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“The Great Gilt Cage”

by Elizabeth Bingham

Lily Bart, the brilliant heroine of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, is famous for her irresistible charm. Beautiful, clever, spirited—she captivates her audience both in the novel and out. Yet, for all her allure, Lily elicits largely ambivalent feelings from me. She attracts, yet she repels; she inspires admiration, but also disdain; she is likeable, but at times most unlikeable. I have a love-hate relationship with Lily Bart. I envy her beauty, charm and position, yet despise what she represents—the egocentric extravagance of the upper social class. At first glance, Lily and I seem doomed to antagonism: she condemns my social environment; I, in turn, condemn hers. Closer examination of our social attitudes reveals an unsettling similarity, however. I, like Lily, am trapped within my own classism. I, like her, am guilty of prejudice and pride. But I, unlike Lily, should know better.

I was born and raised in Iowa, where the work ethic reigns supreme. Surrounded by hardworking farmers and small-town wage-earners, I learned the value of a hard day's work, of Scottish and German thrift, of occasional self-sacrifice and service to others. These values, so common in the working-class Midwest, are virtually absent in the high society world of Lily Bart, where pleasure, beauty and power serve as the ultimate goals. When I read *The House of Mirth* and enter the rarefied realm of Lily Bart, these two worlds, the working class and the upper echelon, clash head-on.

As a member of the upper class, Lily embodies powerful attributes—beauty, tact, money, all the social graces. She is a great social favorite, regarded highly by her peers, particularly the men. For all her charm and popularity, however, Lily does have her drawbacks, among them an intolerance for people she considers her inferiors, which includes almost all those beneath her own social level, and anyone else who doesn't value exterior finish as much as she does. Such people, in her opinion, “live like pigs” (30). While her disdain for the unexciting, work-oriented middle class (especially as presented in the figure of Gerty Farish) may be acceptable, even encouraged, among her own set, it provokes strong resentment in me, a lifetime member of this “drab” social level. Lily's attractions begin to dim when she attacks and belittles the social circumstances of my life—based on work, practicality and usefulness—while extolling her own life of leisure, luxury and ornamentation. My resentment of her condescension, of her view of middle-class faults (“dinginess”

being chief among them), sparks in me an active dislike of her, and a desire to retaliate in kind.

The wealth, beauty and ease of the idle rich form a seductive picture in *The House of Mirth*, one we might all be encouraged to pursue, but the reality beneath that surface is severely warped. At one point in the novel, Lily views her friends clearly and critically:

Carry Fisher, with her shoulders, her eyes, her divorces, her general air of embodying a "spicy paragraph"; young Silver-ton, who had meant to live on proof-reading and write an epic, and who now lived on his friends and had become critical of truffles; Alice Wetherall, an animated visiting-list, whose most fervid convictions turned on the wording of dinner-cards; Wetherall, with his air of agreeing with people before he knew what they were saying; Jack Stepney, with his confident smile and anxious eyes, half way between the sheriff and an heiress; Gwen Van Osburgh, with all the guileless confidence of a young girl who has always been told that there is no one richer than her father. (55)

The upper class presented by Lily is far from perfect; it is superficial, artificial, and materialistic. Like Lily, this high society is highly self-indulgent and supremely self-centered. Lily inhabits a world of deceit, vanity, and calculation, where marriage is a social necessity representing bank books and jewelry boxes rather than any love and devotion. For all the glitz and sumptuous glamour of Lily's world, it is nonetheless hollow, devoid of basic human values, and I disdain it as much as she disdains mine.

Lily and I seem firmly locked in our incompatibility, with her looking down on my social dullness and me deeply resenting her condescension—and finding fault with her in turn. A seemingly unresolvable conflict. But *are* our situations irreconcilable? Are Lily and I really so different? Or might we actually share a similarity more disturbing than our perceived differences? In examining the causes of Lily's attitudes, I experience an increasing sympathy for her, and an unsettling recognition of myself.

The House of Mirth makes clear that Lily is the product of her environment, of the non-productive, pleasure-seeking upper social class. Lawrence Selden sees Lily as "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" (7). Lily, as a person, has many attractive qualities, but society has in effect ruined her by making her think of herself as an art object.

Thus, despite her intelligence and spirit, Lily has been taught that her primary purpose in life is to adorn society: "Was it not possible that the material [of Lily] was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?" wonders Selden (5). He senses a Lily who is deeper than her perfect exterior. Lily has undeniably been "fashioned" by society's expectations, but more specifically by her mother who embodies those expectations. Lily naturally thinks of herself as an art object because she has been raised by someone who sees her so. Lily "remembered how her mother, after they had lost their money, used to say to her with a kind of fierce vindictiveness: 'But you'll get it all back—you'll get it all back with your face'" (28).

