Amy Cantrall
Advisor: Nancy West

“In Sympathy: How to Read – and View – Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth”

In the second Gilded Age that we live in now, it has been surprising to me to find that Edith Wharton’s presence in homes and classrooms has been waning. In order to understand why this is, I turn to one of Wharton’s most popular works to find out what makes her relatively undesirable to read today. In *The House of Mirth*, I discovered that a large problem with the main character, Lily Bart, is the fact that readers feel unable to sympathize with her.

By looking closely at both the text and Terence Davies’s 2000 film adaptation, the aim of my thesis is to argue that there are reasons why Lily Bart should be treated with compassion. With evidence in the text, such as Wharton’s clever uses of names, it is clear that Wharton has a strategy in which she emphasizes readers’ sympathy for Lily. Similarly, the film also constructs Lily in such a way that viewers feel for her and are devastated at her fall from grace.

It is true that due to Wharton’s high status in life, it is initially difficult to feel compassion for her characters who are, for the most part, also equal in status. However, I have discovered that her characters, such as Lily Bart, still face human dilemmas and have emotions; as such, they are equal to readers in that we can understand their problems, even in today’s day and age. I argue that there is a reason why Wharton presents her characters as difficult to sympathize with, and that we should look to her difficult heroes and heroines for more lessons on life than our typical literature idols.