidden beneath her social appearances, which distort her true qualities. One indication of a possible separation between Lily's true self and her social persona is her lack of interest in going to a public place with Selden. She seems to dislike the idea of having to socialize with other people and, instead, prefers to spend time alone with Selden. This suggests that, in the same way he finds her unique, Lily might also recognize something special in Selden that sets him apart from other men.



When the sun comes out, Lily complains about the heat again but feels grateful for the trees planted on the street where they are walking. Selden then reveals that this is the street where he lives, and when Lily asks him if it is cooler in his apartment, he makes the bold move of asking her to come and see for herself. Lily blushes but accepts his offer, which she knows is a risk. To himself, Selden admires her for her spontaneity and feels deeply pleased to know that she accepted his offer without premeditation.

Once in the apartment, Lily finds it wonderful that Selden has the entire space for himself, and she criticizes the fact that women are not allowed the same luxury. When Selden replies that Gerty Farish has her own apartment, Lily considers the example irrelevant, since Gerty is not “marriageable” and has an unpleasant apartment. Suddenly remembering that Gerty is Selden’s cousin, Lily apologizes for her harsh words but concludes that, while Gerty is both free and “good,” Lily is not. Observing Lily, Selden feels that her bracelets make her seem trapped, a victim of her own society, forced to follow a fixed fate.

When Lily and Selden discuss the topic of personal apartments, Lily seizes this opportunity to ask him why he does not visit her more often at her aunt Mrs. Peniston’s house, despite the fact that they get along so well. Lily says that she truly does not know why Selden does not come more, noting that the only men who come are people who think she wants to marry them, but that that cannot possibly be Selden’s belief. Completely charmed and intrigued by Lily’s attitude, Selden then takes the risk of telling her that that might in fact be part of the reason he doesn’t visit more, but Lily laughs off his answer, saying it is stupid of him to try to seduce her.

Lily then confesses that she wants a true friend, someone who does not try to please her but will say the honest truth to her when she needs it. Everyone around her, she argues, only tries to use her for their own benefit, and does not actually care about her. When Lily complains that people are saying she should marry, Selden bluntly asks her why she doesn’t, invoking the fact that women like Lily are brought up for that very purpose. Lily sighs, making a cynical comment about the fact that she has nothing else to look forward to, and discusses the rich men she could have married earlier if she had seized the opportunity. As they mention one of her past suitors, Selden lightly comments that she can do better.

Lily’s hesitation does not indicate that she believes Selden is making romantic advances toward her but, rather, that she knows other people might interpret her decision to follow him as a romantic signal. Lily’s willingness to overlook such social codes and follow her own whims signals that she is not as calculative as Selden might think.



Lily’s conversation with Selden reveals that she is not an unthinking, superficial member of society but, rather, that she thoughtfully reflects on issues of gender inequality and justice. She criticizes the trade-off that exists between women’s independence and marriageable or financial status, arguing that the only free women are those who cannot marry. Lily’s own attraction to money keeps her from being an objective critic, or from actually wishing another life for herself.



Lily’s assumption that Selden knows she would never want to marry him highlights, in a playful yet brutal way, how little she can imagine marrying someone who would not propel her to the top ranks of society. Lily’s focus on money thus keeps her from taking seriously Selden’s shy admission that he might in fact be interested in her romantically. At the same time, her frustration with the superficiality of her social circle makes her sincerely desperate for friendship, highlighting her loneliness and her feeling that she has no one to truly depend on.



Throughout the novel, Lily will show that she is not afraid of confronting truth. Her desire to have a reliable person by her side to help her in that task reveals her aversion to dishonesty and hypocrisy, which are so prevalent in her social group. Selden’s blunt suggestion that the only objective for women is to marry reveals a central contradiction in Lily’s character: her embrace of the materialistic values her upbringing gave her, and her simultaneous opposition to its most effective means, marriage.



When Selden hands Lily a cigarette box, Lily grabs a cigarette. She lights her cigarette to his and Selden is moved by how smooth her face is. Lily then stands up to examine the room, appreciating the bookshelves with a pleasure less intellectual than sensuous. She interrogates Selden about his literary collections, asking him about Americana, but Selden says that Americana are only interesting as historical artifacts, not as actual reading material. They discuss the rarity and extraordinary price of Americana, as well as the famous Jefferson Gryce collection.

Despite the pleasure that Selden draws from being in Lily's company, he cannot help but wonder what her hidden motives might be. When Lily turns to him with a smile that is both intimate and challenging, Lily asks him if he is disappointed not to be richer and to have to work for a living. Selden answers that he enjoys his job as a lawyer, although he admits he does sometimes wish he could travel more. Lily then provocatively asks if he would be ready to marry to do so, but Selden rejects this idea as preposterous.

Lily explains that this is the problem: men are free to choose whether or not they want to marry, whereas women are forced to. She describes the double standards affecting men and women's behavior, as women must always be elegant and wear expensive clothing to be part of upper-class social circles, whereas men's appearances do not matter as much. If women cannot afford this life on their own, they are forced to marry.

Amused by Lily's arguments, Selden does not take her very seriously, and notes that she might find a husband at the Trenors'. Lily then mentions that many people will be there whom Selden knows, including the Dorsets, and she glances quickly at Selden to gauge his reaction. Unfazed, Selden replies that big parties bore him, and Lily admits that they also bore her. When Selden asks her why she goes to them, Lily argues that it is her duty, adding that she would be alone with her aunt otherwise. As the two of them laugh at how terrible that sounds, they share a surprising moment of intimacy.

Lily then notices it is getting late and leaves to catch her train. She makes Selden say goodbye to her at the door instead of taking her back to the station, since she knows that going up to his apartment alone was already very imprudent on her part. On her way out, she crosses an unpleasant cleaning lady and wonders if the woman's stare reflects her belief that Lily might be someone with whom Selden is having an affair. This causes Lily to blush suddenly, ashamed, and hurry off.

Lily's sensory-based interest in Selden's books reveals her passion for the beautiful, luxurious items that money can buy. However ingenuous her questions about these books may seem, they serve as the foundation for a plan she has already formed in her mind: to use her knowledge about Americana to make Percy Gryce interested in her. This behavior confirms that she does indeed use social calculation, sometimes when it is least expected.



Lily's alternation of genuineness and social calculation make her difficult to decipher. However, this interrogation of Selden on marriage, which seems cryptic, reflects Lily's desire to evaluate life deeply and critically; her question to Selden about marriage is actually a criticism of gender roles, as she will soon reveal.



Lily uses her anticipation of Selden's response (which she knew would be opposed to marrying for money) to discuss gender roles. Lily's comments are not only a denunciation of society's injustice, but also a form of self-justification, since they describe her own life choices (the plan to marry a rich man) in terms of constraint and injustice.



Selden's failure to understand Lily's words as a sincere outcry against gender-based injustice reveals that he believes Lily might not despise society's focus on wealth and appearances as much as she claims. Lily's mention of the Dorsets is meant to provoke Selden, since he had an affair with Bertha Dorset in the past. Lily's comment can be seen as mere provocation or, perhaps, as an indication of her nascent romantic interest toward Selden, as she tries to figure out if he still has feelings for Bertha.



Lily's insistence that Selden say goodbye to her inside the building reveals her fear that she might be seen alone with a single man, which would be a dangerous blow to her reputation as an unmarried woman. The fact that Lily has to think about this reveals the fact that the burden for maintaining a reputation of chastity lies on the woman's shoulders, not the man's.



Once in the street, Lily runs into Simon Rosedale, an acquaintance she would have preferred to avoid. Mr. Rosedale takes pleasure in Lily's embarrassment and, when he implies that Lily has just been up to Selden's apartment, Lily invents an excuse about having been to her dress-maker's. However, when Mr. Rosedale reveals that he is the owner of the Benedick, where Selden lives, Lily feels even more embarrassed and quickly hails a hansom instead of letting Mr. Rosedale take her back to the train station.

Lily's fear of being judged for spending time alone with a man proves well founded when Rosedale teases her about it. Rosedale's attitude is cruel and tactless, since he knows that in Lily's social world, reputations are people's most valuable assets. The power he has over her, through the potential rumors he could spread about what he has just seen, makes him behave in a callous way.



BOOK 1: CHAPTER 2

In the hansom, Lily reflects that, as a woman, she is being unfairly condemned for every act of spontaneous behavior, such as going to see Selden in his apartment. She realizes that lying to Rosedale was a terrible mistake, since it only emphasized the riskiness of what she did, whereas admitting that she had visited Selden would have proven her innocence. In addition, allowing Rosedale to take her to the station might have encouraged him to remain quiet about what he saw, since Lily belongs to the upper-class society he so desperately wants to join. He might even think that Lily would invite him to the party at Bellomont, which would help him in his social climbing.

Although running into Rosedale might seem relatively innocuous, this episode has greater repercussions that come to light later in the novel, when Gus Trenor makes aggressive, derogatory comments about Lily's relationships with men, thus implicitly revealing that Rosedale has spread defamatory rumors about the young woman's sexual life. Lily's evaluation of what the best course of action would have been involves social transactions: making Rosedale feel flattered and grateful in exchange for his silence.



Lily remembers the first time she met Mr. Rosedale, whom she immediately felt repulsed by. She recalls deliberately ignoring him in public, and wonders if the man's recollection of the shame he felt might be sufficient to make him want to take revenge on her. Lily scolds herself for such a rash action, since she knows one should always please new members of society, as one never knows how far they will go.

Lily's thoughts about Rosedale reveal that social connections in Lily's world are only defined by people's interests, wealth, and power. Lily concludes that she should have ignored her own feelings about Rosedale and acted hypocritically toward him, feigning friendliness only because he could potentially become rich and powerful.



At the train station, Lily boards the train and, eager to take her mind off these unpleasant thoughts, contrives to make a man she recognizes, Percy Gryce, sit beside her. Mr. Gryce, who is very shy, has probably seen her but not dared to say hello. However, Lily succeeds in making him sit next to her and orders tea for the two of them, impressing Mr. Gryce with the grace with which she handles the tea in the middle of an unstable, moving train. Although Lily does not enjoy the thought of drinking this bad tea after having had Selden's refined tea, Mr. Gryce, overwhelmed by the young woman's beauty, finds the tea wonderful.

Lily's strategy to ignore unpleasant or solitary thoughts is often to seek company at all costs, even if the company itself bores her. Her comparison of the tea in the train and at Selden's serves as a symbol of the stark differences between Gryce and Selden themselves. It is not only the flavor and quality of the tea that she finds different, but the very nature of the two men—Selden, who is intellectually curious and perceptive, and Gryce, whom Lily can easily manipulate.



Lily congratulates herself on setting the right tone for her conversation with Mr. Gryce, and keeping from making it seem too adventurous, which might frighten him. However, when the conversation subsides, Lily inquires about Mr. Gryce's Americana, which leads him to describe his various purchases with great detail. Despite feeling terribly bored, Lily looks at him with interest, which encourages him to keep on talking. She feels glad to have questioned Selden about Americana in preparation for this moment, and congratulates herself on taking advantage of unexpected opportunities. Mr. Gryce, in turn, feels happy to engage in a conversation about something he is passionate about. The inheritor of the famous Jefferson Gryce collection of Americana, Mr. Gryce has made it his duty to expand his father's collection and takes pride from this activity.

Mr. Gryce then suddenly looks distraught when a common acquaintance enters the carriage. Bertha Dorset then walks in, interrupting the conversation and imposing herself on Lily and Mr. Gryce by making a fuss to sit beside them. After sitting down, Mrs. Dorset asks Lily if she has a cigarette but Lily, who knows that Mr. Gryce disapproves of smoking, calls Mrs. Dorset's question absurd, although Mrs. Dorset notes that she is surprised to learn that Lily has quit smoking. Noticing Mrs. Dorset's sly smile, Lily regrets the fact that Mrs. Dorset was able to find a seat beside them.

Lily's social skills come to light in this episode, in which she knows exactly how to behave to put her acquaintance at ease. Her calculative nature also becomes apparent, as it appears that her previous questions to Selden about Americana were not an indication of Lily's sincere interest in this topic but, rather, her anticipation that she would need to converse with Gryce over the course of the weekend. Lily's constant use of such calculation makes her actual feelings difficult to decipher. It also highlights the artificiality of such conversations, as politeness and civility keep people from expressing their true feelings about certain topics.



Gryce finds Bertha's entrance in the carriage distressing not only because it interrupts his pleasant conversation with Lily, but because it shows him in presence of an unmarried woman, which is potentially scandalous. Bertha's seemingly innocent—yet insistent—comments about Lily's smoking reveal that Bertha knows (as her smile suggests) that Lily is trying to impress Gryce, but that she takes pleasure in potentially hindering Lily's efforts.



BOOK 1: CHAPTER 3

At Bellomont, after playing bridge until early morning, Lily walks up to her room but takes a moment to look around her, because she does not yet want to face the solitude of her room. On the stairwell, she finds delight in admiring the beauty of the Trenors' house (instead of a sense of inequality, which she sometimes experiences). She then sees Bertha Dorset talking intimately with Percy Gryce. Although Lily knows that Mr. Gryce, whose boring stories she has had to hear all afternoon, is taken with Lily, she feels jealous of Mrs. Dorset's married status, which allows her to amuse herself with men without actually needing them in the way Lily does.

Lily's attitude toward money is defined by a sense of want (since she has not achieved financial stability yet) but also an aesthetic appreciation for the luxury it brings, highlighting the sincere pleasure she takes in this upper-class life. Meanwhile, Bertha's attitude toward Gryce serves as an early indication of her intention to keep Lily from trying to marry Gryce, since it is highly improbable that Bertha actually takes pleasure in spending time with this man, who is universally acknowledged to be boring.



Lily realizes that she will not be able to escape her fate of marrying a rich, probably boring husband. While Lily could live independently like Gerty Farish, she feels too much pleasure at living in luxury to conceive of a lower life. At the same time, Lily knows that her gambling habits are bad for her, and she regrets deciding to play once again. She recalls the example of Ned Silverton, an innocent, beautiful boy who fell in love with divorcée Carry Fisher and with bridge, which made him become addicted to gambling. Over time, Lily's hostesses have expected her to play bridge with them as an implicit exchange for the clothes and accessories they sometimes buy for her, and Lily has discovered some of the same traces of addiction in her own life.

When Lily returns to her room, she realizes that she has lost three hundred dollars at bridge, whereas women who do not need it, such as Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor, left the bridge table with hundreds of dollars. Lily finds this situation unfair and compares her life to the maid's, arguing that she, too, is "in bondage," but that the maid at least gets paid regularly. Lily looks in the mirror and notices lines by her mouth. She concludes that her frequent worrying is making her look old—which in turn causes her to worry more, since beauty is so important to her social advancement.

Lily then reflects on Percy Gryce and concludes that he is clearly interested in marrying her. Imagining being married to Mr. Gryce, Lily remembers her mother's vengeful tone when she foreshadowed Lily getting all their money back thanks to the young girl's beauty. Lily recalls her family life, in which she and her mother would spend extravagant sums of money and live lavish lives, while being in constant need of more money.

When Lily and her mother lacked money to sustain their expensive lifestyle, Lily's father, whom she almost never saw and whom she barely knew, was always blamed. Mrs. Bart became famous for creating elegance out of moderate means. She considered her life heroic, since it involved such a mix of nobility and risk. Lily agrees with her mother in this regard and feels disdain for people who "live like pigs"—that is, who do not respect conventions of manner and elegance.

At the age of nineteen, Lily's life changed dramatically when her father announced that he was bankrupt. This confession led to his slow death and, while Lily felt sorry for him, Mrs. Bart was angry at her husband's failure. The two women were forced to live in a state of poverty. They carefully avoided their previous acquaintances, considering their situation a disgrace.

Lily's attitude toward money is paradoxical. She often complains about what she is forced to do, such as marry a rich man, to have enough money. However, as her gambling habits demonstrate, she also seems incapable of adopting a rational attitude toward money and working hard on her own to save the little money she has. At the same time, Lily feels that even gambling is a mandatory activity, since it allows her to receive the accessories she needs to take part in upper-class activities. These constraints seem to doom Lily to a life of eternal spending, with few opportunities to actually protect her resources.



Lily's self-comparison to the maid expresses her personal feeling of being prisoner to upper-class life, but is also highly disingenuous, since Lily has chosen a mode of life in which she is not expected to work and can spend her money on frivolous items such as dresses and jewelry. Although Lily sees social events as a form of obligation that involve skill and work, she does enjoy them greatly and cannot imagine living without them.



Lily's memories of her family life serve as an explanation for her own, current situation. Throughout Lily's upbringing, it was acceptable to spend more money than one received, and this attitude has defined the young woman's own values. Her mother's aggressive attitude shows that money, for Mrs. Bart, was a matter of moral dignity as much as survival.



Mrs. Bart and Lily's purely instrumental relationship with Lily's father serves as a dark, foreboding signal of the kind of life that Lily herself could lead one day, in which one accepts that marriage and family life can be loveless, unaccompanied by any deeper attachment than an exchange of money. Lily's disdain for people who "live like pigs" relates not only to wealth, but also to decorum, which she takes very seriously.



Mrs. Bart and Lily's avoidance of past acquaintances reveals that their relationships with people in upper-class circles was exclusively based on a single common attribute: money. Lily's upbringing thus taught her to accept that friendship does not necessarily involve loyalty or affection.



Despite their dire situation, Mrs. Bart trusted in Lily's beauty and the consequent ease with which she would one day find a husband. She expressed these ideas so forcefully that Lily began to feel entitled to a world of elegance and luxury. Early on, Lily realized that she would have to use her beauty in strategic ways to become part of the upper-class society that so fascinated her. At the same time, though, Lily does not share all of her mother's beliefs, as she feels repulsed by the idea of marrying a man for the sake of money alone. Secretly, Lily dreams of noble princes and romantic adventures.

Reflecting on these earlier dreams of adventure, Lily concludes that they were childish. Two years after Lily's father's death, her mother died, telling her daughter that she must escape the "dinginess" they lived in, otherwise she would never find a husband. After Mrs. Bart's death, Lily's relatives, who probably knew what Mrs. Bart thought of their lives spent "living like pigs," are uninterested in taking care of Lily. Only one of Lily's aunts, Mrs. Peniston, accepts to take her in, feeling pride in this act of public self-sacrifice.

