

**An Insatiable Hunger: Society's Glutinous Consumption of the Individual in
The Second Sex and *The House of Mirth***

By Allison Speicher

Although it exists as a human creation, society is a malicious monster with an insatiable hunger for consuming the individual and enforcing a socially-dictated conformity of values. Society makes humans necessarily dependent upon it for definitions of self in order to ensure its continued survival. Outside of definitions built upon society's terms, humans cannot possibly begin to know who they are. To combat the encroachments of society on one's existence as an individual, one can attempt to drop out of its constructs, but this attempt at redefinition is simply the act of defining oneself as "not society"; the definition continues to hinge upon society's unwanted stipulations. The quest to define the self concretely as an entity separable from society thus becomes a vicious cycle which continues to feed society's voracious appetite. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that humans can consciously destroy the terms of definition which are rooted in the language society has constructed and slay the beast which seeks to define all human experience. In her tale of a woman fallen from society's grace, Edith Wharton in *The House of Mirth* displays how society frightens humans into believing that in seeking to destroy or combat social norms they effectively destroy themselves. She presents a much bleaker view of the future of identity, for just as her characters begin to break the bonds of societal constraint, the readers are left with a corpse and a vision of opportunity lost. While Wharton and de Beauvoir offer different visions of who created the monster of society and its accompanying myths, they concur that it preys on human weakness and perpetuates itself through breeding and centuries of sociological

propaganda. Both writers focus on the ability of the individual to escape his or her socially-determined fate, but their differing visions leave readers adrift in feelings of both hope and despair.

"[T]he individuals that compose the society are never abandoned to the dictates of their nature; they are subjected rather to that second nature which is custom and in which are reflected the desires and the fears that express their essential nature" (36). In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir focuses on prescribed gender roles and attempts to discern their point of inception so that woman can begin to unravel the chains which bind her to man. The division, which society perpetuates, did not start with biology. While biology makes woman a slave to the human species because her body is the vehicle of its continued existence, the "bondage of woman to the species is more or less rigorous according to the number of births demanded by society" (35). It is not woman's biological role as the child bearer which makes her a slave, but rather society's demand for more children. Inferiority and subjugation to man are not therefore inherent in the existence of woman. Woman's "dependency results not from a historical event or a social change" (xxiv, nor from her biological existence, but instead from life in the society man built for himself.

Society, under the dominion of man, has generated the myth of womanhood which has become the barometer for measuring all women. In the society of his creation, he is the Subject and woman is the Other, one only to be defined in terms of man or, more broadly, in terms of society. Writes de Beauvoir, "[T]hrough the myths this society imposed its laws and customs upon individuals in a picturesque, effective manner" (260). Although the myth of woman does not match her complex reality, it ties woman directly to the institutions and values society wishes to restrict her to and veils her with an air of

impenetrable mystery. The myths serve the purpose of excusing the behavior of men, society's keepers-of-the-keys, with regard to women. They form the pretext through which women can be further abused. The image of the woman as an enigma is an especially useful and deeply engrained myth, explains de Beauvoir, because it excuses the theft of woman's right to a concrete identity and does not push men to try to understand women. Women are silenced; their language is not the language of society; their views on love and marriage are not the proper views on love and marriage. Women are nearly powerless in the face of the silence; "woman cannot be objectively defined through this world, and her mystery conceals nothing but emptiness" (259). Society makes it exceedingly difficult for woman to claim her humanness; it becomes "more comfortable to submit to a blind enslavement than to work for liberation" (263). Children are inculcated into this falsehood; each girl is raised "without ever being impressed with the necessity of taking charge of her own existence" (721). Society creates the myth and feeds it to each new generation so that its continuity is ensured; the dehumanization becomes a vicious cycle.

While de Beauvoir focuses her critique on gender roles, Wharton bares the secrets of the class structure and the upper class which creates a social myth with norms and standards based upon unreasonable expectations that even members of this class cannot possibly live up to. The latent hypocrisy of this class is revealed in characters who feel it is sufficiently holy to watch the church bus drive past and who accept only those divorced women who were penitent enough to remarry into wealth. Like de Beauvoir, Wharton attacks the myths that lie at the very heart of society's dictatorship over the free

spirit. Wharton focuses on social rules as determined by the upper class; de Beauvoir, on rules imposed on women by men.

Struggling for air in this strangling society is Lily Bart, who dares to question its norms, but to little avail. In a society which values wealth, beauty, and power, Lily Bart is "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" (6). At the age of twenty-nine, Lily is feeling the pressure of society to marry and marry well. In a society that expects her to be beautiful and well-dressed, marriage is the only arrangement which will provide sufficient wealth for meeting these expectations and striving for the ultimate goal: social power. She has unlimited faith in her beauty's power to attain for her all she needs; she was indoctrinated in her society's myths at a young age by a mother who disdained "dinginess." A victim and product of her society, she confesses that she "felt within her a stealing allegiance to their [the upper class's] standards, an acceptance of their limitations, a disbelief in the things they did not believe in, a contemptuous pity for the people who were not able to live as they lived" (51). The subjugation and sycophantic awe of the lower classes was simply a part of the "natural order of things" (158), Lily was taught. Wharton's narrator's slant leads readers to disdain Lily's naiveté. Wharton capitalizes on this disdain in her social critique by making it clear that Lily is a product of society's myth. As in de Beauvoir's text, the fault lies chiefly with society, not with the individual.