One can easily understand why Lily feels the need for a rich marriage; she has been trained to trade her looks for wealth. Mrs. Bart further shapes Lily's regard for her beauty; after the family is ruined, she watches Lily's beauty "jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian; and she tries to instill into the latter a sense of the responsibility that such a charge involved" (34). Judith Fetterley sees Mrs. Bart as perpetuating the "cult of woman as Beautiful object," and, in "shap[ing] Lily's character and fate," laying the groundwork for Lily's destruction:

This objectification of her physical beauty has a large effect on Lily. First, making a separate entity of her beauty creates a schism between what might be called Lily's "real self" and her cultural identity as beautiful object. (201)

In pursuing what she regards as her societal role, Lily must suppress her personal inclinations to such an extent that she generally *believes* that upper class goals are her own.

Indeed the primary motivation for her fixation on appearance becomes clear: she separates herself from the vulgar masses by viewing herself as an art object and as an artistic person who enhances everything she touches. Because of her identity as art object, Lily *has* to look down on the practical plainness that the Gerty Farishes represent, or else she loses not only her distinction, but her whole sense of worth.

Seen in the light of her family environment, Lily's pursuit of luxury and riches and her condemnation of all that is "dull" become more pitiable than despicable. She cannot abandon her ingrained values, even when she hates them. She is the victim of her society, trapped by class in a meaningless life she cannot quite bring herself to accept. As she notes:

[Society was a] 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. (54)

What does this mean for me and my middle-class identity? Recogniz-

ing Lily's classism makes me realize that I am trapped within my own classism, raised to resent the social superiors who oppress us little people, and to disapprove of the wasteful, idle rich Lily represents. Yet I cannot play the self-righteous victim of an oppressive society, for in my middle-class morality, I, too, am guilty of "superior" feelings. I not only disapprove of Lily's lifestyle, like her I regard some people as social, intellectual or artistic inferiors. Deep inside, I *do* feel just a little superior to some members of the lower class, those uneducated, on welfare, perhaps living in dingy, dirty surroundings. But what is this? "Dingy"? "Dirty"? This sounds like Lily speaking, and the sobering fact is that it may as well be. I am just as much the narrow-minded arbiter of my own values as Lily is of hers. Lily evaluates the world in terms of the artistry and ornamentation her luxury offers, while I judge according to the general usefulness and productivity of my working-class background. Although her values differ from mine, we both rigidly adhere to our own set, firmly convinced of our own superiority. The similarity between us becomes solemnly clear: in condemning Lily for her classism, I must also condemn myself. While she disdains only her social inferiors, I am critical of those both above and below me on the social ladder.

Lily, however, slowly overcomes her classism during her painful social descent. Turned out by her social equals, she eventually sees the value of her steadfast friend Gerty Farish. Serving as secretary to the socially unacceptable Norma Hatch, Lily decides that this new-moned woman is every bit as good as the high society Freddy Van Osburgh. And struggling through her incompetence at the milliner's shop, Lily finally learns to respect hard work well done.

By the end of the novel, Lily has clearly learned that there is more to life than empty luxury and splendor. Her lesson is illustrated the night before her death. Lily, sitting exhausted on a park bench, is assisted by Nettie Struther, one of Gerty's social work cases whom Lily had once helped. Lily's appraisal of Nettie's humble life contrasts sharply with her earlier vision of success defined only in terms of money and physical luxury:

The poor little working-girl who had found strength to gather up the fragments of her life, and build herself a shelter with them, seemed to Lily to have reached the central truth of existence. It was a meagre enough life, on the grim edge of poverty, with scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance, but it had the frail audacious permanence of a bird's nest built on the edge of a cliff—a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss. (319-20)

Faced with the warm domesticity of the working-class Nettie Struther, Lily realizes that satisfaction and happiness can exist in a poor woman's life as well as a rich woman's. Her social descent results in an increase of tolerance; she recognizes the worth of social classes beyond her own and gains respect and appreciation for people she had formerly disdained. My opinion of Lily changes accordingly from dislike to a strong sense of sympathy with and admiration for her as she sees the worth of other people. As Irving Howe writes, "Before the pathos of [Lily's] failure, judgment fades into love" (127).

Lily Bart serves as a reminder of classism, of the rigidity, unfairness and judgment inherent to it. But Lily triumphs over her classism by refusing to adhere to it completely, and in doing so, at great social, physical and financial expense, she sets a heroic example of increased tolerance and understanding. Lily has to suffer to learn the lie of classism, but I, as a reader, can benefit from her example. If Lily, who at one point seemed manacled to her society, can overcome her classism, couldn't I? Possibly. The more telling question, however, is "Will I?" Am I willing to give up my goal of social and academic success in order to prove my belief in egalitarianism?

I don't think so. I *like* my education, my income, and my entertainments, and selfishly want more, even though others must do without college, adequate finances and symphony concerts. I will continue my comfortable life in the middle class, socially superior to the lower class and morally superior to the upper. (What an enviable position!) Yet Lily Bart will haunt me, and I must live with the knowledge that I sold out to society's dictates, that I am a fly willingly trapped in a bottle.

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