Despite being part of New York's upper class, Mrs. Peniston has always lived at the margins of high-society activity, and she takes pleasure in the material aspects of upper-class life more than the social circle itself. Therefore, Lily was forced to adapt to her aunt's unexciting, secluded habits, but also benefited from Mrs. Peniston's belief that young people should wear elegant clothes. Instead of giving Lily a regular allowance, though, Mrs. Peniston buys her presents, which keeps the young woman in a state of dependence.

Apart from this, Mrs. Peniston has failed to intervene in Lily's life, and Lily feels frustrated that she is still unmarried at the age of twenty-nine. At the same time, Lily longs for independence, but soon realizes that her desire for luxury is too strong and would keep her from straying away from her quest for money, power, and success.

BOOK 1: CHAPTER 4

The next morning at Bellomont, the hostess, Judy Trenor, sends Lily a message asking her if she can come down by ten to help with administrative tasks. Lily complains about having to be down at an hour that, at Bellomont, is considered extremely early, but knows that she is implicitly expected to perform such duties in exchange for being invited to Bellomont. However, in light of Lily's wasteful previous night, this message only emphasizes her lack of liberty.

Although Lily accepts to live in a world in which her appearance, more than her mind or character, will determine her future and her happiness, she also proves more romantically inclined than her mother, as she ideally seeks to combine luxury and romance. Part of Lily is thus attracted to a world of social calculation, but part of her also longs for a more spontaneous, fantastical world, in which she might experience life outside of the narrow codes of high society.



In the same way that Lily's relationship with her parents was defined less by love than a common embrace of upper-class attitudes, her relationship to the rest of her family lacks affection and care. Even Mrs. Peniston's decision to take Lily in derives less from compassion than from the knowledge of doing a publicly admirable act. Lily's cynicism about romance likely derives from this generally affectionless environment.



Lily's disregard for Mrs. Peniston's highly comfortable, yet isolated life reveals that Lily is not necessarily interested in wealth or financial stability, but in the public display of wealth and power, and in the socially exciting world of upper-class life. It remains ambiguous whether Mrs. Peniston actually means to make Lily feel dependent, but it is possible that she does not trust Lily enough to give her financial freedom.



Lily's belief that at least part of the reason she is not yet married is Mrs. Peniston's fault seems like an unfair accusation, since Lily herself admits that she does not want to marry for money alone. This accusation can be interpreted as Lily's effort to project onto others a blame that she knows is largely her own.



Although members of the upper class value Lily's presence and Lily is regarded as an important member of high society, her unmarried status also places her in a precarious social position, as there are hidden conditions (such as Lily's help with Judy's administrative duties) tied to her participation in social events.



When Judy Trenor sees Lily, she shows no visible sign of recognition of Lily's services, which irritates the young girl. However, Lily, who tends to think of her friends in a calculating, self-interested way, considers Mrs. Trenor a reliable friend, unlike many other people she knows.

Mrs. Trenor, who deeply enjoys her function as hostess and takes this role seriously, is agitated because she fears that her party will turn into a disaster. Feeling that she is competing against other women such as Mrs. Van Osburgh, Mrs. Trenor is afraid that people might be bored. She also notes that people disapprove of her inviting Carry Fisher, a woman who has been divorced twice, and she complains about Mrs. Fisher borrowing money from her husband Gus Trenor, although she is grateful for the way in which Mrs. Fisher keeps her husband in a good mood.

As Lily tries to help Judy Trenor with her massive correspondence, Mrs. Trenor complains about Lady Cressida Raith, who is religiously conservative and will make the party boring. Mrs. Trenor discusses the various possible attitudes of the people at the party but Lily tries to reassure her by telling her that the Bellomont parties are always entertaining. However, Mrs. Trenor remains gloomy, explaining that Bertha Dorset is angry at her because Lawrence Selden, with whom Bertha once had an affair, might be coming. Lily is surprised to learn that Bertha apparently still has feelings for Selden, who does not seem to feel the same way.

Lily and Judy then discuss Percy Gryce, whom Judy invited on purpose for Lily. Judy tells Lily that she is infinitely more attractive and intelligent than Bertha, but that, unlike Lily, Bertha is mean, which is more likely to benefit her in the long run. Feigning surprise at this harsh comment, Lily wonders about Judy's friendship with Bertha but Judy simply explains that it is safer to keep dangerous people on one's side. Judy adds that Bertha takes pleasure in making her husband George Dorset jealous and miserable.

When Judy says she might call Lawrence Selden to make sure he comes, Lily blushes and says that, if Judy would be doing so to keep Bertha from seducing Percy Gryce, she shouldn't worry. Judy then exults at the idea that Lily has successfully seduced Gryce. Knowing Gryce's conservative nature, though, Judy encourages Lily to go slowly, but also promises to help her out as best she can in the young girl's efforts to marry him.

Lily's belief that Judy is a loyal friend will later prove mistaken, when Judy distances herself from the young woman after learning about Lily's financial arrangements with Gus Trenor. Mrs. Trenor's expectation that Lily will help her with administrative duties already signals that their friendship is tied to underlying, self-interested exchanges.



Mrs. Trenor's concerns, as well as her discussion of other people's personalities and motives, reveals that social events of this kind are a fragile enterprise, moved not by a common desire for people to enjoy themselves but, rather, by relationships of power and competition, hidden by outward civility. Semblances of morality (such as people's condemnation of Carry's divorces) ultimately matter less than social prestige and utility.



Mrs. Trenor's fear concerning Lady Cressida Raith's presence reveals that people's attitude toward morality is superficial, since what ultimately matters is less morality itself (for example, religious observance or Carry Fisher's divorces) than people's enjoyment. Lily's detached comments about Bertha and Selden's relationship are not as disinterested as they seem, since Lily will later prove jealous of Bertha when she sees Bertha and Selden together.



Judy's willingness to share her thoughts about Bertha with Lily seemingly indicates that she feels closer to Lily than to Bertha. However, Judy's mention of Bertha's malice also foreshadows Bertha's later social prominence and thus highlights the extent to which sincere affection matters less than relations of power in this upper-class milieu.



Lily's blush reveals her potential feelings for Selden, and her desire to keep him away from Bellomont might derive from her knowledge that Selden's presence would keep her from wanting to spend time with Gryce. Judy's excitement for Lily's potential marriage with Gryce shows that she is less concerned with Lily's happiness and Gryce's suitability than with the prospect of a materially successful marriage.



Over the next few days, Lily feels satisfied by her slow progress in seducing Percy Gryce. When she sees her cousin Jack Stepney with Gwen Van Osburgh, she realizes that their situation is similar to hers: Gwen seems deeply attracted to Jack, who only expresses boredom. However, Lily feels jealous of Jack's situation, in which he simply has to let Gwen marry him, whereas Lily has to engage in complicated social strategies to make sure that Gryce is actually interested in marrying her.

Lily's desire to seduce Gryce does not make her blind to the reality of her situation, in which she knows she is choosing a life of monotony and boredom for the sake of money alone. Lily's lucidity, though, does not keep her from wanting to succeed. Her criticism of having to use social strategies relates less to morality and ethics than to the practical effort it takes to behave in socially savvy ways.



Reflecting on her possible marriage with Gryce, Lily feels relieved that her money troubles might soon end, and that she might be able to live her life independently. Amazed by the pleasures and luxuries that such a life would afford, Lily feels optimistic about the potential for her beauty to seduce anyone. She looks tenderly upon the people at Bellomont, reveling in the beauty of the setting and the elegance of the people around her, whose world she will be happy to share. When she hears footsteps behind her, she believes Percy Gryce has come to join her but, upon turning around, discovers that it is in fact than Lawrence Selden.

Most of Lily's attitude toward money and her own future is characterized by the alternation of moments of self-confidence and moments of discouragement and worry. Lily's trust in her own beauty serves as her primary source of optimism, and also fuels her conviction that she belongs in a luxurious, beautiful world. Selden's arrival when Lily expected Gryce symbolically replaces one man for the other, suggesting that Lily will have to make a choice between two opposite life paths: her friendship with Selden and her necessity to marry Gryce.



BOOK 1: CHAPTER 5

Having planned to seduce Percy Gryce by convincing him that she is religiously observant, Lily plans to join him to go to church on Sunday. Mr. Gryce, who considers high society too materialistic, is impressed by what he perceives as Lily's own discomfort in this social sphere. However, Lily, despite her best intentions, is too intrigued by Lawrence Selden's presence at Bellomont to go to church. Looking out the window at the omnibus that is departing for church, she is glad to notice that Mr. Gryce seems dejected by her absence.

Lily's relationship to Gryce is defined by social calculation and the pleasure of asserting her power over someone else, whereas her relationship to Selden is much more mysterious, fuelled by sincere interest and curiosity. Lily does not feel bad about trying to convince Gryce that she is someone she is not, since her entire relationship with him is defined by calculation and a lack of sincere romantic interest.



Lily reflects on Lawrence Selden's character and resolves to figure out if he has come to Bellomont for her or for Bertha Dorset. She wonders why she likes him so much, and admits that she has always enjoyed his company more than other men's. She concludes that what she admires in him is his capacity to remain on the outskirts of high society, taking part in its activities without becoming its prisoner, as Lily feels she is.

Lily's reflections on Selden reveal curiosity on her part, as she feels attracted by Selden's intellectual and social freedom. Her interest in him is inherently deeper than her relationship with other members of society, since none of it derives from social calculation. At the same time, Lily does not yet seem ready to admit that she might be interested in him romantically.



Lily makes a mental list of who is present at Bellomont and realizes that, compared to Selden, they are all empty and uninteresting. She smiles at this thought, since her friends had seemed so admirable to her the night before. She realizes that, however opulent their lives might be, they are also dull and empty, and she herself longs for an opportunity to escape the monotony of the life she has planned for herself.

The contrast between Lily's previously positive assessment of Bellomont and her current criticism underlines the strong influence that Selden has on her, as well as Lily's underlying aversion to a monotonous life. However much she tries to convince herself that she desires money and luxury, she seems incapable of accepting the boredom they are tied to.



At the dinner table the night before, George Dorset, who was seated next to Lily, remarked to her that his wife, Bertha, who was seated next to Lawrence Selden, was ridiculing herself by trying so hard to seduce Selden. When Lily turned to look, she noticed that Selden, however, seemed uninterested in the woman's advances. George, who felt that Lily was being particularly attentive to him, admitted that he was jealous and that that was what has caused him to suffer from chronic indigestion.

At the end of dinner, when Lily heard the name of Simon Rosedale mentioned, she wondered if she might one day have to consider marrying him if she failed to make Mr. Gryce propose to her. However, Lily was cheered up from these thoughts by the confidence she felt about her effects on Gryce. When she returned to her room, her happiness was increased when she found some money that Mrs. Peniston had sent her.

The next morning, as Lily imagines the endless tediousness of sharing a life with Percy Gryce, she feels that her plan to go to church is too rational for her not to want to break it. Therefore, instead of taking the omnibus with everyone else, she decides that she will walk to church, pretending that she woke up too late, so that she can take advantage of the beautiful morning to enjoy herself.

As Lily walks around in the large house, she reaches the library, where she sees Lawrence Selden and Bertha Dorset in intimate conversation. Pretending that she had not realized she was late for church, she tells them she will walk to make it for at least part of the service. She then steps outside and realizes that she is disappointed to have seen Lawrence with Bertha, since she thought that he had come to Bellomont for her.

At a slow, leisurely pace contrasting starkly with her professed intention to make it to church on time, Lily walks through the gardens and into the woods, where she finds a beautiful spot to sit and rest. Unaccustomed to solitude, though, she feels that she is wasting the beauty of this spot by being there alone and misusing the potential of this romantic scene.

Bertha's behavior toward Selden in front of her husband highlights her disregard for ethical issues regarding adulterous behavior, but also for other people's feelings—in this case, her husband's. She seems intent on getting what she wants without considering the consequences of her actions on other people's lives. Selden's lack of interest in Bertha, though, seems to suggest that he came to Bellomont to see Lily.



Lily's consideration of Rosedale as a potential future husband reveals the lack of sincere interest she has in Gryce, thus highlighting how emotionally empty her marriage would be. It also suggests that part of her knows that she will fail to marry Gryce—perhaps precisely because of her lack of emotional interest in the affair.



Lily's behavior, in which she intentionally sabotages her opportunities to marry for money, indicate her lack of interest in actually marrying for money. At the same time, she seems incapable of giving up on that idea entirely, since it is her only direct avenue to secure wealth and power. Her elaborate social strategies aim to compensate for these existential doubts.



Lily finally admits that she feels emotionally invested in her relationship with Selden. This time, her jealousy toward Bertha has less to do with power dynamics than with the nature of her feelings themselves—although she does not yet directly admit that she feels anything for Selden.



Once again, Lily shows, through her behavior, that she is not actually trying hard to make Gryce interested in her, since she seems willing enough to let this opportunity pass. Lily's inability to connect with her own self becomes apparent, as she cannot accept solitude as an opportunity to engage with her own thoughts.



When Selden arrives, playfully asking her if she was waiting for him, Lily replies that she did indeed want to see if he would come. Lily then reveals that her purpose in going to church was to accompany somebody else. As Selden and Lily then playfully debate what she should do to try to find that mysterious person, they suddenly see the church group walking toward them.

When Selden sees Percy Gryce among the attendants, he realizes that this must be the person Lily wants to impress and he admires her planning skills, telling her that he now understands why she asked him so many questions about Americana. However, Lily blushes, confused, and Selden is surprised by this reaction, which he believes can be interpreted in various ways. Before the group reaches them, Selden suddenly asks Lily if she will agree to spend the afternoon with him, since he is leaving the next morning.

BOOK 1: CHAPTER 6

That afternoon, Lily accepts Selden's proposal and goes on a walk with him in the woods. She appreciates the peaceful atmosphere of the natural scene, although she enjoys nature only insofar as it reflects her own emotions. When the two of them sit down, they remain quiet. Selden feels extremely calm and relaxed, feeling free and appreciating the pleasant sensations that nature brings him. Lily, on the other hand, behind an appearance of equal calm, feels alternately fearful and overjoyed, although the latter emotion soon dominates.

Lily wonders if this might be love, or merely the combination of pleasant sensations. Having no prior experience from which to judge her current state, she cannot be sure what she is feeling. She remembers falling in love only once with another person (although she has fallen in love with money or power many times), but what she felt at the time could not compare to this. This time, she feels unusually light and free, and she admires Selden's various qualities, such as his cultivation and his sense of irony, which keeps him separate from trivial matters of society.

As a form of emotional self-protection as well as honesty, Lily does not allow her relationship with Selden to become too intimate, since she always reminds him of her parallel efforts to marry someone else. At the same time, the two of them only consider Lily's future in a playful way, seemingly unable to trust that Lily would actually sacrifice her life for money and boredom.



Lily's blush at Selden's comment reveals her embarrassment at seeing her previous calculative behavior come to light. This signals her aversion to immoral practices such as deception and dissimulation, and also her shame at being so blatantly seen trying to impress someone else—a shame that (as Selden perceives) indicates Lily's sincere interest in Selden, perhaps even as a romantic partner.



The contrast between Lily and Selden's attitudes and emotions indicates different responses to a similar situation. Although Lily soon becomes overwhelmed by her emotions, Selden seems more relaxed, perhaps because he has already learned to accept what he feels for her. Either way, the peaceful setting of this scene creates the perfect backdrop for an intimate, honest conversation.



Lily's inability to identify love suggests how little she has been able to engage with her emotional life until now. Unlike many of Lily's other feelings in life, which revolve around material acquisitions and other superficial pursuits, this new series of sensations allows her to take pleasure in intellectual life, since it is precisely Selden's anti-materialism that appeals to her.



When Lily begins saying that she has broken two engagements to spend time with him, Selden replies that he has broken none, since he came to Bellomont to see her, because she fascinates him. At the same time, he adds that he knows that the time Lily is spending with him has not distracted her from her prior course, and Lily is forced to admit to herself that he is right, because she has used Selden's presence as a way to make Percy Gryce only more interested in her. This afternoon, when she invented the excuse of a headache to avoid going on an excursion with the rest of the group, her vulnerable, sick attitude made her seem only more attractive to Gryce.

Since the rest of the group will be gone for four hours, Lily feels happy about having some time to enjoy her thoughts freely for once. Replying to Selden's previous comment, Lily complains about him always accusing her of premeditation, but Selden explains that he admires her for it. When Lily despondently replies that it has not brought her success, Selden argues that his vision of success is different from hers: he sees it as a "republic of the spirit," apart from any material concerns.

Lily and Selden argue about the possibility of reaching such a non-materialistic world. Lily notes that, despite Selden's critique of high society, he seems willing enough to take part in it. However, Selden argues that he knows how to separate himself from society. He adds that anyone who thinks that being part of society is an end in itself, instead of a means for diversion or entertainment, will be condemned to an artificial relationship to people and to life.

Selden prophesies that Lily, too, will one day find that she is disappointed in her materialistic goals. Lily finds this prospect terribly depressing, although Selden makes her admit that she has thought about such a possibility before. Frustrated, Lily tells Selden that he should stop belittling her world if he has nothing to offer her in exchange. Selden replies that, despite having nothing to give her, he would be willing to give her all he has. Lily then begins to cry, and the two of them argue over whether Lily truly only cares about material things. They do not reach a consensus, and Selden concludes that she does not even know for herself whether she does.

Lily's attempt to indicate to Selden that she is making special concessions for him can be seen as the beginning of an expression of romantic interest, but is soon overpowered by Selden's more straightforward confession, in which he declares his fascination for her, thus proving that he is more emotionally open than her. Selden also proves that, while Lily claims to be sacrificing something for him, she is doing nothing of the sort, since Selden is not an obstacle to her greater plans of marriage.



Lily's conception of success involves constant calculation and ambition—as it is based on the desire to become rich and powerful, oriented toward an end goal—whereas Selden's conception of success is not a projection into the future or a tangible end. Rather, he argues that anyone can be successful as long as they learn to separate themselves from the trivial aspects of life and focus on their spirit.



Selden's freedom here differs from Lily's not because, as a man, he has less pressure to marry, but because he has accepted that high society can offer him nothing that he inherently needs to be happy, nor does it allow for the elevation of the spirit. Selden's comments serve as a prophetic description of Lily's life, in which she will later realize that she has cultivated a superficial relationship with herself and the world.