To further her social critique, Wharton gives her readers stolen glimpses of the lower classes. The trickle-down effect of upper-class culture is evident in the Gormers, the Brys, and Mr. Rosedale, characters whose cravings to join the upper class are all-

consuming. The upper class views Gerty Farish, an independent woman who lives just outside this class, as "a parasite in the moral order" (157). The readers' affections extend naturally to Gerty, Lily's true friend and a philanthropist. Wharton gives her readers a lower class character to adore, but then tears her down, working within the constructs of the society she is satirizing. Until the end of the novel, all members of the lower class are dull, nameless, and faceless. Even the factory workers Lily joins as she spirals socially downward are pictured gossiping about the upper class, the center of all of society's attentions. As Lily descends, she is left with "the passionate craving for a fair chance against the selfish despotism of society" (319). Wharton shows economics as the creator of the great social divide and, through her upper class characters, explains the power they believe their old money gives them to legislate social mores. Since they were raised to believe in the values of the ruling generation before them, according to Wharton, all humans are tied down to deeply-rooted mores. De Beauvoir, finding no concrete biological or historical basis for women's subjugation to the will of a male-dominated society, can attribute it only to a convenient myth. Wharton demonstrates that the myth which holds Lily's society in its vice-like grip is rooted in an history of indoctrination to the upper class perspective.

De Beauvoir points to society's oppression of women; Wharton, to the oppression of all who question society's latent materialism and the rule of the rich and beautiful. While elucidating the cases of two different groups of victims, the authors differ in their hopefulness. Wharton repeatedly refers to Lily's plight, her feeling of being trapped in her social class and its norms, as her destiny. Writes Wharton: "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?" (39). As one raised to believe the myth of the upper class, Lily has no escape. Wharton has greater hopes for freedom amidst the lower classes, but even here people are bound in servitude to the controlling class. Even the relatively free milliners complete their work to satisfy the needs of the upper class.

Lawrence Selden explains to Lily early in the novel that the only ideal of success is "personal freedom" (71). While his notion colors Lily's later views and begins her awakening to the lies of the myth, she never achieves it. She comes to see her life as cheap, yet cannot but long to re-attain the heights of social achievement because this is the only truth she knows. Although "she had a fatalistic sense of being drawn from one wrong turning to another without ever perceiving the right road till it was too late to take it" (134), she never forgets Selden's simple truth which even he himself cannot live up to as he is hopelessly entangled in society's web. Knowing the truth leaves her with "a sense of a deeper impoverishment" (338); the novel's greatest tragedy is not Lily's death but the fact that her knowledge of the myth's fatal attraction could not stop her from acting like a moth drawn to the flame. Both Selden and Lily are unable to leave behind the myth despite their knowledge of its ability to destroy; readers' dawning hopes for change are crushed with Lily's death and Selden's recognition that he could not save her from society's voracious appetite.

While Wharton holds that society, through its myth, lulls individuals into a trusting sleep from which they awaken too late to orchestrate change, de Beauvoir holds that an awakening is the first step in making meaningful changes. Wharton writes, "Why do we call all our generous ideas illusions, and the mean ones truths? Isn't it a sufficient

condemnation of society to find one's self accepting such phrasology?" (73). De Beauvoir agrees and she argues that to truly change society individuals need to develop a new language, a language in which woman has a definition independent of man. She asserts that biology does not "establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny" (32); this assertion itself is laden with a hope Wharton rejects in asserting that social class is the root of destiny and that the values individuals are raised in are immutable. De Beauvoir provides women with a course of action, writing, "Let them be provided with living strength of their own, let them have the means to attack the world and wrest from it their own subsistence, and their dependence will be abolished" (724). She points to economics, Wharton's great hand of fate, as the first avenue through which women should seek change because the ability to support themselves will free them from their dependence on men. Moral, cultural, and social change can be pursued once this goal is attained. The key lies in men and women recognizing one another as peers; according to de Beauvoir progress towards this goal has already begun and "it remains only for women to continue their ascent" (729). Wharton's heroine dies in her attempt to slay the beast that is society, while the work of de Beauvoir's has just begun.

Society uses the myth as a tool to lull people into its trap, where it pounces on individuality and consumes the independent self. Society thus roots every individual's self-image in its own fallacious values. In *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton contends that the traditions and expectations of the upper class shape this myth and that all people pay homage to it. With Lily Bart dies any hope of change; the individual is destined to be society's pawn. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, maintains that the myth was created and perpetuated by men, society's keepers, for their convenience. Women's

awakening to this myth is the first step towards societal and personal change; women must take action on this knowledge. Identity, both for society and the individual, is fluid if individuals actively pursue change, holds de Beauvoir. While Wharton maintains that individuals will never know their true selves, de Beauvoir ventures that their true selves will liberate them from society's falsehoods. In this way, the hope for humanity which dies with Lily Bart is rekindled nearly five decades later in de Beauvoir's *Modern Woman* as individuals continue to live and die in their quest to slay the dragon that is society and hope that someday, humans may finally live happily ever after.