

FILM

The House of Mirth (1905)

Edith Wharton

(1862-1937)

adaptation written and directed by Terence Davies (2000)

ANALYSIS

This is a lavishly beautiful and moving adaptation, very well cast, skillfully directed, insightful and as faithful to the classic text as can be expected. As almost any film adaptation must, it greatly condenses the content (though well over 2 hours long), conflates scenes, changes some implications, reduces the number of characters, simplifies and in some cases alters them. While losing literary qualities of style, complexity, scope, depth and the rendering of psychology from the inside, it enhances the novel with greater economy, vividness and dramatic intensity. Anyone who has read the novel will know the characters already and should be very pleased with this film.

In this film adaptation the tragedy of poor Lily Bart is distilled to its essential plot: Failing in her attempt to enter the upper class society of New York by marriage to a wealthy man, she becomes the victim of her virtue, is demoralized and kills herself, an end that seems determined from the outset by her nature and her social circumstances, but also by chance.

The opening scene in a railway station is true to the novel: the two main characters standing beside a locomotive evokes the time, the popular faith in progress and Lily's ambition to get somewhere. Ironically, the society she hopes to enter is about to pass away in the modern age of the motor car, as suggested by the fact that, contrary to the novel, throughout the film the wealthy characters are still transported by horse and carriage. Their stiff old Victorian clothing expresses the rigidity of their self-protective social standards, the men in tight highnecked collars and the women in layered frocks and sheltering hats. The pace of their hedonistic and insular lives is slow, in contrast to urban life among the poor teeming all around them during this period, the rabble off screen in this film as it was in the minds of those wealthy enough to live in a house of mirth. In the novel, the very poor are represented by good Gerty Farish and the noble model of triumph over adversity is Nettie Struther.

Symbolism in the film--such as obscuring steam--is subtle and consists of imagery given emphasis that is natural to the story rather than with lingering closeups. The indoor settings are opulent and their pastoral vistas peaceful, suggesting that the rich live in heaven on earth, making it no wonder that Lily aspires to join them. Their ordered lives of leisure are conveyed by measured classical music on the sound track and by a scene at an opera by Mozart. Though their manners are refined and their lush surroundings beautiful, their true interiors are exposed as crude and ugly, in contrast to poor Lily Bart.

Wharton uses techniques of literary Realism and Impressionism derived from painters of the late 19th century. The cinematography of this adaptation is visually faithful, with many shots composed and styled like Realist and Impressionist paintings, as by Renoir and Mary Cassatt. In particular, one scene when Lily strolls along a beach with a parasol on a bright sunny day animates a number of familiar Impressionist paintings with such exactness the effect is startling. A number of transitions are made by filling the screen with impressions of sunlight on water, fragments glittering as with excitement, like Lily bedazzled by her environment and disturbed by her impulses.

Lily is distracted from her pursuit of the wealthy but dull Percy Gryce by the far more attractive Lawrence Selden, who tells her, "Your genius lies in converting impulses into intentions." Yet the potential lovers are never able to make their intentions clear to each other. Lily's attraction to Selden, a lawyer who must work for a living, conflicts with her ambition to marry up. This introduces the theme of Nature versus

artifice, or society. Ironically, their first date is to be at church. They both have red hair (in the novel his hair is dark), implying a natural and even fiery compatibility that is confirmed by flirtation and culminates in the only kiss in the film--a modest though fatal one.

Lawrence Selden is a cultured bachelor who has had an affair with Bertha Dorset, one of the New York aristocracy. He collects "first editions," indicating that he is attracted to originals, like Lily Bart. When he invites her up to his flat, Lily says "I'll take the risk," gambling with her reputation. She rebels against convention also by speaking first to men, by inviting them to sit with her on the train and by smoking. She already has a reputation as a gold digger and tells Selden that unlike a man, "a girl must marry," though by nature she has an aversion to marrying a dull man for money. Naturally, her flirtatious instability distances men from her emotionally while attracting them sexually, as when Selden says, "You're such a wonderful spectacle."

Feeling inadequate to her needs and troubled by her priorities, Selden tells her he expects her to marry someone rich, saying "I have nothing to give you." When he seems prepared to give her love, however, she must ask, "Are you serious?" In their mutual ambivalence, they accuse each other of cowardice. "We always play this elaborate game," Lily says. In the end, they both lose at gambling.

Lily's conspicuous interest in Selden frightens away her first objective, the shy rich bachelor Percy Gryce, who is easily shocked. At the Mozart opera she brazenly wears a bright red frock and manipulates a matching red fan, sitting in a box with the rich but married philanderer Gus Trenor, who represents the pinnacle of the corrupt social order. Because he is played by the famous comedian Dan Ackroyd, he seems out of character, striking a false note consistent with his being a fraud--a lecherous cad pretending to be a gentleman. Gus seduces the naive Lily by pretending to be generous and interested only in making financial investments on her behalf. She has gambled on her skill at the card game of bridge and lost, leaving her in debt and vulnerable to Gus. Likewise she is never able to bridge the gap between herself and the aristocracy. That gambling is a metaphor is emphasized by the fact that literal gambling is never shown in the film, not even in the episode set in Monte Carlo.

Lily accepts Gus's invitation to come home with him only because he lies and says his wife Judy is there. This proves to be a fatal gamble. Lily naturally sees herself as innocent and above reproach. But she lacks prudence and foresight. In leaving the opera with Gus before an audience of the very people she wants to impress favorably, she loses her reputation because of his. The invented scene is an excellent compression of episodes in the novel. Worst of all, when Selden sees Lily leave with Gus, he draws what appears to be an obvious conclusion that sticks with him for the rest of her life: "Men have minds like moral flypaper." In the novel this line is attributed to a different character. When the boorish Gus reveals his lie and his true motive for befriending her, Lily is shocked, but her emphatic rejection is too late to avoid the appearance that she has compromised herself, which in a monetary sense she has.