A paradox emerges about Lily's character: she is intelligent and lucid enough to know that material goals will probably not bring her happiness, yet she does not seem able to deviate from her materialism-driven path. When Selden tells her he would give her everything, he is indirectly declaring his love to her and suggesting that she could start a new kind of life with him, but Lily's indecision about her own desires and needs does not allow for this moment to illuminate Lily's life.



Lily then directly asks Selden if he wants to marry her and Selden, laughing, says he doesn't, but adds that he would if she did. He then says that he would be willing to take the risk of marrying her, but both of them playfully call each other cowards. Selden takes Lily's hands, and Lily makes an amused comment about the fact that she would look ugly in unfashionable clothes, which she would have to wear since Selden is not rich.

Lily and Selden smile at each other, lost in their daydream of getting married and living together. However, they suddenly hear the sound of a car and Lily, annoyed, fears that the group will see them together. The two of them have a cigarette and, when Lily asks if Selden was serious about marrying her, he implies that he was. However, the two of them then walk back to the house, where they plan to resume their ordinary lives.

Selden's noncommittal answer about marriage and Lily's jokes about wearing ugly clothes reveal the two characters' efforts at making light of their love, as they seem incapable of committing to it (or rejecting it) enough to influence the other person's outlook. Humor and playfulness thus prove to be the only means through which they can address their fear-inducing romance.



Since Lily and Selden have not found a way to make their love fit within the narrow world of high society, they are forced to ignore the intense, emotional moment that they have just shared. Lily, in particular, demonstrates ambiguous feelings—the desire to know whether Selden is serious about his love, combined with a feeling of obligation toward the rest of the group at Bellomont.



BOOK 1: CHAPTER 7

The next morning, Judy Trenor scolds Lily for letting herself be seen coming back from her walk with Selden. This caused Bertha Dorset to become extremely jealous and to tell Percy Gryce that Lily is not the prude, conservative woman he believes her to be. She invoked rumors about Lily's borrowing money from a man as proof, which caused a fearful Gryce to leave Bellomont as soon as he could. Frustrated by the fact that Bertha distorted the truth about an episode when Lily did in fact borrow money from a family member but soon repaid it, Lily nevertheless accepts Mrs. Trenor's fair scolding, since Lily knows that she has lost an important opportunity to get married to Percy Gryce, and that she will once again have to worry about money.

At lunch that day, Bertha Dorset takes pleasure in making reference to Gryce's departure, while Lily feels pained to think about how much money she has lost by letting Gryce leave. Mrs. Trenor then asks Lily if she can go pick up her husband, Gus Trenor, because she does not want Carry Fisher to do so, since she is afraid that Mrs. Fisher would ask Gus for more money. This causes Lily to reflect on the different standards expected of married and unmarried women. Whereas it is relatively acceptable for Mrs. Fisher to borrow from Gus, Lily would never be able to do so without suffering serious social condemnation.

Bertha Dorset's behavior is highly hypocritical, since she pretends to defend morality (in this case, the idea that for a woman to borrow money from a man—in addition, without repaying it—is immoral) whereas her entire behavior stems from jealousy, itself based on an adulterous affair she had with Selden (which can be seen as immoral behavior). Bertha thus proves willing to wreak vengeance on Lily without directly expecting to derive any benefits from her actions. This thus proves that Bertha is even more dangerous than the other self-interested members of society, since she is willing to inflict harm for vengeance's sake alone.



Bertha's cruelty does not end with her success at making Gryce flee Bellomont, since she takes pleasure in making Lily feel bad about it. Lily realizes that, in high society, the concept of morality is highly relative, since it does not depend on the nature of a given action, but on its context—specifically, who is performing it. Lily's understanding of the potential danger for her to borrow money from Gus serves as a dark omen of her later business agreement with him.



When Gus sees that Lily has come to pick him up, he feels relieved and the two of them laugh about the fact that Judy has forced Lily to come. Gus is glad to note that Lily seems interested in having a conversation with him, which is rarely the case with other women, and he gives her his opinion about certain members of society. For example, he predicts that Simon Rosedale, despite being despised by most members of society, will soon be so rich thanks to his gifts of financial speculation that there will be no choice but to integrate him into the upper-class circle.

Intrigued by the mention of Wall Street, Lily resolves to manipulate Gus so that he might want to help her financially. Despite feeling repulsed by Gus's appearance and behavior, she succeeds in making him feel pity for her current situation, in which she would be constrained to marry someone like Gryce (whom everyone knows is terribly boring) to have enough money to live.

Lily suggests that Gus and she extend their trip a little bit instead of heading straight to the Trenors' house, so that they can talk some more. Moved by Lily's plight and seeming desire to confide to him, Gus convinces her to let him invest her money on the stock market. As Lily accepts this offer, she feels relieved to think that she might no longer suffer from financial troubles. She is convinced that she can manipulate men such as Gus to give her what she wants, and she derives a sense of power from her social skills.

BOOK 1: CHAPTER 8

Weeks later, after Gus's promise to invest Lily's money on the stock market, Lily receives a thousand dollars from him, and she is glad to know that her investment is bearing its fruits. She recalls the end of her stay at Bellomont, when Judy expressed her gratitude for Lily and Gus's friendship, since Gus's stories are so tedious. Judy then contrasts Lily's attitude with Carry Fisher's, which she considers immoral because Carry asks Gus to speculate for her without compensating him for any losses. This causes Lily to feel a sense of fear, but she tries to reassure herself by noting that she is different from Carry since she would repay Gus in case of loss—a possibility that, in addition, seems unlikely, since Gus is relying on a reliable "tip" that Simon Rosedale gave him.

Gus's genuine gratitude about Lily's interest in him highlights how little gratifying social contact he has in life, and foreshadows the intensity of his future sexual interest in Lily. Gus also proves socially perceptive in his analysis of Rosedale's potential, which cynically—but realistically—assumes that the only prerequisite for entering high society is not moral value or social skill, but wealth itself.



Lily's social shrewdness allow her to manipulate Gus into wanting to help her. This reveals the extent to which Lily is forced to ignore her intuitive feelings, such as her repulsion for Gus—which signals, on a physical and moral level, her anticipation of how vulgar and aggressive he can be—in order to solve her financial problems.



Ironically, what Lily perceives as a moment of success is in fact the foundation for her future downfall. She does not yet realize that Gus also expects to derive benefits from this situation, as he later demonstrates when he demands sexual favors from her. Despite their apparent geniality, both characters are following nothing but their self-interest, thus highlighting how artificial friendships are in this money-obsessed world.



Lily's relief at the abatement of her financial troubles does not blind her to the potential danger of her situation. As is characteristic of her personality, she is not afraid to confront her actions and evaluate them morally. Although she knows that she is firmly committed to the principle of repaying her debts, she also knows that what Judy perceives as Lily's friendship with Gus is nothing but hypocrisy, since Lily feels no actual interest or affection for Mr. Trenor. Lily's naïve belief in the stability of the financial system also reveals her ignorance of the practical workings of the world.



A few weeks later, at Jack Stepney and Miss Van Osburgh's wedding, Lily feels jealous, arguing that she should be the one getting married. She knows that her financial troubles are probably only temporarily resolved, since new problems can always emerge. When she sees Percy Gryce, she resolves to find a way to talk to him and try to seduce him again. She also notices Selden and feels a sudden emotion of mixed attraction and fear. She decides that she would prefer not to see Selden anymore, because talking with him only makes her feel despondent about the life she has chosen for herself.

Gerty Farish then approaches Lily and compliments her on her appearance. Lily privately looks down on Gerty for accepting a life of modest means without seeking to advance herself, an attitude that Lily finds demeaning. Unaware of Lily's thoughts, Gerty takes her to look at all the wedding presents and is impressed by all of them, naively believing that the cost of people's gifts is a direct reflection of their kindness and generosity. Gerty mentions that Selden insisted on taking her to the wedding, and that she is extremely glad to be here.

Gerty then mentions that Percy Gryce and Evie Van Osburgh, a quiet girl with a similar attitude toward life as Gryce, are going to get married. Lily feels angry and disappointed by this news, since she has lost her opportunity to marry, and Evie is a dull, uninteresting girl who does not even need money, since she already has so much of her own.

Gerty Farish then trails off, looking at the presents, and Gus Trenor greets Lily in a loud, familiar tone, which worries and annoys her. Gus hands her a check for four thousand dollars, and Lily, who does not understand much about the financial process, believes that it is still the result of her initial investment. She suddenly feels exuberant, forgetting her frustration at Gryce's marriage and feeling that the world is not as unfair as she thought it to be. However, Gus then complains inelegantly about not having seen Lily in a long time, and his words remind Lily that she has indeed avoided going to Bellomont in the past months.

Lily's optimism plays an important role in her life, since it allows her to believe in what often prove to be impossible scenarios (such as still being capable of marrying Gryce), but also enhances the tragic gap between her expectations and reality, and the seeming endlessness of her financial troubles. Her knowledge that Selden would influence her views about life suggests that Lily knows that she should choose another life for herself, but is incapable of making that decision.



Lily's association of social and financial advancement with moral value reveals that, however much she might criticize high society, she deeply identifies with its codes and values. Gerty, by contrast, does not realize how constraining social life can be, with its rules about civility and its demonstrations of power, for example through the gifts to the newly married couple. It is precisely Gerty's simplicity, though, that makes her such a loyal and honest friend.



Lily's feeling of injustice at learning about Gryce's marriage reflects her fear about her own financial future, more than sincere regret about not marrying Gryce specifically.



Lily's worry about Gus's familiar tone indicates that he is stretching the limits of their relationship, which should remain within the ordinary conventions of formality. Lily's decision not to go to Bellomont indicates her fear about Gus's lack of subtlety and the consequent possibility for Judy to discover their business agreement. Lily's sudden forgetting of the injustice she previously felt only confirms that what she truly wants is money alone—not marriage to a man like Gryce.



Grumpy about Lily's absence, Gus asks her to be nice to Mr. Rosedale as compensation, since most women present have been avoiding him. Lily then prepares herself to talk to Rosedale, but Selden approaches her in the meantime. She feels grateful for the sense of comfort she always feels with Selden, but also feels hurt to note that Selden has adopted a light tone, and that neither of them is mentioning their experience at Bellomont. Lily then tries to make reference to it, playfully and ironically attacking him for making her materialistic goals seem so trivial, but Selden replies that, through him, she has in fact proven that they are the most important thing in her life, which makes Lily feel helpless and fragile.

Gus Trenor, now accompanied by Simon Rosedale, reappears, treating Lily in a familiar way that makes her feel disgusted. Despite her promise to talk to Rosedale, Lily finds herself unable to do so with Selden so near, so she walks away with Rosedale, making an effort to feign comfort and intimacy. As she walks with Rosedale around the rooms, suddenly resolved to find out if Gryce is truly getting married, Mrs. Van Osburgh, who has been looking for Lily, hurries up toward her and tells her that Percy Gryce and Miss Van Osburgh both want to tell her that they are getting married.

BOOK 1: CHAPTER 9

On her way back from the Van Osburgh wedding, Lily is forced to bear the subtly mocking comments that people are making about Percy Gryce's upcoming wedding and its relation to Lily. Frustrated by having to act skillfully to show that she is not personally affected by this event, Lily reaches her aunt's house, in which Mrs. Peniston has launched a large September cleaning operation. On her way up to her room, Lily has to ask a seemingly defiant charwoman to move and realizes that it is the same woman who works at the Benedick and had given her a provocative stare after Lily had left Selden's apartment.

Lily feels angry at the charwoman's attitude, but also at being forced to stay at her aunt's house longer than usual, since she has received few invitations this season. She is tired of her boring life and feels a strong desire for something new and exciting to happen, but she cannot possibly picture anything adventurous. Mrs. Peniston, too, would have preferred her family member and friend Grace Stepney's presence to Lily's, because Grace is better at helping with domestic affairs such as cleaning.

The expectation that women should talk to Rosedale underlines how much of Lily's social codes are ruled by women more than men, even though, paradoxically, men are often the ones providing women with money. Lily's decision to mention Bellomont to Selden without being ready to commit to him as a partner is paradoxical. She seems unable to give up on her special relationship with Selden but, at the same time—as Selden points out—equally unable to embrace it and forget about her social ambitions.



Because of Selden's presence, Lily feels unable to adopt her usual social behavior, which is affected and calculative, since she is so genuine and vulnerable with Selden. Her effort here only highlights how artificial relationships are in this social world. Mrs. Van Osburgh's rush to tell Lily about Gryce's marriage serves as a kind of warning, establishing that Lily should forget about marrying Gryce and not approach him with romantic intentions.



The pleasure that people take in gossiping and trying to make Lily feel bad reveals the lack of solidarity and honest friendship that exists in Lily's social world, where no one comforts her or tries to help her ignore people's mockery. The fact that Lily sees the same cleaning woman from the Benedick highlights the impression that everyone is conspiring against her, and that she cannot escape her social world, even when she is in the privacy of her own house, since its rumors and unpleasantness follow her even there.



Lily's sense of boredom is paradoxical. On the one hand, she wishes she could spend more time at social events but, on the other hand, she wants to escape that world entirely. The tragedy of this confused desire is that Lily is unable to imagine a life for herself outside of trivial activities and social-climbing ambitions—a lack of imagination that shows how little freedom she is able to enjoy, even in her own mind.



One day in October, the doorbell rings, and a woman called Mrs. Haffen asks to see Lily. When Lily sees her, she realizes with surprise that it is the charwoman from the Benedick. Sensing that this conversation might involve confidential matters, Lily takes the woman to the drawing-room. There, Mrs. Haffen reveals that, upon cleaning Selden's apartment, she found a series of **love letters** addressed to him that the young man had clearly meant to throw away, but failed to destroy.

While Mrs. Haffen believes that Lily is the author of these **letters** and would want to keep them safe and private, Lily recognizes Bertha Dorset's handwriting. Although Lily realizes that these letters could be a powerful weapon against Bertha, as they would be proof of her adulterous behavior, Lily initially refuses to purchase them. However, she also realizes that Selden's own reputation is at stake, and thus decides to purchase the letters so that she can keep them safe. After a tense negotiation, Lily finally comes in possession of the packet.

Feeling disgusted by the idea of reading the **letters**, Lily resolves to destroy them in her room, but Mrs. Peniston then walks in to talk to her. Although Mrs. Peniston does not take part in social events, she is eager to know all the details involved in the Van Osburgh wedding. When she realizes that Lily can't remember the particular clothes that people wore and the food that they ate, Mrs. Peniston is disappointed, even though she has already heard two separate accounts of the event. Mrs. Peniston mentions that she heard that Lily was supposed to marry Percy Gryce, but that he left suddenly one morning at Bellomont. Unwilling to discuss the issue, Lily retreats to her room.

In her room, Lily plans to burn Bertha Dorset's **letters**. However, after Mrs. Peniston's mention of the reasons that made Percy Gryce flee Bellomont, Lily remembers Bertha's role in the situation. Angry and ashamed, Lily decides that, instead of destroying the letters, she will simply keep them in a safe place.

BOOK 1: CHAPTER 10

During the autumn, Lily receives various letters from Judy Trenor inviting her to Bellomont, but Lily refuses to go. At the same time, she begins to despair of her loneliness and only finds enjoyment in spending money. She is used to considering money an unstable possession, bound to come and go according to unpredictable patterns, and does not know how to save money to protect herself against economic troubles.

This episode highlights the importance of coincidences and chance encounters in the novel: the propitious fact that Mrs. Haffen works both at the Benedick and at Mrs. Peniston's, that she runs into Lily on two separate occasions, and that Selden mysteriously failed to destroy these love letters. All of these events create a sense of destiny, as though these coincidences were simply meant to happen.



Despite Bertha's willingness to wreak vengeance on Lily, as she demonstrated when she scared Percy Gryce away at Bellomont, Lily refuses to use such base strategies against her enemy. Rather, Lily demonstrates that what she truly cares about is friendship and moral behavior, since she decides to keep these letters to protect Selden from defamation. This highlights Lily's superiority to some of the vile practices seen in society.



Lily's unwillingness to read these letters stems from her aversion to potentially harmful gossip as much, perhaps, as a lack of desire to know about Selden's life with another woman. Lily's inability to recall specific details about the wedding reveals that, paradoxically, Lily is not necessarily interested in material goods per se but, rather, in the excitement that upper-class social life provides. Mrs. Peniston, by contrast, only views social life through the lens of gossip.



Lily's decision to keep Bertha's letters is morally ambiguous, since the only reason she seems to be keeping them is to retain the opportunity of taking her revenge against Bertha, although she does not have any definite plan in this regard.



Lily's refusal to go to Bellomont serves as an indication of her growing distancing from Judy, which will later prove irreversible. Lily's pleasure at spending money justifies to her the important role that money plays in her life, but also highlights that Lily's attitude toward money is capable of leading to bankruptcy.



After running into Gerty Farish at a shop, Lily decides to give the young woman money to support a charity at which she works, which helps working-class women live a dignified life. Although Lily is not used to feeling compassion, she feels sympathy for these girls, whom she identifies with for a moment. At the same time, this act of generosity makes her feel more self-confident and also justifies, in her mind, her previous, expensive purchases.

Lily is then invited to spend Thanksgiving at a party financed by Wellington Bry and organized by Carry Fisher. Although the Wellington Brys are not part of Lily's usual upper-class circle, she decides to go anyway and, when she is treated with high esteem, she feels a sense of power and importance over the less well-connected Wellington Brys.

A few days after this party, Lily receives a visit at her aunt's house from Mr. Rosedale. Although she tries to make him feel welcome, she feels revulsion for him and cannot make herself comfortable in his company. Launching an uncomfortable conversation, Rosedale asks Lily if she will accompany him to the opera and then proceeds to make veiled comments about Gus Trenor's interest in Lily, even asking Lily about her investments in the stock market.

After upsetting Lily with these unsubtle comments, Rosedale finally leaves, glad to have made Lily nervous, because he believes that increases his potential power over her. Lily, however, feels disgusted and afraid at the idea that Gus might have told Rosedale about their business agreement. Reflecting on the issue, Lily wishes she understood the nature of their financial transaction better, and could understand the nature of Gus's financial power over her. After a few days, though, these worries subside on their own.

