

Spring 2010

## The Effect of Mentorship: A Test of Strength and Survival in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* & Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

Kathryn Agliata

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Agliata, Kathryn, "The Effect of Mentorship: A Test of Strength and Survival in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* & Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*" (2010). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 177.

<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/177>

This thesis (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu).

The Effect of Mentorship:

A Test of Strength and Survival in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* & Edith

Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

by

Kathryn Agliata

(Under the Direction of Caren J. Town)

#### ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I will compare the role of Mentorship in the lives of protagonists Lily Bart of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Carrie Meeber of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Both Lily and Carrie experience life altering events that force them into unfamiliar roles amidst the upper-class New York Society of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Each woman's circumstances foster a growing level of independence, and each is compelled to examine the potential of her own skill set. The challenges they face include financial struggles, difficulty in establishing and or maintaining their desired status in society, as well as a reluctance to place their futures in the hands of other's. Their efforts produce contrary outcomes; however, each suffers the consequences of life's lessons along the way.

Although evidence throughout the stories focuses on the individual progress of each woman's experiences, it is imperative to note the significant role of Mentorship in these woman's lives. To most, the presence of Mentorship is vital in obtaining success in life. To these women, the value of this kind of guidance is immeasurable. With the influence of mentors Carrie is able to Adapt to the changing circumstances around her, therefore ascending to the higher levels of society with little difficulty. Her abilities grow stronger and she is able to accomplish great success. Despite the guidance of surrounding Mentors, Lily, who already exists within the higher tier of society, is incapable of acclimating herself to her situation's changing dynamics. Ultimately, her Mentors fail and her inabilities continue to affect her position toward an inevitable downfall.

The presence of Mentorship in each woman's life initiates the question of whether or not the relationships are capable of influencing Lily and Carrie's Abilities so that they are able to surpass individual limitations. This thesis explores the most influential relationships in Lily and Carrie's lives, establishing Mentorship, or even the lack thereof, as the greatest contributing factor in each woman's Successes or Failures.

INDEX WORDS: Mentorship, Mentor, Adapt, Abilities, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Society, Lily Bart, Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, Carrie Meeber, Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, Success, Failure.

The Effect of Mentorship:

A Test of Strength and Survival in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* & Edith

Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

by

Kathryn Agliata

B.A., University of Buffalo State Collage, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2010

© 2010

KATHRYN AGLIATA

All Rights Reserved

The Effect of Mentorship:

A Test of Strength and Survival in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* & Edith

Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

by

Kathryn Agliata

Major Professor: Caren J. Town  
Committee: David Dudley  
Gautam Kundu

Electronic Version Approved:

May 2010

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband, Peter Agliata, my parents, Margaret Neate and David Wiegand, and my sisters, Dr. Krista Wiegand and Kara Wiegand for their unwavering encouragement, faith, and support. I also thank my children, Nathaniel and Juliana for their amazing patience—someday I'll return all of their stolen time.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. Caren J. Town for her continual encouragement and patience throughout my work and progress on this thesis. Through her guidance and support, she motivated me to exceed my limitations and inspired my accomplishments through her sincere belief in my abilities. I also wish to thank my committee members, Dr. David Dudley and Dr. Gautam Kundu for both the knowledge and time they contributed.

I also thank my sister, Dr. Krista Wiegand, who graciously offered her academic knowledge and experience time and time again, my husband Peter, and my children, Nathaniel and Juliana, for all they sacrificed on my behalf, and my friends, Carolyn Walker who selflessly supported me through her gift of time, and Gwen Pacella whose support and kindness throughout this process continually motivated a growing confidence in my strengths.

I am humbled by the amazing love, friendship, support and strength existing within the depths of my friends and family, and it is from this that I continue to draw the motivation and confidence to keep forging ahead.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	7
CHAPTER		
1	INTRODUCTION.....	9
2	MENTORSHIP AND ULTIMATE SURVIVAL.....	15
3	GOOD AND BAD MENTORS: LILY BART'S FAILURE TO DISCRIMINATE.....	27
4	PREDESTINED TO FALL, DETERMINED TO RISE: CARRIE MEEBER'S CLIMB TOWARD SUCCESS .....	52
5	MENTORSHIP PUT THE TEST: WHY CARRIE SUCCEEDS WHERE LILY FAILS.....	81
	NOTES.....	94
	REFERENCES.....	95

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

With spectacular transformations occurring in America from the late 1800's through the turn of the century, major metropolitan areas such as New York City and Chicago went from port towns and transportation hubs once surrounded by acres of fertile land to financial and industrial capitals. These cities attracted a whole new breed of people, such as financiers, industrialists and real estate developers. The lively and flourishing atmosphere of these major metropolitan areas provided a luring cityscape and attracted a wide variety of ambitious people from rural America, including large numbers of young women.

*Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser and *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton both brought to life the stories of two young women striving to follow their ambition during the extraordinary revolutions occurring in New York City and Chicago. Set between the years 1900 and 1904, the two novels present multi faceted and realistic journeys of two very diverse women. One, born into a life of wealth, culture and materialism, struggles after her family's social ruin to remain within the upper-class society. The other, native to the life of blue collar, rural America, faces challenges while striving toward becoming a member of that same upper-class society.

