



[House of Mirth](#), by Edith Wharton

In A Nutshell

The House of Mirth was published in 1905 by Edith Wharton, a well-known writer from a famous and wealthy New York family. Wharton, in many of her novels, explores and exposes the opulent society in which she lived. She knew the ins and outs of high society like the back of her hand, and wealthy New York society is indeed the hot topic of *House of Mirth*. The novel follows Lily Bart, a beautiful young woman on the hunt for a rich husband, as she navigates the social scene and suffers tragically at its self-serving hands.

At the time of its publication, *House of Mirth* was critically and commercially a great success. However, it was condemned by some as overly-critical of society's elite – and by "some" we mean, of course, "society's elite" themselves. Literary critic Elizabeth Hardwick writes in her introduction to the 1999 Modern Library edition of the novel that Wharton exposes "the best and the richest society of New York" to be "pimps cruising in Cadillacs." Ouch.

The novel firmly established Edith Wharton as a serious writer, and paved the way for later novels, including *The Age of Innocence*, for which she received the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for Literature. (Wharton was the first woman to receive this award.) *House of Mirth* was also seminal as an early novel in a genre of literature called "The Novel of Manners." These works explore a particular social system in a particular time, generally elite society sometime around the last half of the 19th century. Wharton was among writers like Jane Austen and Evelyn Waugh in pioneering this genre.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Do you like Lily Bart? Do think that Wharton is pushing you to either like or dislike her? What specific scenes make you feel the way that you do?
- 2 What are the differences in mood between Book I and Book II? Why does Book One end when it does?
- 3 At the end of the day, would Lily and Selden make a good match? Could she ever really be satisfied with him, and vice versa?

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