On the day Lily accompanies Mr. Rosedale to the opera, she feels elegant and beautiful, and does not feel threatened at all by Gus Trenor's presence. However, during a moment in which the two of them are left alone, Gus talks to her in an extremely familiar and resentful way, complaining about the fact that he never sees her. Lily attempts to use her conversational skills to pacify Gus, but he becomes increasingly agitated, and Lily suggests that they meet at the park together the next day.

Lily's use of a charitable occasion to revel in her own feelings of power reveals how unused she is to thinking empathetically about other people's lives, and how little she reflects on issues of social justice, despite her previous mention to Selden that power and money can be used to do good.



Lily's goal in life is not only to become rich, but to reach a situation of power in which she might be admired and revered. Her complacency, however, underlines her naive belief that she deserves to be treated in this way, as well as her ignorance of how fragile her current position is.



Rosedale's mention of Lily's business relation with Gus is potentially dangerous for Lily, because it means that rumors of her intimacy with Gus might negatively affect her reputation. Rosedale's lack of discretion in this regard can be seen as a display of the power he holds over her, in the same way that his snide comments about Selden at the beginning of the novel aimed to make Lily feel uncomfortable.



Lily begins to realize that, even though she believed that she could keep Gus Trenor under control, Gus does not necessarily have her best interests in mind and might put her reputation in danger, either intentionally or by inadvertently telling people about their business agreement. This foreshadows what Lily will later discover: that Gus, too, is trying to use their relationship to his own advantage, in order to pursue his own self-interest.



Although Lily's general optimism made her forget her fears about Gus, she is once again confronted to Gus's aggressiveness—which might be interpreted as mere social incompetence or, as will later become clearer, a definite intention of tricking and manipulating Lily. Gus's attitude reveals that Lily's usual social strategies are useless against an unrefined man like him.



George Dorset then walks in, interrupting Lily and Gus's conversation. George, who felt that Lily had been particularly kind to him at Bellomont, tells her that Bertha is inviting her for dinner on Sunday, which makes Lily wonder if Bertha and she are now on good terms. Since being in possession of **Bertha's letters** has made her feel more powerful over Bertha, Lily now feels no animosity toward her and accepts the Dorsets' offer.

In light of Gus's attitude, George's appreciation of Lily can also be viewed with suspicion, since it remains ambiguous what George expects from his relationship with Lily. Bertha's offer for friendship is equally unreliable, given her past, treacherous behavior. Lily's willingness to accept her offer, though, reflects Lily's (mistaken) belief that she can defend herself in any social situation.



BOOK 1: CHAPTER 11

After the holidays, the social "season" is beginning. Mrs. Peniston, who, despite her reclusion, has an incredible memory for any aspect of social life, remembers this period as one in which everyone except Rosedale and Wellington and Louisa Bry felt poor, because of severe problems on Wall Street. At the same time, Rosedale, who has invested successfully, is becoming more socially prominent.

Mrs. Peniston's interest in social life is not innocuous, and will later prove harmful to Lily, as Lily's aunt will give a lot of weight to rumors against the young girl, however ill-founded they might be. The financial troubles on Wall Street also suggests that Gus is probably not earning the money he gives Lily in the way he wants to make her believe.



In the meantime, after Jack and Grace Stepney's honeymoon, Mrs. Peniston decides to organize a dinner at her own house. The prospect of this dinner, meant to involve the entire family, delights Grace Stepney, who is almost never invited to such high-scale events. However, after Lily mentions to her aunt that she should probably invite some people prominent in high society, Grace is asked to come to dinner another time. As a result, Grace feels deeply resentful toward Lily for having ruined her chance at enjoying a fancy dinner.

Lily's suggestion to exclude Grace from this meal proves to be one of the worst mistakes of her life, as Grace will remember this seemingly trivial episode and later use her resentment against Lily to condemn the young woman to financial ruin. Grace's seemingly disproportionate reaction highlights how the desire to take part in upper-class life can distort people's morals and values.



Because of this resentment, Grace Stepney resolves to tell Mrs. Peniston about the rumors according to which Gus Trenor is in love with Lily, and that they might be romantically involved. After Mrs. Peniston protests that Lily could not possibly be interested in a man like Gus, Grace then reveals that Gus is said to be paying Lily's bills, including her gambling debts. At the mention of gambling, Mrs. Peniston becomes shocked and furious, unable to believe that her own niece gambles.

Instead of confronting Lily directly about what has happened, Grace uses devious methods to inflict harm on Lily. The injustice of this action is blatant, since Lily never actually meant Grace any harm, yet Grace feels no compassion toward the young woman. Lily thus becomes the victim of her own popularity, as her position of power inspires treacherous jealousy in others.



Grace further mentions that Lily has also accepted attentions from George Dorset, but Mrs. Peniston, unwilling to believe these accusations, defends her niece and refuses to pursue the conversation. Reluctant to make a scene, Mrs. Peniston refuses to talk about these rumors with Lily, but does conclude that a girl is responsible even for the unfounded rumors that are made about her.

The lack of compassionate, effective communication between members of the same family highlights the artificiality of relationships in high society, as people prefer to trust defamatory rumors about someone rather than engage in a sincere dialogue with the person in question.



BOOK 1: CHAPTER 12

In the meantime, Lily does feel that she is following a fated course, making decisions without ever knowing if they are wise or if they are potential mistakes. Despite her financial worries, Lily feels that her relationship with Bertha has softened, and that the two have renewed their friendliness. Although she knows that rumors are now speculating about her relationship with George Dorset, Lily is more worried about Gus Trenor, whose moods are unpredictable, in part because of financial troubles, and who shows increasing impatience about his relationship with Lily.

Lily, who has not received any more invitations from Judy to join them at Bellomont, wonders if Judy might have learned of the rumors concerning Lily and Gus. After the New Year, Lily thus resolves to go to Bellomont to see where her friendship with Judy stands. However, at Bellomont, the young girl feels that Judy is colder towards her, and she remains annoyed by some of people's criticism, as they disparage Lily's acquaintance with Rosedale and Wellington and Louisa Bry.

Back in New York, Lily attends a party that makes her forget about these troubles at least temporarily. Under Carry Fisher's guidance, Wellington Bry and Louisa Bry want to organize a party that will be so lavish as to attract all the important members of high society. Under the guidance of Paul Morpeth, a prominent artist, they organize a series of *tableaux vivants*.

Intrigued by such a program, most of society attends the party. Interested in the artistic nature of the event, Lawrence Selden also decides to attend the party and sits next to Gerty Farish, who is delighted that Lily has sent her an invitation. Commenting on this generous act, Gerty concludes that Lily is caring and compassionate, invoking in addition Lily's politeness toward Mr. Rosedale and her two visits to Gerty's charity as evidence of Lily's natural generosity.

The *tableaux vivants* then begin, showing various scenes and characters, which Selden particularly enjoys because he is capable of immersing himself entirely in the visual scenes depicted, whereas Gerty simply comments on the beauty of the actors. When the curtain opens on Lily Bart, meant to be impersonating Reynold's portrait "Mrs. Lloyd," the audience emits a gasp of surprise. Lily has chosen a painting that seems like a pure celebration of her own self, since she is the only character on stage, resplendent in all of her beauty.

The fragile situation that Lily is in is financial as much as social. Although she feels more confident about her relationship with Bertha, Bertha remains a potential threat, because it is impossible to know what her true motives are. In parallel, Gus's attitude is increasingly worrying, since he seems to expect more than mere friendship from Lily. These parallel developments will prove the greatest threats to Lily's well-being and reputation.



Judy's coldness is a bad sign for Lily, revealing that what Lily had thought was a strong friendship might break from one day to the next—with the consequence of excluding her from an entire section of social life, such as Judy's gatherings at Bellomont. People's comments about Lily's acquaintances reveal the hostilities and rivalries that exist between different social groups, according to who is more or less prominent.



The Wellington Brys' attempt to become part of high society reveals that money alone is insufficient in guaranteeing one's elevated position in the upper class. Rather, one must learn to combine money with shrewd social skills and an interesting personality.



Although this event signals the possibility for the upper class to use their money for good causes, such as creating art, the Wellington Brys' hidden motive is social-climbing—thus confirming Selden's cynical view of high society as a narrowly self-interested group. Gerty's inability of attributing base motives to others, such as a desire for power, makes her one of the few people capable of believing in Lily's goodness.



Selden's appreciation of the purely artistic elements of this party reveals his lack of interest in the aspects of this event that relate to social competition and power. However, Lily's single-person portrait cannot be seen as a purely disinterested choice, since her goal, in appearing alone on stage, is not only to add to the beauty of the party, but to impress the audience and present an image of power and self-control.



Selden feels that this *tableau vivant* shows him “the real Lily Bart,” without her social artifices. However, when Selden hears Ned Van Alstyne comment inelegantly on Lily’s beauty, he feels indignant, as he believes that the tone and nature of this comment reflect the low standards by which Lily is judged in her own society. Before the curtain falls, Selden feels that Lily is calling out to him to save her from the tragic way in which her beauty is trivialized in her social sphere. Gerty then interrupts Selden’s reverie, commenting excitedly that this is “the real Lily,” and the two of them agree. Gerty is happy to realize that Selden likes Lily, noting that Lily always says he is mean to her.

Paradoxically, Selden ignores the statement of social power involved in Lily’s decision to appear alone on stage, instead focusing exclusively on her beauty, which he separates from its vulgar, competitive context. Selden’s desire to imagine Lily outside of her social sphere reflects his personal wish for Lily to care less about the material world, which he believes she should and can do—for her own sake as well as for their relationship’s. Lily’s comment that Selden is usually mean to her does not express actual harm (though Gerty interprets it that way) but, rather, the difficulty of overcoming the differences between their two conceptions of the world.



After the performance, Selden looks for Lily, who is surrounded by a group of admirers and is reveling in her success. She knows that she has awed everyone present but, when she sees Selden approach, she feels for a moment that it is only for him that she wants to impress with her beauty. When the group of admirers disperses to go to dinner, Lily and Selden walk off on their own, feeling that they are in the middle of a dream.

Lily’s intentions are both collective and personal. She wants to assert social dominance, but also conquer Selden’s heart. Her feeling that this latter goal might matter more than the former highlights the intensity of her emotions, and her intuition that cultivating deep personal relationships is more valuable than achieving social prominence.



Lily and Selden sit down by a fountain, and Lily criticizes Selden for never speaking to her and saying disparaging things about her life to her, but Selden replies that he certainly thinks about her a lot. When Lily asks why Selden does not help her by being her friend, he replies that he can only help her by loving her. Moved by their feelings and these words, the two of them kiss. Lily, overcome by emotion, suddenly stands up, poignantly telling Selden that he should love her but never tell her so, and she walks away. Knowing that such moments of intimacy are extremely short-lived, Selden does not follow her. Instead, he walks inside and listens as Gus Trenor and Ned Van Alstyne crudely discuss Lily’s figure.

Lily’s criticism of Selden’s attitude is disingenuous. She wants him to admire and appreciate her, but does not want him to express what they both know they feel: love. Lily’s inability to handle such an intense emotion reveals that she feels more comfortable in a social world in which she follows fixed rules of convention and civility, instead of in a world where she might be free to follow her emotions instead of social rules. The consequence of staying in a debased social world is that people do not treat each other with care and affection but, rather, are not afraid to discuss other people in self-interested, even sinister ways.



BOOK 1: CHAPTER 13

The next day, Lily receives a note from Judy Trenor asking to dine together, as well as a note from Selden asking if they could meet the next day. Lily wonders if Selden is going to ask her to marry him and fears allowing their dream-like encounter the previous night to turn into more substantial reality, but also revels in the power she has over him. She quickly asks him to meet the next day at four. Lily feels glad about Mrs. Trenor’s invitation and replies that she will have to meet her after dinner, because she is dining with Carry Fisher.

Lily’s attitude toward Selden consists of a mix of fear and desire. Although she wishes she could live with him in their dream-like world, she knows that she would not be capable of leaving her social world (and her desire for power) for him. The unpredictability of Lily’s behavior, though, gives their meeting an aura of infinite possibility, as it is impossible to know in advance what Lily will decide.



After dinner, Lily goes to Judy Trenor's house, where Gus, not Judy, opens the door. Lily is surprised to note that Judy is nowhere to be seen, and she grows increasingly alarmed when she notices that Gus is excitable and gives vague explanations about Judy being sick. When Lily tries to leave, Gus places himself between her and the door and angrily complains about her not paying enough attention to him. Lily keeps trying to leave and says she will go search for Judy upstairs, but Gus laughs and reveals that Judy is not in the house. He explains that Judy had asked him to tell Lily that she had decided to stay at Bellomont, but that Gus did not communicate the message.

Lily, who feels deeply confused and increasingly anxious, angrily tries to convince Gus to call a cab for her, saying he has tricked her. Gus admits that he has tricked Lily but continues expressing his resentment at being made to look like "an ass" and a fool. Lily insists that she cannot be seen alone in a man's house at night, but Gus retaliates by saying that she is seen in men's houses even during the day. This comment makes Lily feel dizzy, as though Gus had attacked her physically, as she realizes that men talk about her in this way.

As Gus becomes more and more aggressive, Lily becomes increasingly vigilant. Gus then mentions that she owes him for making him feel insignificant and for treating him like a fool. At the mention of owing him, Lily pursues the subject and discovers that not only has Gus been giving Lily money when she thought his checks were the result of her original investment, but also that he now expects "payment in kind" from her. Lily feels a deep sense of humiliation and physical danger, but, as soon as Gus touches her, she regains energy and tells him she will give him his money back.

Moving from an effort at seduction and pity to pure aggression, Gus then implies that Lily must have already borrowed and "settled [her] scores" with Selden and Rosedale. This vicious outburst leaves both of them silent, frozen in place. Gus then realizes that he has gone too far and, suddenly feeling ashamed of his own behavior, sends Lily away. Behaving automatically, without being able to think calmly, Lily finds the strength to make Gus call a cab for her. Finally, she walks out of the house and into the cab, after having the impression that she noticed a familiar figure at the corner of the street.

From the beginning, Lily realizes that she should not be at Gus's house if Judy is not there, because being seen alone with a man (especially at night) would be a serious threat to her reputation, since people might think she is having an affair. Gus's attitude adds another layer of danger to this scene: the possibility of violence and sexual aggression. Gus's refusal to let Lily leaves shows that he has already decided not to follow ordinary social codes—which means that Lily's usually skillful defense might not work this time.



Gus's self-pitying attitude is worrisome because it is seemingly unfounded, since Lily has never meant to humiliate him in any way. Gus's comment about Lily's relationship with other men strays so far from ordinary civility that Lily is forced to realize that beneath people's respectful attitudes lie wells of hostility, and that the social conventions of high society can be nothing but a veil for potentially violent intentions.



Lily's realization that what she thought was a fair business agreement was, in Gus's mind, nothing but a promise of sexual favors reveals how unpredictable and treacherous high-society relationships can be. Everyone expects to profit from those around them, without necessarily making their intentions clear. Lily's capacity to defend herself, both physically and verbally, reveals her strength against adversity, and her capacity to stick to her moral principles even in the most difficult moments.



While it remains ambiguous whether Gus's conclusion that he has gone too far derives from his belief that the rumors about Lily are false, or simply that he should not have voiced them, both characters understand that accusing Lily of using sex for financial purposes is the worst insult Gus could have possibly used. The figure Lily notices when she steps out of the house is Selden, who will quickly jump to conclusions about what he has seen.



In the cab, Lily feels completely dejected, helpless, and unable to think. The idea of going home to an empty, lonely room terrifies her. Although she feels that she has no one to rely on, since her aunt would offer no comfort or understanding, she then realizes that she could go to Gerty's, hoping that she will get there before she begins crying uncontrollably.

Lily realizes that, when she most needs it, her high-society friends are of no help, since they are not actual friends, but acquaintances connected through socio-economic ties. Living apart from this sphere, Gerty is the only non-judgmental, reliable friend Lily has—which only highlights how superficial high-society relationships are.



BOOK 1: CHAPTER 14

The day after Wellington and Louisa Bry's party, Gerty Farish feels happy to have taken part in such elegant entertainment and to know that Selden and Lily appreciate each other. Gerty also admires Lily's philanthropy, although she does not realize that Lily's motives are not as elevated and selfless as her own. When Selden asks to have dinner with her that evening, Gerty feels that she shares a special bond with him.

Gerty's generous interpretation of people's behavior as selfless allows her to take pleasure in many of her relationships, but is also responsible for later disappointments, such as what she will feel in Selden and Lily's regard when she realizes that they are more interested in each other than in Gerty herself.



In the meantime, Selden reflects on his own upbringing. Despite growing up in a lower-income environment, his mother made their life pleasant and elegant, and he inherited from her a lack of interest in material things, although he does appreciate objects for their artistic qualities. Although he used to think he was less interested in sentimental than intellectual adventures, he is now overwhelmed by the thought of Lily Bart, whose real personality he feels he can separate from her vulgar environment.

Although Selden loves Lily, part of his love hinges on the possibility for Lily to reject her social environment, whose values he disagrees with. This means that the obstacles separating Lily and Selden are financial (since Lily wants to marry a rich man) and social, since the only way they could be together would involve Lily abandoning her social sphere.



On his way to dinner at Gerty's, Selden runs into Gus Trenor, who tries to convince Selden to dine with him, complaining that Judy has not come to town and that he does not want to dine alone. However, Selden tells him he has another engagement. When he sees Gus's irritated reaction, he cannot believe that rumors have associated Gus with Lily romantically—an idea that makes Selden feel disgusted. He then discovers a note from Lily asking to meet him the next day and feels overcome with joy.

This episode highlights the importance of coincidences in the novel. Had Selden accepted Gus's proposition, he might have been at the Trenors' house when Lily arrived, and kept her from experiencing a brutal confrontation with Gus. His inability (and lack of desire) to accept the invitation thus conveys the impression that Lily is doomed to her fate—specifically, to suffer Gus's ire, which marks the beginning of her downfall.



In Gerty's sparse apartment, Selden compliments the young girl on her various qualities, which makes Gerty feel flushed. After dinner, the two of them then talk about Lily, sharing their impressions of her and their mutual excitement over Lily's true nature, but over the course of the conversation Gerty realizes that Selden probably only came to dinner in order to talk about Lily. This causes Gerty to feel a vivid sense of pain and, when Selden stands up to go to Mrs. Fisher's, where Gerty told him Lily was, Selden leaves Gerty without noticing the disappointment he has inflicted on his cousin.

