

## The House of Mirth

Director/writer: Terence Davies, from the novel by Edith Wharton. Producer: Olivia Stewart. Cinematographer: Remi Adefarasin. Sony Pictures Classics.

Catharsis, said Aristotle, is the goal of drama. You'd never know it from *The House of Mirth*, an adaptation of Edith Wharton's 1905 novel by the great British filmmaker Terence Davies. Its intensity is distilled in its uncompromising restraint, and though there are passing moments of anger in the film, and rare, sudden swellings of grief, there's not a second of real release in this grim anatomy of a socialite's inexorable decline. Yet the film's relentlessness does not feel cruel. It feels like the piercing expression of a boundless pity.

Lily Bart is a strong-minded heiress whose will to independence can only be perceived as pride by the society she lives in—New York City at the turn of the twentieth century. She recklessly accumulates gambling debts, treats the powerful men who covet her with lighthearted scorn, and falls victim, in the end, to petty rumors. Disinherited, she joins the working classes, and gradually descends into drug addiction. It's the stuff of pulp melodrama, raised in Wharton's delicately histrionic treatment of the material to the level of tragedy-of-manners. In turn, Davies resists the histrionics and makes the story into a chamber-play,

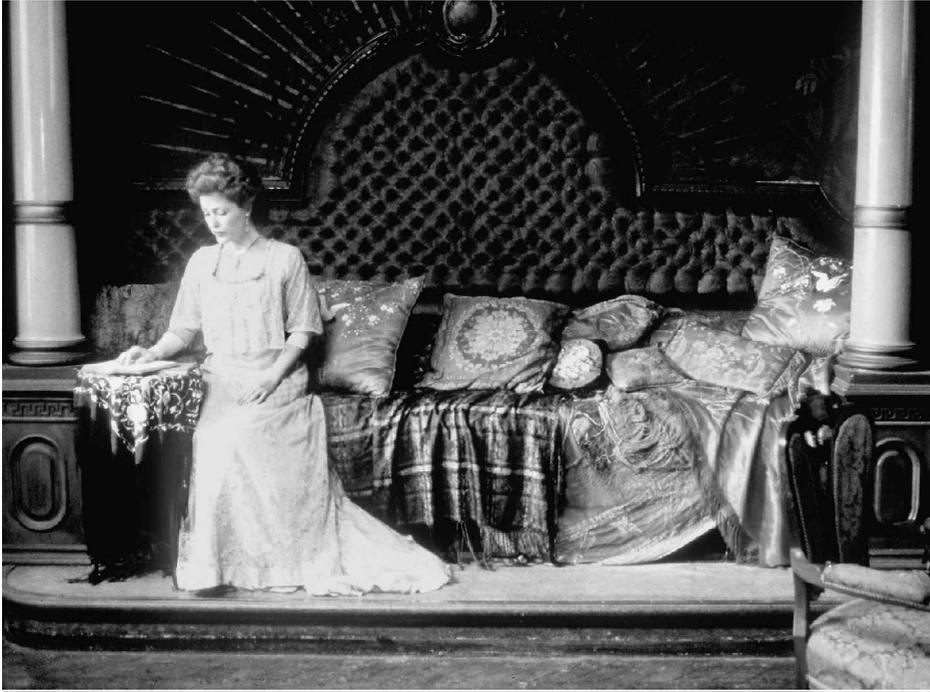
in which squelched emotion and strangled expression perform a hushed duet. Davies seems to have set himself the near-impossible task of making a movie about repression whose power lies in the fact that what's repressed never rises to the surface.

The Masterpiece-Theatre-style costume dramas the film superficially resembles tend to work in something like the opposite way. They're all about repression, too, typically with the self-congratulatory implication that we moderns have risen above the stifling but picturesque social rituals of days of yore. But they can usually only represent repression by revealing the strong emotions it mitigates—as in the explosions of violence in *Howards End*, say, or the sex scenes in *Wings of the Dove*. Only then do you realize what undercurrents are supposed to be surging beneath the surface. But Davies wants to reveal these undercurrents without ever manifesting them directly because, his film suggests, social repression doesn't just short-circuit true expression temporarily before it finally comes out—it kills the feelings it smothers.

There is a sex scene in *The House of Mirth*, and it's a marvel in its suggestion of subdued carnality, of a desire that can barely take shape amid the opulent trappings designed to crush it. The scene evokes a compelling sense of suspended time, and hopeless longing that gains force *because* it's hopeless. The pace is slowed, in long, languorous takes, and sound effects are invested with a charge of rare sensuality:

Anatomy of a decline: Gus Trenor (Dan Aykroyd, left) and Sim Rosedale (Anthony LaPaglia) hover over Lily Bart (Gillian Anderson).