Lily is dependent on her rich guardian the imperious Aunt Julia, whose ugly old face is set off by lighting from a dark background, suggesting that she is the true face of the cruel and rigid aristocracy that rejects Lily for her indiscretion--specifically for her gambling: "You are disgraced." This makes Lily's exclamation ironic when she reads the letters she buys from a cleaning woman that expose the affair between Selden and Bertha Dorset: "Oh Bertha, how could you be so indiscrete!" Lily is betrayed by her homely cousin the graceless Grace Stepney, who tells Aunt Julia about Lily's gambling because she hopes to win Selden herself. In the novel, it is poor Gerty who wants Selden. The film omits Gerty and strengthens the motivation of Grace for her cruelty.

Potential salvation presents itself to Lily in the form of Simon Rosedale, a "new rich" Jewish investor considered vulgar but accepted by the vulgar aristocracy because he has so much money. Lily has absorbed prevailing social prejudices. A social climber herself, she responds to Rosedale's marriage proposal by asking him for time to decide, hoping to do better. Rosedale is well aware of what everyone including Lily thinks of him and he has a realistic though narrow perspective. The film counters the negative stereotype of the Jew by making Rosedale straightforward and by humanizing him through the personality of the actor. Wharton humanizes Rosedale by making him complex, sympathetic, truly in love with Lily and more

honorable than the gentile aristocrats, while at the same time she depicts him as having characteristics common to his “type.”

An alternative opportunity is offered by Bertha Dorset, who invites Lily to join a cruise on her yacht. Bertha’s concealed motive, to distract her husband George from her own current affair being conducted under his nose, is introduced by ominous imagery of concealment: The furniture covered by white sheets like shrouds prefigures the ultimate death of Lily, implying cause and effect. In Monte Carlo, the world becomes a gambling house of mirth where games are fixed by the rich and powerful: Bertha accuses Lily of scandalous conduct with George—“You carried your imprudence too far”—and orders her not to return to the yacht. Bertha has gotten away with her affairs in this way, by lying and manipulating her weak husband. She is a cheater who always wins. What must hurt Lily most of all is the truth in Bertha’s lie, that she carried imprudence too far. Again contrary to ethnic stereotype, Rosedale is honest and forthright, whereas Bertha proves to be devious and evil.

Lily is abandoned in a scandalous place. Totally so when Aunt Julia dies, leaving everything to Grace, except just enough money to Lily to pay off her debt to Gus. Though she is more virtuous than anyone else in the story and persists in her virtue to the point of destroying herself, Lily is condemned by the corrupt for lacking virtue. The film is successful in conveying sharp ironies such as this, the means by which Wharton defines the moral implications of her story with clarity and strong emotional effect. Wharton is so realistic that in her novel she is often critical of Lily, whereas in the film Lily seems more pure.

George Dorset comes to Lily distraught from jealousy, openly vulnerable to her. Rather than capitalize on the situation, she is honorable. She does not take revenge on Bertha by showing George her letters to Selden, nor does she use the letters to extort money from Bertha. Simon Rosedale reappears and the impoverished Lily now accepts his proposal. Too late. She has become a poor social investment. He knows about Bertha’s letters and advises Lily to use them as “the means of her redemption.” Lily chooses a spiritual rather than a social redemption by not using the letters, remaining honorable and protecting Selden to the death—a measure of her love and the triumph of Nature over society.

Her abrupt downward movement to the bottom of the social scale is conveyed by rapid and ironic transitions. She is fired as a secretary to the disreputable Mrs. Hatch, for being disreputable. In the novel she quits for her honor, after Selden advises her to, an indication of his spiritual influence upon her. Then she uses the prescription of Mrs. Hatch to acquire chloral: “We resist the great temptations but it is the little ones that pull us down.” She has fallen so far from her natural place, the place she has been conditioned to all her life, she is soon demoralized and even gets fired as a lowly seamstress making hats.

Having failed to receive her meager inheritance from Aunt Julia and unable to repay her debt to the unethical Gus, Lily goes to Grace and begs for a loan, only to be turned down. Grace excuses her cruelty by blaming Lily for Aunt Julia’s death. At the railway station Lily encounters Rosedale again, but rejects him when he offers her the same dishonorable proposition as Gus. Finally, in desperation, she decides to try using Bertha’s letters at last, but she finds the Dorsets not at home. In the novel she resists the temptation to try. She then resorts to visiting Selden and apologizes to him for the game she played. She feels defeated and worthless now: “I am on the rubbish heap.”

When Selden leaves the room, Lily puts Bertha’s letters into the flames of his fireplace, slips out and returns to her bleak room. In near darkness, having overdosed on misery, she drinks an overdose of chloral. In the film she commits *suicide*. In the novel she overdoses by *accident*, just as she did not mean to destroy herself socially. The film is more tragic, the novel more poignant, symbolic and strengthened in structure by parallelism. Selden discovers the letters singed but unburned in his fireplace, and Lily’s check repaying Gus with the inheritance she finally received. In the novel he discovers the check in *her* place and he never learns of the sacrifice Lily made for him by not using and finally burning the letters. In the film, Selden realizes her virtue at last and rushes to her room too late. He raises the blind, letting in the light. In the novel the light is “tempered” through the blind. In the film, he kneels weeping by her body saying forever too late, “I love you.” In the novel Wharton withholds use of the word *love*, conveying the inhibition of her characters that led to such unfortunate consequences.

Michael Hollister (2015)