For the first time in the novel, Gerty expresses negative feelings: pain and jealousy. This reveals that, despite her disinterest in social intrigue, she too has ambitions of her own: to be loved and admired for her own sake, just like any other member of society. Although Gerty's jealousy toward Lily recalls Grace Stepney's feelings of exclusion, Gerty soon proves capable of overcoming her self-centered emotions when she sees Lily in a desperate situation.



At Carry Fisher's, Selden hears that Lily has already left, and he listens to people gossip about her. When someone mentions that Lily has gone to Mrs. Trenor's, Mrs. Stepney notes that Judy is still in Bellomont, which causes everyone to wonder silently, with amused smiles, if Lily has gone to meet Gus alone. Feeling oppressed by this atmosphere, Selden, who feels increasingly resolved to get Lily out of this toxic social environment, decides to leave.

Van Alstyne accompanies Selden on a walk, and the two of them discuss Wellington and Louisa Bry's efforts at social climbing. However, when they approach Gus and Judy Trenor's house, the two of them see a dark figure hurrying to a cab, while a bulkier one remains in the house. Worried about the conclusions that Selden might draw from this incident, Van Alstyne, who belongs to Lily's family, asks him to keep quiet about what they have seen, but Selden abruptly says goodnight and leaves.

Meanwhile, alone in her apartment, Gerty feels mounting jealousy toward Lily, whom she feels must know about Gerty's feelings for Selden but not care. She concludes that Lily is callous, but also reproaches herself for daring to dream of a more elegant life, beyond her looks and her means.

As Gerty is getting ready for bed, someone suddenly rings the doorbell. Gerty hastily opens the door and is angry to see Lily, although Lily's desperate embrace awakens Gerty's compassion, as Gerty can tell that Lily needs help. Gerty makes tea, and Lily explains that she simply could not bear to be alone. Gerty, who is worried that something terrible has happened, tries to make Lily tell her what is wrong, but Lily speaks in vague allusions, concluding that her entire life has been destroyed, and that she is never going to be able to sleep again.

The pleasure that people take in gossiping and in the idea that Lily might be having an affair with Gus reveals the malicious (or at least non-sympathetic) intent of many members of the upper crust, who derive pleasure from witnessing other people's missteps and public embarrassment. The impossibility for people to live private lives without enduring public scrutiny restricts their freedom without bringing greater morality.



Van Alstyne's effort to protect Lily shows a concern for the young woman, instead of a desire to mock her—an unusual occurrence in this social world, even if, in this case, it is based on the self-interested effort to protect the family's reputation. Meanwhile, Selden's anger at Lily seems unfair. Instead of allowing Lily to explain herself, he derives conclusions from mere appearances, which are themselves informed by the rumors he has heard.



Gerty's surprising reversal from admiring Lily's generosity to accusing her of callousness reveals the extent of her pain, but also highlights the difficulty of understanding the character of a person like Lily, whose attitude often varies according to context.



Gerty's ability to promptly put aside her own grievances and focus on Lily's unhappiness reveals her moral virtue. Her willingness to let compassion triumph over jealousy highlights the emphasis she places on collective life and relationships, more than on the cultivation of one's ego or self-interests (the values that determine upper-class social life). Lily's hunch that this episode marks a turning point in her life will later prove correct, as neither her finances nor her ability to sleep will ever recover from this event.



Lily then begins to cry, and Gerty tries to convince her to actually tell her what has happened, adding that Selden went to Carry Fisher's to look for her—a comment that only makes Lily feel more fragile and horrified, as she realizes that Selden was right in warning her that she would one day hate the society she belongs to. Desperate, Lily asks Gerty if she thinks Selden would help her even if Lily told him the truth: that she cannot help but want money and material things in her life, and that she has now fallen very low. Gerty, who decides to sacrifice her own love for Selden in order to tell the truth, reassures Lily that Selden is a good man and would help her at all times. The two girls then go lie down, and Lily, still in shock, asks Gerty to hold her before she can fall asleep.

Lily's inability to tell Gerty about what has happened might be the result of shock and shame, how unused Lily is to sharing her intimate experiences with anyone, or her belief that Gerty might be too horrified by her story. Either way, although Gerty could choose to depict a negative picture of Selden so that Lily would lose interest in him (and that Gerty could have him for herself), she makes the moral decision to tell the truth. Ironically, though, on this particular occasion, Selden's behavior proves disappointing, since he does not actually make himself available to help Lily, overwhelmed as he is by his own misguided feelings of hurt.



BOOK 1: CHAPTER 15

The next morning, Lily wakes up alone in Gerty's bed and, as memory returns to her, feels a mix of horror and disgust, which she despondently realizes she will have to live with for the rest of her life. For the moment, however, she feels too tired to think of a solution to her troubles. When Gerty enters the room, Lily says that she must have had a nervous attack last night, and Gerty reassures her that she called Mrs. Peniston to tell her where Lily was.

Lily's horror at what has happened to her will seemingly disappear during her trip to Europe, but will never actually disappear, as her later sleeping problems reveal. Gerty's responsible behavior, though, proves that she is a devoted friend, willing to help Lily in any circumstance without demanding any explanation from her.



When Lily returns home, Mrs. Peniston tells her that she was extremely worried last night. Lily explains that she had felt faint but did not need a doctor, which reassures her aunt. In her room, Lily calculates the amount she owes Gus Trenor and realizes that regaining her dignity and moral worth will cost her even more money than dressing fashionably.

Mrs. Peniston's worries about Lily are qualitatively different from Gerty's, since Mrs. Peniston is less interested in Lily's personal life and well-being than in her mere physical health and reputation. The ironic conclusion that protecting one's dignity is more expensive than being socially accepted reveals how separate morality is from high-society values.



After lunch, Lily asks to speak to her aunt. Lily begins to discuss her problems, but when she mentions her debts, she is surprised to see that her aunt is not astonished. Instead, Mrs. Peniston reprimands Lily for putting herself in such a situation, noting that she has always given her enough money to buy clothes, and Lily is finally forced to admit that she does not only owe money only for clothes, but also for bridge. Instead of offering to help her, Mrs. Peniston scolds her for such unacceptable behavior and concludes that she does not care if Lily is disgraced, considering that Lily has already disgraced herself through her own behavior.

Lily's willingness to admit her mistakes to her aunt reveals her moral uprightness. By telling the truth about her gambling to her aunt, Lily is ready to sacrifice her dignity and social propriety in order to live up to more elevated ideals. Mrs. Peniston's behavior shows moral rigidity as well as lack of compassion, but also highlights the ways in which Lily has mishandled her money, wasting it on risky activities such as bridge.



Shaking with fear and rage, Lily returns to her room. However, after walking around angrily, she realizes that it is almost four—the time at which Selden is supposed to come. Feeling that his love is her only hope, and that he might be able to save her, she resolves to confide in him, which makes her feel scared but also hopeful. However, an entire hour soon goes by, and Selden does not come.

Wondering if Selden might have mistaken their appointment for five o'clock, Lily is relieved to hear the bell ring at five. However, instead of Selden, Rosedale walks in, which irritates Lily. After discussing Wellington and Louisa Bry's entertainment, Rosedale suddenly says that he has all the money he needs in life, but that he doesn't yet have the right woman.

Lily remains silent as she listens to Rosedale promise to give her all the money she might ever want. When Lily is forced to give him an answer about marrying him, she begins to refuse, but Rosedale, who did not expect her to be in love with him, emphasizes that, while he is in love with her, he knows she mostly cares about luxury and fashion and that he would be able to give all of that to her.

Speaking very straightforwardly, Rosedale adds that he could put all her troubles in the past, and the allusion to Lily's problems makes her blush. Lily tells him that she needs time to think about his offer, and Rosedale seems to consider this a fair answer, although his patient reaction scares Lily, as she realizes that he might prove a tireless suitor.

After Rosedale leaves, Lily is convinced that Selden will write to her to explain his absence, but she feels disappointed and scared when he does not. The next day, after an agonizingly lonely night, Lily begins to write a message to Selden but suddenly sees a note in the evening paper revealing that Selden has left the country for the Caribbean. She then understands that Selden will never come to visit her, and she feels helpless and old.

Lily's anger highlights Mrs. Peniston's lack of family loyalty, but also Lily's complete isolation and loneliness, as she does not know who might be able and willing to help her. The reader knows before Lily does that Selden, who is angry at seeing Lily with Gus Trenor, is unlikely to come.



Although Lily feels frustrated by Rosedale's presence, he proposes to Lily at the moment she needs it most, since marriage would put an end to the rumors about her liaisons and bring her the financial stability she needs. Although Lily does not yet realize it, this represents one of her last moments to choose between financial ruin and success.



Rosedale's pragmatism is admirable, since he does not expect love from Lily but, rather, a business-like partnership. This is exactly what Lily has always wanted—and also, everything that she has always felt ambivalent about. Her unwillingness to seize this opportunity reveals her doubts about whether she truly wants only money in life.



Rosedale hints at the rumors about Lily to argue that money could solve all her problems—from repaying Gus Trenor to safeguarding her reputation. The (probably correct) idea that money could protect Lily from anything reveals the cynical, debased norms that high society follows.



Lily's failure to interrogate Selden's mysterious departure might indicate utter confusion, resignation to her fate or, perhaps, the intuition that her social environment has made him flee. Either way, Selden's failure to at least inform Lily of his departure is particularly disheartening, given that Lily has done nothing to offend him personally and would have desperately needed his support in this moment.



Noticing the pen with which she was going to write to Selden, Lily begins to write a message to Rosedale but finds herself unable to form words. Then, at ten o'clock, when the doorbell rings and Lily receives a note, she thinks Selden might have written to her after all, or might perhaps not have left the country at all, but she opens the letter to see an invitation from Bertha Dorset to join her group on a cruise to the Mediterranean.

Bertha's invitation to go on a cruise is just as sudden as Selden's departure, and suggests that Lily is now bound to spend her time with untrustworthy people such as Bertha, instead of people like Selden whom she thought were reliable. The apparent generosity of Bertha's gesture only suggests that it must conceal ulterior motives, since Bertha never does anything out of kindness alone.



BOOK 2: CHAPTER 1

Months later, in mid-April, as Selden exits the Casino in Monte Carlo, he feels renewed, detached from the problems he faced in New York. However, as he walks around, he runs into Carry Fisher, who is accompanied by Jack Stepney and his wife Gwen, Louisa Bry, and Lord Hubert Dacey, who talk about the best place to have lunch.

The irony that Selden's relief at escaping the oppressive environment of high society is immediately followed by an encounter with the very people who constitute high society suggests that it is perhaps impossible to fully escape one's problems, and that Selden's effort at distancing himself geographically from them is only a superficial and temporary solution.



When the group sees a boat in the harbor, they believe it to be George and Bertha Dorset's cruiser, the *Sabrina*, where Ned Silverton and Lily are as well. They describe the success that Lily has had in the Mediterranean, in particular with the Duchess of Beltshire, and Selden remains quiet, as he had not expected to run into Lily on the Riviera. He believes, however, that after three months of not seeing her, he must no longer have strong feelings for her.

Selden's belief in having forgotten Lily has not yet been put to test, and therefore remains highly uncertain (as well as improbable). His desire to forget her is also unjustified, since Lily never meant to hurt him and does not even know why he left New York so suddenly.



After lunch, Selden walks with Carry Fisher, who has been helping Wellington and Louisa Bry integrate into high society, but has struggled to make their personalities agreeable to other members of the upper class. Carry then discusses Lily, saying that Lily has the bad tendency of working hard to achieve what she wants before letting it go at the last minute. Interested in this contradiction, Carry wonders whether this reveals mere fickleness or a more hidden distaste for the very objectives she is trying to reach. Carry also mentions that everyone knows Bertha has brought Lily on this trip so that Lily can distract George while Bertha and Ned Silverton have an affair.

Carry Fisher's comments about Lily reveal how perceptive she is. Despite being part of the upper class, Carry understands that Lily might secretly reject upper-class values. Carry's interest in Lily reveals her empathy, at odds with other people's self-interested attitude toward the young woman. This foreshadows Carry's later loyalty, as—unlike people like Bertha, who demonstrate utter lack of morality and compassion—she will prove the only member of high society to help Lily after her social downfall.



Selden then says he must leave, because he is staying in Nice instead of Monte Carlo. Although he feels cowardly for essentially fleeing Lily's presence, which should no longer affect him, he also knows that he would rather not see Lily if he could avoid it. In the train, though, George and Bertha Dorset, Ned Silverton, Lord Hubert Dacey, and Lily all enter his compartment, having decided to go to Nice for a dinner with the Duchess of Beltshire.

Once again, Selden's efforts to flee from Lily prove highly ironic, since his attempted escape only leads him closer to her. The fortuitousness of this sudden reunion accentuates the novel's focus on fate and destiny, for it seems as though Lily and Selden are bound to meet and, one day, resolve their issues.



Selden briefly observes Lily and notices that she is more impenetrable than before, which he sees as a crystallization of her youth. Lily treats him with ease and fluidity, as though they had never interrupted their relationship, and this easy behavior unnerves him, although he concludes that he is now in control of his feelings. Reflecting more on Lily's expert management of this complex social situation, which involves all the people present in the train, he realizes that the young lady's social skillfulness must reflect desperation on her part, as though she were engaged in a last effort to keep from sinking.

In Nice, Selden is confirmed in his observation that all of the people he is with are in insecure, unstable situations. Ned Silverton cynically complains about his companions'—especially Lily's—trivial attitudes and constant concerns for food and fashion, whereas he personally cares more about the beauty of landscapes. After dining with an acquaintance, Selden appreciates the beauty of the moonlight views of the water, but sees Mrs. Dorset and Ned Silverton enter a cab on their own. He then runs into Lord Hubert Dacey, who talks to Selden about Lily, commenting allusively about some of Lily's problems and the dangers of staying among people like the Duchess, who have had a "liberal education," far from the more conservative influence of people like Lily's aunt, Mrs. Peniston.

BOOK 2: CHAPTER 2

The next morning, Lily is surprised to find herself alone on the *Sabrina*. After learning that Bertha Dorset has not yet left her room and that George Dorset and Ned Silverton left the yacht separately, Lily admires the view, taking pleasure in the beauty of the landscape. She feels that this invitation to go on a Mediterranean trip was the perfect break from her troubles and has allowed her to relax, blurring such problems as Rosedale's proposal and her debt to Gus Trenor.

In a new social sphere, Lily has once again proven her superiority over others, as she has charmed everyone with her social skills. Lily has breakfast plans with the Duchess at eleven and, after failing to see Bertha Dorset, who claims to be tired, Lily leaves the ship. When she enters the Casino, she sees Mrs. Bry and, behind her, Carry Fisher, who tells Lily that Mrs. Bry is angry at Carry for failing to create a good relationship between Mrs. Bry and the Duchess. Carry also notes that Mrs. Bry feels that Lily has rebuked her, for example by not inviting her to dinner on the *Sabrina*.

In the same way that Lily has expressed her frustration at Selden's casual attitude in the past, Selden wishes Lily would somehow reveal that they once enjoyed a deep, intense relationship, instead of adopting such an opaque social façade. At the same time, Selden himself is responsible for Lily's emotional distancing, since he refused to confront her about seeing her with Gus Trenor, choosing to leave New York instead.



Selden slowly realizes that Lily finds herself in a delicate situation, since it is not her charming personality that brought her to this cruise but, rather, the convenience for Bertha to have someone who might distract her husband from her own adulterous relationship. In turn, Lily faces problems at home, where going on this cruise might be seen as a reckless decision. The difficulty for Lily to protect her reputation from any possible attack or manipulation is great. Selden's alertness to this fact reveals that his compassion and concern for Lily's well-being remain intact.



Lily's belief that going to Europe has allowed her to stay away from her problems is reminiscent of Selden's similar belief, and just as fallible, since, on this very day—as her observations about Bertha, George, and Ned forebode—Lily is about to discover that staying at Monte Carlo could tarnish her reputation for good.



Lily's encounter with Carry Fisher serves as a reminder that people's goal at Monte Carlo is not simply to relax and enjoy themselves, as Lily hopes to do, but to pursue their narrow interests—such as, in Mrs. Bry's case, become part of the highest circles of the upper class. This causes people to become so self-obsessed that they take offense at even seemingly innocuous behavior, such as Lily's failure to think about Mrs. Bry's desires and invite her to dinner.



Lily says that she can try to use her influence to make the Duchess invite Mrs. Bry, but Carry then admits that she is worried about Lily herself, because a journalist (Mr. Dabham) is spreading rumors that Lily and George Dorset came back from Nice alone after midnight. Although Lily initially laughs this comment off, she notices Carry's grave expression and explains that they *did* have to come back alone because Bertha never showed up to meet them at the station. Carry seems worried at this new piece of information and wonders if Lily will somehow be made to pay for Bertha's absence.

After Lily uses her skills to encourage the Duchess to have dinner with Wellington and Louisa Bry, she runs into George Dorset, who makes her feel even more apprehensive than after her conversation with Carry. As Lily accompanies George on a walk, she notices that he is extremely nervous, and George then reveals that, last night, Bertha and Ned Silverton missed all the trains to Monte Carlo and had to drive back. On the *Sabrina*, George waited up for them and made a scene when they arrived. Although Lily tries to keep from grasping exactly what George is implying, she is nevertheless forced to sit by him as he breaks down and relates tales of personal misery.

After George's long outpour of emotions, Lily asks him what he is going to do, and he explains that he is going to find a hotel and speak with his lawyers. When George remembers that Selden is a lawyer, he decides to talk to him. Despite initially discouraging George from getting Selden involved, Lily changes her mind and simply concludes that they will wait for George for dinner. Then, she reflects on the situation, feeling sorry for Ned Silverton, who is genuinely in love with Bertha, who only cares about herself.

As Lily returns to the *Sabrina*, she expects to find Bertha overwhelmed with emotion, but is shocked to see that the woman is in full control of herself. Lily is surprised to see that, as Bertha converses with Lord Hubert and the Duchess, she makes casual reference to George and does not seem to consider that anything is amiss.

When the guests leave, Lily tries to have an intimate conversation with Bertha, but Bertha begins by saying that she and Ned waited for Lily and George at the station all night. When Lily replies that George told her Ned and Bertha had arrived at the station after the last train, Bertha argues that George does not remember the events clearly, since he had a terrible nervous attack this morning.