Trapped in the House of Mirth

the whispering folds of elaborate clothing, the lapping of moist lips in halting speech, the keening echo of a concerto so faint, so far distant, that it might be heard in memory alone. The scene is not meant to suggest that if only these people could break out and get in touch with their real, primal selves—à la the *Merchant/Ivory Room with a View*—then they'd triumph over the restriction of social mores. The whole point is that's just what they *can't* do.

Still, some viewers might understandably, at first, mistake *The House of Mirth* for another entry in the Merchant/Ivory stakes. It's a period piece, after all, with fancy costumes, classical music filling the soundtrack, and painterly compositions—the last image fades into a melancholy tableau that suggests Mary Cassatt. I don't mean to slight Merchant/Ivory unnecessarily here: with films like *Shakespeare Wallah* and *Roseland*, we should recall, they were international pioneers of independent filmmaking. Before they settled into the cozy niche of their recent films, they even brought some of that independent spirit to their earliest forays into costume drama—as in the dryly severe *The Europeans* (1979), out of James, to which *The House of Mirth* bears some affinities. But the rigorous spareness of Davies's film has none of the genteel aura or the classy status of the later Merchant/Ivory productions. In *The House of Mirth*, scene follows scene with an impacted cadence made harsher, somehow, by

the swift, precise dissolves that link the images, and the tableaux have an enclosed, airless quality—you can sense the dank, rarefied atmosphere, but you can't breathe in it.

The whole film is slightly, delicately stylized, and Gillian Anderson's performance as Lily Bart suits this milieu perfectly. By no means is it standard, naturalistic "star" acting. It is both mannered and understated, a thoroughly modulated performance, the gestures refined, the intonations of line readings just slightly, though fastidiously, stilted. This stylization is meant to suggest a range of emotional colorings, while retaining an essential elegance. Even after Lily has resigned herself to her debasement, she remains excruciatingly well-bred—as if she *thought* she were in a Merchant/Ivory film. Considering the extreme bias toward naturalistic acting of many film viewers, Anderson's performance will not be to every taste, especially since it's at odds with the more traditional styles of many of her fellow actors—Eric Stoltz, for instance, who plays Lawrence Selden (Lily's true love). But this works for the film, too, in the end, suggesting Lily's terrible distinction, her intractable apartness.

If you're a lover of Wharton who wants to view a full adaptation of her work, see Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence*. That film encompasses the waspish wit, the detailed examination of social minutiae, and

the exuberance giving way to melancholy that are the hallmarks of Wharton's great novels. With sheer intensity of focus, Davies concentrates here only on the dourness, in all its varied textures. The emotional register of the film is closer to Strindberg than to Wharton. It's a very modern rendering of Wharton's fairly modern novel, on the order of Jane Campion's treatment of James in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Davies skews some of the causes in Wharton's plot: the nature and origins of the rumors swirling about Lily are obscured, and Lily's sojourns as secretary and milliner are startling because relatively unexplained in the film's plot. This is because Davies wants to show this society as a complex closed system, where the causes of effects are never easy to determine, even when they seem to be nothing but petty personal motives.

Davies is known—when he's known at all—for densely free-associative memory-films like *Distant Voices/Still Lives* (1987) and *The Long Day Closes* (1993). These films transport the materials of British social realism, chronicles of working-class family life, into a heady context of modernist aestheticism, with fragmented narratives and highly wrought alienation-effects. But though the films look avant-garde to many viewers, it's hard to stay too alienated from them—the feeling for the characters is so deep. Watching these movies is like seeing the ghosts of loved ones, substantial but fleeting, and understanding at last the suffering that made them what they were. For Davies, we're all products of our time, and one of the things this means is that we're *trapped* in time. In those earlier films, we watch as the characters, helpless and trapped and beloved, strive variously for transcendence—pursuing the errant cycles by which they live, or joining together in fugitive song. In *The House of Mirth*, one still feels one is watching a cast made up of phantoms, and the feeling expressed for them is still deep. But because the world of the film is so tragically loveless, this feeling can take shape, not as love, but only as an abiding sympathy with those who must live, and die, there. And this time there is no transcendence—except, perhaps, for the one that might come later, after the film is done, when you know you have witnessed a work of art.

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**James Morrison** teaches film and literature at Claremont McKenna College. He is the author of *Passport to Hollywood*, a critical study, and *Broken Fever*, a memoir.