Despite Lily's knowledge of how high society works, she still believes that justice—namely, her innocent behavior toward George Dorset—is sufficient to protect her. On this occasion, though, Lily proves too trusting, since Carry's worries will soon prove well founded. Unlike Lily, who seems to believe that her friendship with Bertha is back to normal, Carry seems to never forget how evil and treacherous Bertha can be.



Lily's effort to ignore the reality of Bertha's adulterous relationship with Ned Silverton can be seen as a self-defense mechanism, since Lily is so intimately involved with the Dorsets and would suffer from the eruption of a scandal. Her failure to think about her own reputation at this moment and try to protect herself reveals how little freedom she has in this situation, since she will be forced to adapt to whatever decisions that George and Bertha take.



Lily's assertion that they will wait for George for dinner stresses her hope that, as long as George and Bertha follow social conventions (such as going to dinner as they always do), everything will be fine. Her compassion for Ned reveals her capacity to think of people beyond herself, and her understanding that innocent people such as Ned can be crushed by the artificial, self-interested nature of relationships in high society.



Bertha's behavior shows the first signs of dissimulation and potential treachery. Lily's surprise only highlights how little she expects Bertha to turn on her, as she has in the past and will do again this time. For all of Lily's social shrewdness, she still expects a minimal degree of emotional honesty from people.



Bertha's strategy is to turn her guilt into victimhood, arguing that it is Lily's fault if Bertha was forced to come back alone with Ned—even though, of course, Bertha contrived to spend time alone with him. Bertha's mention of George's nervous attack is meant to invalidate all he has told Lily. In this way, Bertha's version matters more than the truth.



Unable to understand what is happening, Lily feels lost and, as Bertha continues to attack her for not waiting for them at the train station, Lily can only reply in a genuinely confused tone. As the conversation comes to a close, Lily remembers Bertha's past treacherous behavior and feels, with profound dread, that the woman is planning something evil. Finally, overwhelmed by Bertha's falseness, she goes to her cabin, without finding the words to counter Bertha's unfounded accusations.

The fact that Lily is taken aback by Bertha's deceitfulness reveals that Lily would never behave in this way herself, since she believes in basic moral principles of honesty and respect. Unlike in her confrontation with Gus Trenor, this time Lily does not even understand what is at stake, and therefore does not yet perceive what danger she is facing—and how she might best defend herself.



BOOK 2: CHAPTER 3

After Selden receives a telegram from Lily about George Dorset, Selden decides that his most important task will be to keep the situation from exploding into a scandal—especially one involving Lily. After talking with George for two hours, he is overwhelmed by the man's long list of grievances and realizes that this case will be difficult. To keep the situation from turning more violent than it already has become, he tells Lily to keep on behaving as though everything is fine.

The complexity of George's long-standing grievances serves as the first indication that the sudden reconciliation between George and Bertha the next day is probably dishonest. At the same time, the necessity for Lily to behave as though everything is fine highlights the importance of maintaining civil appearances. This tension between underlying grievances and outward normalcy creates a situation in which no one's behavior can be fully trusted.



This strategy succeeds for a while, although when George shows up to dinner and remains largely silent, Lily wonders what Bertha's ulterior motive could be, since Bertha behaves as though she is the one who has been wronged. Lily hopes that Bertha might confide in her, because Lily believes that she could help smooth over the situation between the couple, but she remains puzzled by Bertha's confrontational attitude. Lily is then even more surprised when, after going to bed, she hears the couple talk for an hour before Bertha retreats to her cabin.

Lily's surprise at Bertha's attitude highlights her naïve belief that friendship is possible between them—a belief that fails to recognize that Bertha is infinitely more calculating and malicious. Lily's willingness to help Bertha only highlights how deeply ungrateful Bertha's treason will later be, since Bertha will intentionally crush someone who actually tried to be her friend.



The next day, Lily notices not only that Ned Silverton is gone—a fact that everyone chooses to ignore—but also that George is avoiding her. After leaving the yacht, she runs into Selden, who tells her that the affair seems settled, and that nothing will happen. Selden, though, feels anxious, because he has also noticed a change in George Dorset's attitude that he cannot explain. He notices that Lily is deeply troubled, as she worries that she might become involved in a scandal, and he also feels afraid for her, although the blame in this situation should logically fall on Bertha. Carry Fisher, who is attuned to mysterious, underlying dynamics, suggests that Lily should marry George in case of trouble.

The unexplainable nature of George's behavior creates suspense and insecurity, since it becomes impossible to understand what people's actual motives are. Even though Lily has done nothing wrong, Selden and Carry's worries about Lily suggest that Lily is in a vulnerable position—having done nothing to offend people directly, but also having no protection against a potential attack from Bertha. Selden and Carry's attitudes, though, at least indicate that there are people around Lily who actually care about her.



Selden then realizes that his greatest duty should be to protect Lily. In the evening, as he heads to a dinner organized by the Duchess, he finds a moment to tell Lily that she should leave the yacht, so that she might stay out of trouble if ever anything happens. However, Lily says that she cannot possibly leave Bertha in this situation, and she seems resigned to accepting that there is little she can do to protect herself.

George and Bertha Dorset then arrive at dinner together, which suggests that their problems have mysteriously vanished. Over dinner, Selden admires Lily's perfection, feeling once again that she deserves to belong to a more elevated environment, and that he does not understand her choice to remain in such a degraded milieu. Selden also wonders about the journalist Mr. Dabham's presence, wondering if the man understands the details of these people's relationships.

By the end of the dinner, everyone seems satisfied. Mrs. Bry, in particular, is extremely proud to have been invited to one of the Duchess's dinners. As everyone leaves, Lily stands up gracefully to accept her cloak from George Dorset. As people take their leave from each other, Mr. Bry calls Lily to return to the yacht but Bertha suddenly interposes herself, saying with cruel finality that Lily will not be returning to the yacht. Everyone looks at each other with utter puzzlement, and while George tries to convince his wife to change her mind, Bertha reiterates her order.

Although deeply shocked, Lily retains a surprising composure, explaining to everyone that she planned on staying on shore because of an engagement with the Duchess the next day. In an atmosphere of intense bewilderment and tension, she then casually reminds Selden that he promised to take her to her cab.

Outside, Lily and Selden sit down and remain quiet for a while. While Selden is trying to understand what could possibly have happened, he is afraid to speak out in case he might say something offensive, but he then realizes that Lily might interpret his silence as a condemnation, comparable to the other men's failure to defend her. The two of them then begin a tense conversation, in which Selden can tell that Lily is mad at him for his prolonged silence. Selden advises her to go to her cousins Jack Stepney and his wife Gwen, although Lily dreads Gwen's reaction. However, Selden insists and Lily finally spends the night there, although Mr. Stepney only accepts on the condition that Lily will leave first thing in the morning, and that he does not want to wake up his wife.

Selden's decision to commit to Lily's plight reveals his loyalty, even if the two of them have not actually redefined their relationship. Lily's inability to leave, though, highlights her lack of freedom, since anything she does might potentially be used against her. Her unwillingness to at least try to protect herself shows her giving in to her fate, however unfair it might be.



The apparent harmony between George and Bertha suggests how little people's attitudes in high society reflect their actual feelings. This complicated social situation gives extra credibility to Selden's assessment of Lily as someone who does not belong in her milieu—since this milieu is about to prove morally degraded and, through Bertha Dorset, eject her for no reason.



Bertha's irrevocable statement proves that, thanks to her power and social standing, she does not need to justify herself for her actions. Rather, despite even George Dorset's knowledge that what his wife is doing is wrong, the people present are happy enough to demand no explanations from Bertha and fail to come to Lily's help—an attitude that contrasts starkly with outward shows of appreciation, such as Mr. Bry's friendly call to Lily.



Although Lily is not as conniving as Bertha, she is capable of demonstrating her social prowess at all times, reacting with elegance to the most unpredictable occurrences. She also knows that, in these circumstances, the only person she can count on is Selden, who does not belong fully to this milieu.



Despite her outward demonstration of courage and dignity, Lily is deeply disturbed by what has just happened, and no longer can discern friends from enemies. Although only Bertha spoke up directly against Lily, everyone else's silence was an equally unfair and cruel act, since their failure to step up in the face of injustice condemns Lily to her fate. Jack's reaction shows how little he cares about Lily's well-being. Instead of treating her with the care and support a family member would deserve, he judges her exclusively based on her newly degraded social situation.



BOOK 2: CHAPTER 4

Two weeks after Lily's return from Europe, she joins her entire family gathered in Mrs. Peniston's house after her aunt's sudden death. Although Mrs. Peniston disapproved of Lily's trip with Gus and Bertha Dorset, refusing to write to the young girl during that period, Lily is relieved to know that she will finally receive her aunt's inheritance and be able to repay her debts.

Everyone present believes that Lily will receive her aunt's 400,000 dollars. However, when the lawyer reads Mrs. Peniston's testament, Lily receives only 10,000 dollars, whereas Grace Stepney inherits all of Mrs. Peniston's estate. Despite Lily's utter shock, no one seems to pay attention to her except Gerty Farish. After the family members all leave, the two of them are left alone.

Lily and Gerty then go to Gerty's apartment, where Gerty decries how unfair Mrs. Peniston's decision is. However, Lily, who has learned that the testament was redacted recently, is convinced that Mrs. Peniston wrote it after learning of Lily's separation from George and Bertha Dorset. Lily insistently asks a reluctant Gerty to tell what is being said about her, because she needs to know if her friends will all turn away from her.

Although Gerty cannot believe this could happen, Lily simply replies that Gerty is her only true friend at this moment. Lily adds that she cares less about her friends' rejection than she cared about receiving her aunt's money, but Gerty argues that she should care about her friends and simply tell them the truth about what happened in Europe. Lily, however, cynically replies that Bertha's version of the story will always matter more than hers, because Bertha has more money and power.

When Gerty insists that Lily recount her version of the story, Lily grows impatient, saying that, if she had to start from the beginning, she would start with her upbringing or, perhaps, her very blood, which are responsible for her attraction to money and pleasure. The truth, Lily concludes, is simply that when rumors are started against a woman, her social future ends, and trying to provide explanations only makes things worse.

Mrs. Peniston's behavior toward Lily once again reveals that she cares about Lily's social reputation before her emotional well-being. By contrast, Lily is concerned with another kind of moral issue, repaying her debts, which shows that she is primarily concerned with behaving in an honorable way—not with what people say about her.



Lily's family's utter lack of interest in her fate reveals that, in the public as well as the private realm, members of high society are so obsessed with money that they fail to invest in relationships in any meaningful way. By contrast, Gerty Farish, who cares very little about money, is the only one who actually worries about Lily's well-being.



Gerty, who lives in a world where social climbing matters very little, does not understand how Mrs. Peniston could be so callous. Lily, by contrast, knows that in her milieu people's reputations are the only thing that counts, and thus understands the logic behind Mrs. Peniston's act, which signals that her love and generosity are proportional to Lily's reputation.



Gerty's belief in truth and justice contrasts with Lily's understanding that, in her world, only wealth and power matter: it is the most influential, powerful people who determine the dynamics of high society, without following any fixed rules or principles. Lily's desperate desire for money highlights the quasi-interchangeable nature of money and so-called "friends" in high society, as both are necessary for power and survival.



Lily argues that she was never given the freedom to determine her own values and the way in which she wants to live her life. Instead, she has been conditioned from the very moment of her birth to feel as though the only environment she belongs in is one of superficial pursuits, moved not by fairness and honesty but by social whims. Instead of fighting against this, she seems resigned to accept it as fate.



That evening, at the hotel room where she is staying, Lily tries to reexamine her situation, realizing that she is completely alone, except for Gerty Farish. After her separation from George and Bertha Dorset, Lily spent a few weeks in London, where, supported by the Duchess of Beltshire, she integrated into a social circle that highly admired her. When she finally returned to the United States, weeks after her separation from the Dorsets, she realized that everyone else had already given their version of the story, and that Lily could no longer say anything credible. A mix of pride and humiliation further kept her from trying to defend herself. She simply accepts that she took a risk in going on a trip in which her only role was to distract George Dorset from his wife's infidelity.

Lily nevertheless decides to stay in New York, hoping that Judy Trenor at least might show some kindness toward her. However, when she comes across a group of women led by Judy and Carry Fisher, the two women appear embarrassed to see Lily and behave curtly toward her, which Lily knows to interpret as outright rejection. Lily concludes that Judy probably knows about Gus giving her money, a practice that Lily knows Judy has always disapproved of.

This interaction only heightens Lily's desire to repay her debt to Gus. However, after writing to her aunt's lawyer, Lily learns that she might need to wait one year to receive her inheritance. As a last recourse, Lily thus decides to ask Grace Stepney if she might be willing to advance her inheritance money for her. However, Grace bluntly refuses, noting that Mrs. Peniston's knowledge of Lily's debt caused her to fall ill. Grace concludes that her role is not to give Lily money, but to scold her as Mrs. Peniston would have done.

BOOK 2: CHAPTER 5

When Lily leaves Mrs. Peniston's (now Grace's) house, she feels that she is leaving her old life behind. However, as she is walking in the street, a cab pulls up to her and Carry Fisher appears, apologizing profusely to Lily for having treated her so badly when she saw her at the restaurant. Without preamble, she offers to take Lily to Sam and Mattie Gormer's party, adding that, while the Gormers do not know Lily personally, they are only interested in having fun and in inviting people they might feel comfortable with. Without leaving Lily time to reflect, Mrs. Fisher orders her to enter the hansom, and the two of them depart together.

Despite claiming that she has had no freedom in forming part of high society, here Lily shows both resignation and defiance. Lily's refusal to defend herself derives in part from the conviction that she can do nothing to change her fate, but also from a cognizant decision not to invest her energy in a system that is inherently unfair. Her refusal to tell her story functions as an implicit condemnation of a system in which a person's reputation can ruin their life, yet depend on nothing more than pure fabrication. Lily's willingness to accept partial responsibility for what has happened shows that she knew she was sacrificing ideals of justice to the base dynamics of society, yet agreed to do so.



The cold behavior that Lily's so-called friends demonstrate toward her reveal high society's hypocrisy, as people prefer to follow dynamics of power (under the guise of following moral principles) instead of obeying higher ideals of compassion, loyalty, and honesty, which should be expected from true friends.



Under the guise of moral condemnation, Grace Stepney's attitude toward Lily can be seen as a continuation Grace's hostile attitude toward Lily, ever since Lily kept her from participating in a fancy dinner. In this case, following principles of morality and social decorum only means acting cruelly and condemning a vulnerable young woman to deep financial troubles.



Carry Fisher's warm attitude toward Lily is surprising, and shows that not all members of high society are equally corrupt and pliable. Carry's readiness to accept that she behaved wrongly reveals her honesty and her willingness to address problems directly—an unusual characteristic in a society determined by artifice and social conventions. Carry thus reveals her loyalty toward Lily as well as her desire to help her, which she does immediately, without behaving as though any hierarchy of power existed between them.



At Sam and Mattie Gormer's party, Lily realizes that this social sphere is an imitation of her own, though with less competition and more friendliness. When everyone receives Lily amicably, she feels frustrated not to be considered superior to them, although she knows that this is the effect of her troubles with George and Bertha Dorset. At the Gormers', what is asked of her is simply to add to the collective merriment. Although Lily knows that she is now spending time with people she would have scorned in the past, she cannot help but enjoy the sense of material comfort that society brings.

On Monday, as Carry drives Lily back to New York, she tells Lily to accompany Sam and Mattie Gormer on their trip to Alaska next month, since Carry will be busy with Wellington Bry and Louisa Bry. When Lily notes that Carry is simply trying to keep her out of sight of her former friends, Carry says that it is only a matter of time before Lily's friends start missing her.

Lily goes to Alaska with Sam and Mattie Gormer, which succeeds in removing her from public scrutiny and criticism. However, Gerty Farish disapproves of the trip, feeling that Lily is giving up on the possibility to escape such a trivial social life, where she lives with people she would despise if they did not provide her with material benefits. Even Lily begins to realize that spending time with the Gormers and their friends, who appreciate Lily's presence greatly, is not sufficient to make her feel satisfied. However, this only strengthens her resolve to reintegrate into her former society.

Conscious of Lily's dilemma, Carry Fisher suggests that Lily marry either George Dorset, who is having problems with Bertha again and would probably only leave his wife for Lily, or Simon Rosedale, who still demonstrates his affection toward Lily when he spends time with Sam and Mattie Gormer. Despite Lily's rejection of these ideas, she keeps on thinking about them, because she no longer feels such a strong revulsion toward Rosedale, who has in the meantime succeeded at making his way up the social ladder. She wonders if he might be willing to marry her for love only, since she no longer has the social credit she used to.

BOOK 2: CHAPTER 6

In the fall, Lily helps Mrs. Gormer examine the house she and Mr. Gormer are building on Long Island. One day, as Lily is walking on the beach, she suddenly comes across George Dorset, whose house is nearby. Instead of ignoring Lily, as she thought he would, George eagerly comes up to her and tries to apologize to her for what happened at Monte Carlo, although Lily's curt replies reveal her impatience with his attitude.

Lily's reaction to inclusion and kindness is not gratitude, but frustration. Paradoxically, it appears that what she seeks in social interactions is not only enjoyment and belonging, but a feeling of power over others—which she has, in the past, been able to achieve through her beauty, grace, and social prominence. This aspect of Lily's personality keeps her from choosing companions for their moral or intellectual value alone, since she is equally—if not more—interested in social competition.



Carry's behavior, which indicates true friendship, contrasts sharply with the blatant absence of Lily's other so-called friends that the idea that these people might miss her seems disingenuous, aimed more at reassuring Lily than at predicting reality.



Gerty and Lily's vision of society differ starkly. While Gerty believes that Lily's focus on materialism and superficial socializing is harmful to her well-being, and that she should abandon such activities, Lily only wants to engage with them on a higher level, by returning to the excitement of her formal world. It is only later, once Lily loses all hope of ever reintegrating high society, that she will finally realize that Gerty's point of view is the correct one.



The fact that Lily's only hope to reenter high society is to marry reflects how little freedom she has in her social world to live a truly independent life. It emphasizes how difficult to understand Lily's desire to reintegrate such an immoral, hypocritical world is, especially after having personally suffered because of many of these individuals. Lily's hope that Rosedale might marry for love reveals a naïve trust in the possibility for love to trump other considerations, such as social standing.



George's sudden desire to talk to Lily reveals the gap between people's public and private attitudes in high society. Although George has agreed to condemn Lily to social exclusion by not stepping up to defend her, he still tries to justify himself. Lily's impatience reveals the hypocrisy of such an act, since apologizing privately does not modify Lily's situation at all.



As George explains that Bertha also manipulates him and that he desperately needs a friend, Lily feels pity for him but says that she cannot be his friend in these circumstances. George insists, and Lily keeps on rejecting him, until George finally makes an implicit offer to marry her, to which Lily replies coldly, unmoved, refusing to help him in any way. Finally, despite George's desperate pleas, in which he insists on how kind Lily is, and how she could set him free, Lily takes her leave—although not after considering for a moment the possibility of taking such a forceful revenge on Bertha.

Back at Sam and Mattie Gormer's, Lily learns that Bertha Dorset has just visited Mrs. Gormer, and Lily feels that Bertha is once again planning some evil deed. Mrs. Gormer, though, only feels thrilled to have received the visit of such an important member of society. When Lily returns to New York, after having found a hotel where she could stay, she receives a surprise visit from George Dorset, who once again begs her to save him. However, as she did earlier, Lily reiterates her unwillingness to be his friend in any way.

BOOK 2: CHAPTER 7

In the meantime, Lily becomes convinced that she needs to find a way to marry Rosedale. When she goes to visit Carry Fisher at her house at Tuxedo in November, Mrs. Fisher happens to be out and Lily finds herself alone for a moment with Rosedale before a few other guests arrive. Lily remains convinced that this is one of Carry's strategies to help her marry Rosedale.

After dinner, Lily and Carry talk by the fireside. Carry shares her success at making Wellington and Louisa Bry more socially connected, but she also tells Lily that she has seen Mattie Gormer and Bertha Dorset together, and both Carry and Lily understand that Bertha's objective is to exclude Lily from the Gormers' circle by spreading bad rumors about her. Carry concludes that Bertha must still be scared of Lily and she enjoins Lily to marry as soon as she can.

The next day, Lily takes a walk with Rosedale and thinks of the memorable walk she took with Selden in Bellomont last September. As they speak, Lily bluntly says that she would be ready to marry Rosedale. However, Rosedale immediately rejects her offer, although he remains fascinated by Lily's dignified, calculated replies, which give her the effect of always seeming distant.

Lily's pity for George reveals her capacity for selfless compassion, as well as her understanding that, in a social system in which individuals must submit to other people's arbitrary power, such as Bertha's, not everyone is equally supportive of the those people's decisions. However, Lily's unwillingness to listen to George shows that she does not condone his behavior, which only reveals his cowardice.



Lily's unwillingness to accept George's proposal to marry him and thus take revenge on Bertha reveals her aversion to behaving in the same vindictive way as Bertha. Lily thus shows that she is not ready to sacrifice her moral principles to mere social advancement, and that her desire to reintegrate society does not place her on the same, morally degraded level as people like Bertha.



Lily's plan to marry Rosedale is so reminiscent of her earlier plans to marry other wealthy men, such as Percy Gryce, that this one too seems bound to fail, too. It remains ambiguous whether Lily is truly desperate enough now to sacrifice her happiness for a loveless marriage.



Carry's willingness to tell Lily the truth, even if it might be unpleasant, demonstrates the very qualities that Lily had hoped to find in a sincere friend. At the same time, Carry's own position is ambiguous, since she does not hesitate to criticize high society while remaining an integral part of it. The fact that Carry has to protect her own reputation as well will later prove incompatible with true loyalty.



Lily's involuntary comparison between Selden and Rosedale reveals hidden longing and regret, although Lily chooses to sacrifice these emotions for purely pragmatic purposes. Rosedale's rejection, then, however harmful to Lily's financial future it might, at least allows her to retain her emotional freedom.



Rosedale resolves to explain his perspective clearly. Although he insists he does not believe the stories about Lily, he says he cannot ignore them, and he knows that the only reason she has changed her mind is because of her social downfall. Finally, he admits that he is still madly in love with her but that associating himself with her would harm his social prospects. Lily is surprised and impressed by Rosedale's candor, which is at odds with most of the interactions she has had in the past year.

As Lily makes a move to leave, thanking him for his honesty, Rosedale reiterates forcefully that he does not believe in the rumors about her. He then startles Lily by asking directly why she does not take her revenge and use Bertha's **letters**, which he knows she possesses. As Lily listens on, too astonished to answer, Rosedale does not dwell on how he knows about this, although he does mention that he is the owner of the Benedick. Instead, he describes Lily's public situation in clear, straightforward terms, explaining that everyone is simply following Bertha out of interest, since she is so powerful, but that they also know that Lily could take her revenge anytime by marrying George Dorset.

Since Lily seems unwilling to do this, Rosedale suggests that the best way for Lily to regain her power would be for Bertha to be on her side, which Lily could achieve by using **Bertha's letters** against her. Using logical, business-like arguments, Rosedale tries to convince Lily that not only could she return to high society, but that she could also reach a permanent position in society by marrying Rosedale, since he would be willing to marry Lily if she succeeds in reintegrating into the upper class.

Marrying him, Rosedale argues, would be Lily's only sustainable protection against Bertha, since, in light of the rumors that already existed about Lily before her separation from the Dorsets—rumors that Bertha could choose to bring up again—a powerful marriage would be Lily's only way to keep Bertha frightened and convince Bertha that Lily is just as powerful as she is. However, despite the intense attraction of Rosedale's proposal, Lily instinctively rejects this plan, finding this scheme particularly horrifying for the simple reason that it is risk-free. Therefore, she rejects all of Rosedale's ideas and refuses to take part in his plan.

Irritated and surprised, Rosedale concludes that Lily's attitude must be explained by an effort to protect Selden, to whom Bertha addressed her **letters**. However, Rosedale adds sarcastically that Selden seems to have done nothing to help her.

Rosedale's sincerity demonstrates his willingness to abide by norms and conventions necessary for social climbing, while at the same time rejecting them on a moral level—a position strikingly similar to Lily's. It reveals, once again, that not all members of society personally agree with the rules they choose to abide by in public.



Rosedale's attitude is pragmatic and amoral. Knowing that their social world values power more than justice, Rosedale argues that any strategy Lily might use to regain power is valid, since, in high society, people are judged for their success and not for the moral validity of their actions. This cynical point of view is compelling: to be an integral part of high society, Rosedale argues, Lily must be ready to play by its rules—an course of action that, so far, Lily has refused to accept.



Rosedale's arguments highlight the amoral nature of their social world, but also tries to persuade Lily by appealing to her primary weakness: her attraction to wealth and power. Rosedale is thus suggesting to Lily that she could finally achieve everything she has ever dreamed of, if only she accepted to consider blackmail a valid strategy, instead of questioning its ethical validity.



To Lily, the absence of risk in Rosedale's well-presented plan equates to a similar kind of scheming as Bertha has demonstrated: a willingness to hide one's own vulnerability by crushing and humiliating someone else. Lily's attraction to risk also recalls the excitement she feels toward money. It is precisely this sense of adventure that she wants to regain by reintegrating high society, not the monotonous (yet wealthy) life that Rosedale is eager to offer her.



Rosedale's mention of Selden is both vicious (since it recalls the rumors he shared with Gus Trenor about Lily's sexual promiscuity) and persuasive, since Selden has in fact essentially disappeared from Lily's life.



BOOK 2: CHAPTER 8

As winter approaches, Lily accompanies Mattie Gormer to the Horse Show but feels that Mattie is gradually erasing her from her life because of Bertha's powerful influence. This only makes Lily more desperate to reintegrate into her formal circle, which she knows she cannot live without, but which keeps on functioning without her, without caring about her fate. Despite Lily's reaction to Rosedale's plan, which she had rejected without actually thinking about it, she soon finds herself unconsciously reconsidering it, unable to resist the attraction of total revenge and vindication.

Although Lily has spent little time with Gerty, whose values are so at odds with her own, she visits her one day. Gerty has just received the visit of Jane Silverton, who is suffering from economic troubles because of her brother Ned's growing debts, as he has begun gambling again now that he, too, has lost Bertha's favor. During their conversation, Lily shows a strange form of excitement and despair that worries Gerty. Lily, who looks paled and exhausted, admits that she cannot sleep at night, which further worries her because she does not want to look ill or ugly. She also adds that she is plagued by horrible thoughts related to her current situation, but fails to detail them to her friend.

After leaving Gerty to meet Carry Fisher, who has found Lily someone in need of a social secretary, Lily reflects on her troubles. She knows that she desperately needs money but, at the same time, is now forced to realize that she does not have many skills that matter on the job market. She hopes that Carry has truly found an opportunity that might help her.

Left alone, Gerty reflects on Lily's plight and feels that the only solution for Lily would be to abandon all her past social life. After the night Lily spent at her apartment, Gerty no longer harbors feelings of jealousy or resentment toward either Lily or Selden, and finds relief in confiding in her cousin. A few weeks after Lily's visit, Selden visits Gerty and, after he admits he has not seen Lily since his return, she describes Lily's current situation to him.

The ease with which Bertha is able to influence other people to stay away from Lily highlights how immoral this social world it—a realization that only suggests that the best way to fight against it might be to use the very same strategies. Lily's attraction to Rosedale's plan thus does not aim to pretend that it is morally acceptable but, rather, to accept that potentially immoral acts are sometimes necessary to fight against cruelty. Lily thus strays away from moral principles into the terrain of social antagonism.



The fact that Lily and Ned Silverton have found themselves in similar situations because of Bertha Dorset only accentuates Lily's desperation to return to her normal social circle, so that Lily—who cares so much about being recognized for her social superiority—will not fall to the same level as someone like Ned. At the same time, the moral dilemma related to Rosedale's plan affects her deeply, showing that she is not ready to make the decision of sacrificing her moral principles for mere social advancement.



Despite Lily's natural sense of superiority, her honesty with herself allows her to become conscious of the deep gap between upper-class life and the rest of society, in terms of values, skills, and relationship to material goods. Her lack of skills thus paradoxically makes her valuable only in the milieu that currently rejects her.



Despite Gerty's belief that Lily would be happier without the negative influences of high society, Lily herself cannot come to terms with this idea, since her social life defines her very sense of identity. Gerty's capacity to overcome her jealousy reveals how much more important compassion is in her life.



Despite Selden's apparent coldness toward Lily's life, Gerty entreats him to help Lily in whichever way he can, emphasizing that Lily needs him more than ever. She adds that Lily cannot help but be dependent on material comfort, and that they should accept that Lily has felt abandoned by the one society she wants to belong to. Although Selden has tried to avoid Lily, whose lifestyle he feels so detached from, he agrees to help her, knowing that he cannot bear the thought of her unhappiness. When he goes to visit her, he learns that she is now with Norma Hatch at the Emporium Hotel—a piece of news that fills him with disgust.

Selden's effort to distance himself from Lily can be seen as an effort to keep from being hurt by the fact that he does not belong in Lily's world, as long as she decides to remain within high society. Gerty's nonjudgmental acceptance of Lily's personality shows that Gerty will remain loyal to Lily, regardless of the choices she might make. Selden's disgust when he learns about Norma Hatch suggests that Mrs. Hatch probably has a bad reputation and is unworthy of Lily's presence.



BOOK 2: CHAPTER 9

The first morning Lily wakes up at the Emporium Hotel, she feels a deep sense of physical comfort that reassures her. Lily's job is to assist a rich, divorced woman from the west, Norma Hatch, in her social climb. Although Carry Fisher does not know Mrs. Hatch personally, she learned of the opportunity through a lawyer named Melville Stancy.

Lily's pleasure at her material surroundings reveal her obsession with living in a world where all her physical and aesthetic needs might be taken care of, without necessarily benefiting from equal moral or intellectual advantages.



At the hotel, Lily finds herself in a strange environment, in which Mrs. Hatch and her friends seem to have no connection to real life, enjoying an existence of unproductive diversion, whose obligations seem to obey no reliable timetable. Lily is surprised to note that Ned Silverton and Freddy Van Osburgh, who has barely left college, frequent Mrs. Hatch's drawing-room. Lily realizes that this constitutes an alternative, unconventional world in which such men seem to enjoy themselves.

Lily's realization that Mrs. Hatch lives detached from real life serves as an exaggerated representation of Lily's own world. Although high society might have norms and rules, these structural elements remain self-interested and disconnected from any political or social issues, focused as they are on the mere enjoyment of its members.



Over time, Lily feels puzzled by the nature of her job. Not only does she feel that she is only given vague duties, but she begins to wonder why Ned Silverton seems so close to Stancy, and why they both seem so intent on nurturing the relationship between Mrs. Hatch and Freddy Van Osburgh, who seems to like the divorcée a lot. Lily, who feels that Freddy's naïveté might be easily taken advantage of, is puzzled to note that the young man seems to be interested in Mrs. Hatch's long-term social future.

Lily's doubts about her job reveal that her appreciation of material comforts does not blind her to moral issues. Once again, she is confronted to the dark side of social transactions, in which people scheme to serve their narrow self-interests. This shows how morally corrupt Lily's world is—in the sphere of people like Bertha, the Gormers and, now, Mrs. Hatch as well.



When Selden comes to visit Lily one afternoon, he only increases Lily's growing doubts about being involved in such mysterious social transactions. While Lily is initially embarrassed, and then pleasantly surprised to see her friend, whose absence has hurt her deeply these past months, Selden remains surprisingly serious.

Lily's pain at noticing Selden's absence reveals her deep attachment to him, and also highlights the fact that Selden never explained to her why he preferred to stay away. His presence, however, suggests that he still cares about her and wants to protect her.



Selden and Lily engage in an awkward conversation, in which they remain uncomfortably distant and detached, and Selden admits that he is following Gerty's advice to help Lily. He explains that his purpose is to take her away from here, making allusive reference to the danger of remaining with Mrs. Hatch and arguing that Lily could stay with Gerty until she receives Mrs. Peniston's inheritance. However, when Lily reveals that she would have to spend all of this money repaying her debts, Selden is shocked. The conversation remains uncomfortable for the two of them, and Lily, moved by pride and a sense of detachment, refuses to make herself seem vulnerable to him.

Lily's comment about her debts serves as an indication to Selden that her situation is not as simple as it may seem. This highlights the fact that Selden's initial decision to distance himself from Lily was based on false rumors, and that he has failed to be honest with her about the reasons behind his behavior. Lily's feeling of pride reveals her need to maintain a social façade with him, since he has proven to her, since seeing her leave Gus Trenor's house, that he is truly interested in hearing her side of the story.



BOOK 2: CHAPTER 10

A few weeks later, Lily separates from Norma Hatch, after sensing that she was being used to facilitate an unacceptable social transaction. Later, she learns that Stancy's goal was to marry Freddy Van Osburgh to Norma Hatch, which members of the upper class were able to prevent by sending the young boy to Europe. Although Lily left Mrs. Hatch before this plan became obvious, Lily's name remained involved in the scandal and served to further tarnish her reputation.

The unfairness of being once again involved in a scandal in which Lily has no say reinforces the idea that she is destined to an unjust, tragic fate. The details of this planned marriage also highlight, once again, the lack of trustworthy relationships in this milieu, since even a lifelong, supposedly emotional commitment such as marriage becomes part of other people's manipulative schemes.



Now, thanks to the combined efforts of Gerty Farish and Carry Fisher, Lily is working for Mme. Regina, a hat-maker. Although Lily hopes to open her own shop one day, she soon realizes that, despite working there for over two months, she is still clumsy and cannot sew as well as the other girls, who have been trained in this trade for many years.

Once again, Lily's freedom appears restricted by her upbringing and her education, which have destined her to a plush life of high-society socialization instead of investing in her talents in a more productive way, for example by cultivating her intellect and skills.



The other girls, who know Lily's story, do not treat her any differently, but do consider her background the main explanation for Lily's incompetence. In the meantime, Lily listens to the girls gossip about the people who will buy their hats and realizes that the workers discuss the details of high society, occasionally mentioning a name that Lily recognizes as one of her friends.

For the first time in her life, Lily is forced to realize that the social prestige she has taken so much pride in is not necessarily valued by the rest of society, which tends to place more emphasis on a person's concrete skills. This highlights Lily's double isolation, as she is excluded from high society and looked down upon by members of the working class.



One day, Lily's supervisor, Miss Haines, scolds for failing to sew carefully enough. After work, Lily feels depressed to be part of the working class but receives some kind words from a fellow worker, Miss Kilroy, who tries to encourage her by telling Lily to go lie down, since Lily had said that she was feeling unwell. Having refused Gerty's hospitality, Lily walks home to her boarding-house.

Miss Kilroy's kindness emphasizes that no social class produces a single type of personality but, rather, that a person's worth depends on their behavior, not their class. This serves as the first signal to Lily that being part of the working class is not shameful in itself, since her identity and worth depends on nothing more than her own self—not her material environment.



On her way home, Lily stops by the chemist's, where she receives her sleeping drugs, although the chemist looks at her in an intense way and tells her that only a few drops above the recommended dose could be fatal. Lily, who had feared that the chemist might refuse to give her the drug, simply feels relieved to have it in her possession.

As Lily exits the store, she suddenly runs into Rosedale, who is shocked to see how unwell Lily looks. He takes her to a hotel for a cup of tea, which Lily enjoys because it is her only strategy to keep from falling asleep during the day, at the same time as her sleeping drug is her only method for falling asleep at night.

As Rosedale observes Lily, he is once again startled by her beauty. He asks about her life, although he is embarrassed to remember the rumors concerning Mrs. Hatch, and is shocked to learn that Lily is now part of the working class. Lily explains that she left Mrs. Hatch so that people would not think she was involved in helping Mrs. Hatch marry Freddy Van Osburgh, but that she now realizes even such prudence was useless, since rumors spread about her anyway. Rosedale, though, insists that he knew Lily would never be involved in such an affair, which makes Lily feel reassured.

When Rosedale inquires further about Lily's situation, she finds herself admitting to him that she owes her aunt's entire legacy. For the first time, she tells the entire truth about her business with Gus Trenor and thinks it might make her feel relieved, but it also increases her sense of misery. However, Rosedale finds this story encouraging, since it clears Lily of blame. He insists on accompanying her home and is shocked at discovering the boarding-house where Lily lives, but Lily simply says she is tired of depending on her friends. Finally, she accepts his offer to come visit her again, realizing that this prospect actually makes her happy.

That evening, in her room, Lily feels lonely. Carry Fisher has been afraid for people to think that she was involved in the scandal with Mrs. Hatch, and has therefore taken a break from helping Lily—which Lily understands and excuses. Although Gerty remains her only loyal friend, Lily avoids her because she fears running into Selden, which she feels would only bring her pain.

Lily's desperate need for potent sleeping medication reveals that she is mentally unwell, unable to come to terms with her current life and to confront the moral dilemma that would determine whether she can re-enter high society. The chemist's warning serves as a foreboding signal of Lily's tragic fate.



Lily's encounter with Rosedale serves as a reminder of her moral dilemma: in choosing to blackmail Bertha, she could put all of her financial and mental troubles aside. Rosedale's presence thus highlights the fact that Lily is going to have to choose between two worlds: her current, morally upright but miserable situation, or a degraded, yet materially comfortable one.



Lily's desire to explain herself with regards to the Norma Hatch scandal suggests that it is difficult for her to retain moral high ground while being ostracized by the rest of society. Rosedale's trust in Lily confirms how hypocritical high society is, since rumors will keep circulating about Lily even though the people who know her are convinced that she is innocent—yet find themselves unwilling or unable to protect her from harm.



Lily's desire to be understood reveals that she still trusts in justice, despite her cynical attitude toward high society. Lily's willingness to live in poverty in order to protect her moral compass—instead of other people's opinions, which are based on slanderous rumors—demonstrates strong values that set her apart from the rest of high society. Her appreciation for Rosedale, highlights his surprising loyalty and kindness, instead of Lily's self-interested ambitions.



Lily's justification of Carry's behavior reveals how tolerant she is to society's norms, even when they are visibly unfair. Lily's avoidance of Selden is reminiscent of Selden's own detachment from Lily, and suggests that the two characters are not kept apart because of insufficient feelings, but because of the different social worlds they want to belong to.



Reflecting on the necessity to repay Gus Trenor's debt, Lily wonders if she could use her aunt's legacy to open her own hat-making business and, over the course of years, give Trenor his money back. However, she also worries that she might lose her sense of moral obligation and eventually accept being forever in Trenor's debt. She knows that her contempt for poverty might lead her to renounce to her ideals and, perhaps, even encourage her to follow Rosedale's original plan to re-enter high society. Finally, she realizes that her only hope lies in her sleeping drugs.

Lily's desire to repay Gus, as well as her honesty about her moral doubts, reveal how seriously she reflects about moral issues and her own flaws. She values her moral dignity in the same way she admires her own beauty, and does not want to allow herself to behave in a dishonorable way. Lily's mention of her sleeping drugs serves as a dark presage of her tragic death, since, if she cannot find a way to solve her problems, she would at least be happy to escape them.



BOOK 2: CHAPTER 11

In late April, Lily watches fancy carriages pass by in the streets of New York. Because of Lily's health problems, she did not go to Mme. Regina's shop as often as she should have and has recently been dismissed, a decision Lily understands to be fair.

Lily does not attribute all of her problems to other people's behavior. Rather, she is capable of introspection and remains committed to justice, even if it must affect her negatively.



When Lily returns home, she sees Rosedale on the doorstep and feels hopeful again. Rosedale is shocked to hear that Lily is out of work and he insists that Lily accept a loan to repay Gus Trenor. However, Lily refuses to accept such a transaction, which reminds her of her failed business agreement with Gus. At the same time, she knows that all she would have to do for Rosedale to marry her is use Bertha's **letters** against her. Throughout her conversation with Rosedale, she is moved by his passionate indignation at her situation.

Rosedale's presence confirms that he is more loyal and reliable than Lily would have expected, since his attitude toward her is moved more by sincere concern than self-interest. Lily's appreciation for this kindness, however, does not allow her to forget her experience with Gus, thus proving that she has lost all trust in the possibility for honesty and fairness in the world of high society.



That night, Lily reflects on the possibility of using Bertha's **letters** to reintegrate into society. She argues to herself that she does not owe high society anything, and that blackmail is a social strategy potentially as valid as any other. She knows that, if she doesn't take advantage of this opportunity to regain her social standing, she will probably be condemned to living in a low social class, a victim of society's tyranny, with her own behavior less to blame than the values she inherited from her family and her upbringing.

Lily's dilemma about Bertha's letters forces her to confront a question she has evaded all her life: is money and power truly what she wants from life, or does she value happiness more? Although a working-class life does not guarantee her happiness, it does ensure that she retains her moral integrity, which, in turn, allows her to maintain the self-respect necessary to feel at peace with herself—whatever her material circumstances might be.



After a sleepless night, Lily goes for a walk and feels painfully lonely. Finally, in the afternoon, she returns home and decides to take Bertha's **letters** to her. Feeling unusually calm and composed, despite the momentousness of the situation, Lily exits her house. However, when she walks down a certain street, she recalls walking there with Selden two years ago, and she feels a sharp sense of shame and knowing that her current resolution to use Bertha's letters also affects him, since he is the recipient of the letters. Although she feels that the moment when Selden was part of her life is over, she passes by his house and feels a strong desire to enter and sit in his room. Following this whim, she enters his house.

In the end, as she passes by Selden's house, Lily becomes aware that she would feel more proud of herself for honoring love and respect rather than following her instinct for revenge and the retrieval of social clout. Although she does not yet formulate it to herself clearly, she realizes that her friendship with him should matter more than her relationship with other people, such as members of high society, since the love she has felt for him is so much more intense than any feelings she might have for the people around her.



BOOK 2: CHAPTER 12

In Selden's apartment, Lily is assailed by her memories, while Selden watches her with silent surprise. Lily begins the conversation by apologizing for her attitude when he came to warn her about Mrs. Hatch. Noting that Lily looks tired, Selden makes her sit down and Lily, unwilling to take part in her usual inventive word-play, begins to share her feelings earnestly, as tears fall from her eyes.

Worried about how tired Lily looks, Selden tries to insist that she have some tea, but Lily explains that she has to go soon. Despite noticing that Selden seems unwilling to reciprocate her outburst of feeling, Lily tells him that she has never forgotten what he told her at Bellomont. She explains that, despite Selden's efforts to help her escape her social circle, she was never ready to accept them, although the only thing that kept her hopeful in her life has been her knowledge of his belief in her.

Lily pauses to cry, and then tries to justify herself, in mysterious terms, for trying to escape the low life she has been thrown into. Selden does not understand what she is trying to say and wonders if she has decided to marry. However, Lily does not yet answer, preferring instead to say that she has kept "the Lily Bart you knew" with her throughout her life, but that she must now say goodbye to her and entreat her to him. Finally, she tells him that the knowledge of his love has always helped her, but that she let the moment slip away and must now keep on living. She touches his hand and the two of them feel strangely serious, as though they were close to death.

Although Lily does feel that she has killed Selden's love, she also knows that the love he has inspired in her lives on, and she suddenly realizes that she cannot let go of it—that her old self must remain with her, not with him. She makes a mysterious allusion to some catastrophe that might be about to happen but then asks Selden to kindle the fire so that she can warm up before heading out. Selden observes Lily as she kneels by the fireside and believes he sees her drop something into the fire, although he feels too entranced by Lily's sight that he does not pay attention to it. Lily then says goodbye and gently kisses him on the forehead.

Lily's sudden honesty reveals that her distance from Selden has been artificial, maintained by pride and an adherence to social codes of detachment. Now that she is engaged in a sincere reflection about the elements of her life that truly matter, though, she realizes that she no longer has to appear strong or superior, but reveal her vulnerability.



For once, Lily agrees to use honesty as the first step in their conversation, instead of waiting for Selden to confront her elaborate conversational skills with blunt honesty. Lily thus sets her public persona aside, allowing her true feelings to come to light for the first time in the novel, without worrying about what Selden's reaction might be.



Before taking Bertha's letters to her, which Lily knows to be a morally reprehensible act, she wants to prove to Selden that she has remained morally pure until this moment, and does not take pleasure in behaving immorally. She suggests that her true self has always remained private and hidden, but that she knows she will not be able to keep on loving and respecting herself after taking part in such an immoral action. In returning to high society, Lily thus plans to take part in total self-sacrifice, eliminating the most noble aspects of her personality.



It is only the notion of Lily's shared love with Selden that brings her a moral illumination: the understanding that she cannot be a full human being without engaging with this love and honesty. However, Lily's choice to burn Bertha's letters in Selden's fire—the mysterious action Selden does not fully perceive—is accompanied by an effort at reconciling herself with Selden. Paradoxically, then, Lily accepts that she has destroyed her chances at being with Selden but that she will still take pleasure in the love she feels for him.



BOOK 2: CHAPTER 13

After leaving Selden's apartment, Lily begins to walk aimlessly, dreading having to return to her room for yet another sleepless night. After sitting down in the park, she is approached by someone who worries about her state, wondering if she is feeling sick. That person is startled to recognize her as Lily Bart. When Lily looks up, the woman says that her name is Nettie Struther, and that she knows Lily from Gerty Farish's charity. Lily then remembers the young girl, who was ill at the time and to whom she had given money to heal.

When Nettie sees how weak Lily looks, she takes her to her apartment and the two of them sit in the warm kitchen. Nettie recounts her life, describing how she found the strength and energy to overcome illness as well as poverty. She describes having found happiness through her husband and their young daughter, a baby for whom Nettie cares fondly. Surprised that Lily, whom Nettie had thought above all possible trouble, is now herself in a difficult situation, Nettie wishes she could help her. As Lily gets up to leave, Nettie enthusiastically invites Lily to come back and get to know her family.

After this chance encounter, Lily feels surprisingly better, having taken comfort in the evidence of her own good actions. However, as she walks back to her boarding-house, she feels lonely and lost. Back in her room, though, she suddenly decides to organize all her possessions. When she comes across the dress she had worn for Wellington and Louisa Bry's *tableau vivant*, she recalls rejecting the possibility of sharing a life with Selden, but also retains a sense of the pleasure and glamor of the party.

A servant then knocks on the door to bring her a letter. When Lily opens it, she discovers a check of ten thousand dollars, with an explanation that the delay had been shorter than expected for her to receive her aunt's legacy. Unable to believe that she is finally in possession of this check, she calculates all of her expenses and realizes that, after paying these and her debt, she would only have enough to live for three or four additional months. However, after seeing how happy Nettie looked, she no longer fears poverty itself. Rather, she realizes that solitude is more painful. She feels dangerously unattached to life, as though she had never benefited from a fixed, entrenched home.

The contrast between Lily and Nettie's current situations reveals how easily fortune can affect people's lives. It also highlights the importance of creating social networks of compassion, as Lily once did with Nettie and as Nettie is now doing with her. These kinds of relationships differ enormously from the cut-throat world of high society, in which people are more interested in competing with each other than helping each other.



Nettie's generosity is reminiscent of Gerty's simple, yet deeply compassionate behavior. Both women, who care more about personal happiness than social prestige, show sincere concern for Lily, thus revealing that personal ties between individuals are stronger and more reliable when they are detached from relationships of power and self-interest. The contrast between Nettie's family life and Lily's near-complete isolation underscores this point.



Unlike when Lily first gave Gerty money for her charity, when she had merely reveled in her sense of power, this time Lily feels sincere joy in helping another human being. Having given up both on the possibility of blackmailing Bertha and of sharing her life with Selden, Lily's reorganization of her belongings can be seen as an effort to come to terms with her past identity, perhaps to create space for building a new one.



The moment when Lily receives her aunt's check allows her to realize that she no longer values money as much as human connections—which she has, unfortunately, failed to cultivate in her life. This moment redefines Lily's moral and socio-economic values, as she no longer associates poverty with moral degradation or unhappiness. She feels at once free and constrained, realizing that she is free to rebuild a new life but has never been taught how to do this in a way that prioritizes her happiness.



In contrast to Nettie, Lily realizes that everyone she knows is disconnected from other beings and floats about life with no apparent aim or network of strong bonds. Nettie, however, has built a safe, stable life for herself with her husband, based on the depth of a bond in which both members are fully committed to each other and know the details of the others' fears and vulnerabilities. Lily concludes that a man's love can bring fulfillment and happiness, as it encourages the woman to become the admirable person she has the potential to be. She also realizes that, despite her bleak circumstances, she still strives for happiness, but that all she is faced with now is renunciation.

Afraid that in the morning she might change her mind about paying Gus back, Lily decides to write a check to him immediately, so that she will not give in to base impulses. She continues to sort her papers until late at night. By the time she is done, the silence around her seems to foreshadow a future of emptiness for herself.

Desperate for sleep, Lily quickly undresses and, in great nervous excitement, does not know how she will be able to bear the difficult circumstances of her life in the days to come. Desiring only a moment of total forgetfulness and peace, Lily pours herself a few more drops of her sleeping drugs than usual, failing to reflect on the possible consequences of this act, simply believing that the usual dose would not be sufficient to quell her overly excited thoughts.

In bed, Lily looks forward to the gradual effects of the drug, which cause her to lose perception and consciousness. She suddenly feels that the next day will not be as unbearable as she thought it might be but that, rather, she will surely find the strength and hope to overcome whatever challenges she must face. No longer feeling sad and lonely, she realizes that she must tell Selden a word, to clarify their entire relationship, although she fears she might not remember that word when she wakes up. She knows, though, that saying it to him would make everything well. She then gives in to the power of drowsiness and falls asleep.

When Lily begins to place more importance on relationships than purely selfish goals, she realizes that life has no meaning without the love and care that a community provides—and that her upper-class community has promoted the very opposite values, such as narcissism and rivalry. Lily concludes that one does not need to sacrifice their personality to achieve happiness, as she thought she would have to do by marrying a rich man. Rather, marriage should involve complete respect and understanding, instead of mere self-interest or convenience.



Lily's moral values overcome even her own weaknesses, since she is honest enough with herself to realize that she is not morally flawless—and, therefore, that she must invest even more energy in her moral intuition. Her organization of her belongings serves as a prelude to the emptiness that her death will create.



This scene establishes Lily's death as semi-intentional and semi-accidental. It is intentional in that Lily desperately wants sleep, silence, and oblivion, but accidental in that she never mentions she wants to die, and later proves hopeful about her future (which suggests that she does not expect her life to end). Whether or not Lily actually harbored suicidal thoughts remains a mystery.



Lily's mental anticipation of the next day intensifies the tragedy of her death, since her positive attitude suggests that she still has hope and could therefore have kept on living a potentially happy life. Lily's desire to reveal a mysterious word to Selden—seemingly indicative of love and hope—suggests that she may have finally accepted that her relationship with him is more important than being part of high society. This attitude, however, will never be put to test, since death cuts short her opportunity to start a new life.



BOOK 2: CHAPTER 14

The next morning, on a sunny day, Selden walks toward Lily's boarding-house, convinced that he must see her immediately and share with her a word that absolutely has to be said. However, as he enters the house, he is surprised to run into Gerty Farish, who is herself surprised that he has arrived so fast. With a sense of foreboding, increased by the presence of other people in the boarding-house at this early hour, Selden enters Lily's room with Gerty, who tells him that Lily has died of an overdose of sleeping drugs.

When Selden sees Lily lying on her bed, he feels that he is seeing "the real Lily," but that she is inaccessible. Seeing Selden's sorrow and shock, Gerty tries to remind him of the urgency of the situation, as the doctor has left temporarily so that they can go through Lily's belongings. Gerty then leaves Selden alone in the room, saying that this is what Lily would have wanted.

Alone in Lily's room, Selden simply wants to fall on his knees by her side, but he knows that he only has a short amount of time to organize Lily's possessions. He looks away from the sleeping drug by the side of the bed and discovers, on the desk, a letter addressed to Gus Trenor that initially rouses anger and jealousy in him. However, he also discovers that Lily has kept the letter he wrote to her after the *tableaux vivants* evening at Wellington and Louisa Bry's—a promise to go visit her that he realizes he had been too cowardly to fulfill.

Looking through Lily's bills, Selden is then surprised to see that all her expenses are paid for. When he realizes that she received her aunt's legacy the night before and addressed a large check to Gus Trenor, he finally understands that Lily had indeed received money from Gus, but could not bear the idea of staying in his debt, even though repaying it condemned her to poverty.

Selden then reflects that their entire lives were meant to keep them apart, because of the different external influences that affected them. However, he finds comfort in the knowledge that he did love Lily, and that he had been willing only a few minutes ago to start a new future with her. Despite the impossibility of making this possibility come to life, Selden knows that it exists in a safe place, separate from the dreary reality of their lives. He knows, too, that it is their love for each other that kept them alive and stronger than their circumstances and, as he kneels by Lily's side, he feels the word pass between them that makes everything well.

Gerty's comment about seeing Selden so soon suggests that she has tried to contact him to inform him of a tragedy. Selden's high hopes—which, like Lily's final thoughts, reveal that he has decided to commit to her, for once and for all—underlines the tragedy of Lily's death, since it puts a brutal end to their relationship and destroys the future that they could have lived together.



Paradoxically, the fact that Selden is convinced to see the "real Lily" even though she is dead suggests that Lily's very life, with all of its social attributes, was an obstacle to her goodness and sincerity. It remains ambiguous why Selden must sort Lily's belongings, but seems related to protecting her reputation.



The letter to Gus Trenor is reminiscent of the moment when Selden saw Lily exit the Trenors' house and immediately jumped to conclusions about Lily's affair with Gus. When Selden sees his letter, though, he begins to realize that Lily only truly cared about him—and that, despite his professed love for her, he was unable to act with complete honesty toward her and ask her about what happened with Gus.



Selden finally understands that Lily's life was more complicated than it might have appeared, but that she was not as superficially greedy for material goods as people might have thought, since she always made it a point to repay her debts. This act elevates Lily on a moral level, proving that she cared more about morality than social renown.



Selden defines the love that exists between Lily and him as something inherently hidden, kept pure and uncorrupted from any aspect of social and material life. This allows him to conclude that their love can overcome death itself, since it continues to exist in the silence of their hearts. Selden's final moment of communion with Lily thus overcomes any barriers that might have existed while she was alive. The mysterious word they both wanted to share remains as strong as ever, thanks to their shared intention to communicate it.





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