At the center of *Sister Carrie* is the originally naïve and uncultured Carrie Meeber. The story of Carrie begins with her journey on a train headed away from the countryside of her small, home town and all the comfort and security she has ever known,

toward all the possibilities of life in urban Chicago. Like so many others who left small towns in hopes of seeing their dreams become reality in urban America, Carrie too risks altering her course in life to chance the prospect of great achievement. Her life changes after she meets and mingles with a string of persuasive individuals, and her motivation and charisma play an integral role in her success.

*The House of Mirth* showcases an altogether different woman, yet one who faces many of the same challenges. Lily Bart, protagonist of *The House of Mirth*, also displays great ambition, but Lily's use of charm and ambition are not necessarily by choice. Her motivation stems primarily from the need to survive and remain within her current social status. Having been born into wealthy upper-class New York society, Lily lives in a world in which struggles and challenges are not typically part of a young socialite's environment. However, when she is forced to deal with her family's financial ruin, the death of her father and the shame associated with her family's disgrace, Lily also finds herself alone, and creeping past the marrying age. For the first time in her life, she is face to face with the same struggle to survive as those of her societal opponents. In spite of all of the economic, material, and cultural provisions made available to Lily, she never develops the necessary skill of self reliance.

Despite their different backgrounds, Carrie and Lily both dream of upward social mobility. For Carrie it is an attempt fight to gain entrance and acceptance into that world, and for Lily, it is a struggle to remain within its often insecure arms. Throughout the novels, we see each woman encounter many different outside factors, each having a great

impact on their successes or failures in life. For example, each woman feels immense pressure to follow the rules and regulations of her desired social class. This is especially true considering the ruthless nature of upper-class society and how its influence can either make or break a person's ambition.

The industrialization and urbanization of Chicago and New York City are also key factors in determining Lily and Carrie's success or failures. They are both young women at the time of this enormous growth. In addition to their own unique skills, they need to rely upon an ability to maneuver through the changes while also depending heavily upon those who mentor and guide them.

In this thesis, I will examine the importance of the role of mentorship in the lives of Lily Bart and Carrie Meeber, and how these mentors were vital in determining their success or failure in life. Despite a great many other factors, none appear to hold as much significance as the presence (or lack thereof) of mentorship in their lives. I believe the guidance and persuasion of others have the most influential and compelling impact on whether or not Carrie and Lily succeed or fail in life. To most, the presence of mentorship is essential to success. For these women, the value of this kind of guidance is also crucial to their survival. Throughout this thesis, I aim to explore how these outside influences affect Carrie and Lily's individual personalities as well as their societal personas, and why such mentors played such prominent roles in the two women's lives.

Often, the success of an individual stems from the presence and constructive mentorship of close relationships in one's life. An individual who is taught the skills and

methods of how to maneuver through life's ups and downs is obviously more likely to succeed than an individual who has not. The tremendous significance of solid mentorship becomes evident through an analysis of the triumphs and challenges through the course of Carrie and Lily's lives. More importantly, though, the presence and quality of mentorship has a clear and unmistakable influence on the overall outcome of these two women's lives. These women not only become who they are as a result of the existence or absence of mentorship, but their fates also greatly depend upon it.

Both Lily and Carrie experience life-altering events that catapult them into unfamiliar roles within upper-class society. As a result, they experience similar tribulations, such as facing anxiety related to an inability to sustain themselves financially. They are enormously motivated, however, and in most cases will do whatever it takes to reach their desired success. The outcomes of their efforts, though, are very different. One, (Carrie) with the right guidance, remains focused and adapts easily to society's changing rules. As a result, Carrie is able to achieve her objective. Lily, on the other hand, has had very little constructive mentorship and is incapable of staying focused on the goal and also struggles to acclimate herself to the changing ways of society. For Lily, this is what ultimately leads to her failure.

Chapter I addresses the background of the novels, and offers a discussion of general mentorship and how the overall form and function of such guidance applies to the successes and failures of Lily and Carrie. In Chapters II and III I examine the overall role and level of mentorship in each separate woman's life. I also examine early influences in

the women's lives, specifically, the impact made by their immediate family members. Then I discuss the type of guidance received from Lily and Carrie's families and the overall relevance to each woman's character.

I next analyze the specific instances of each woman's rise and fall in society and how the mentorship of others influenced these actions. For example, the presence of Charlie Drouet in Carrie's life is the single most influential form of mentorship in her journey toward achieving her ambitions. It is his early influence that awakens Carrie's motivation and her desire to achieve more from life. I believe that close examination will prove that without his presence in her early years, Carrie's would not have developed the passion or ability needed to transition herself to a higher level of society.

Finally, I discuss the benefits gained by Lily and Carrie in their ability to mentor others. I believe that their capability to do so only reinforces their own levels of motivation and skills. This is evident in Lily's relationship with Nettie Struther, a woman who Lily helped while she worked with a charitable organization. By reconnecting with Nettie after some time, Lily is able to gain knowledge of the great difference her assistance made to Nettie. It affords Lily a feeling of accomplishment, which is especially important for her, as she has never before felt she could provide such guidance or make such an impact.

Chapter IV explores and analyzes the significant differences between the levels of mentorship in Lily and Carrie's lives. Although, both women exist in extraordinarily dissimilar worlds, and face altogether different challenges, they share a commonality in

their struggle to stay afloat amid difficulty, and to secure achievement despite ever-changing circumstances. In this chapter, I discuss and compare the generated impact of mentorship as it pertains to each woman's life. Additionally, I address my beliefs about the role of mentorship in relation to how one woman fails and the other succeeds.

I believe Carrie achieves overall success due to her dedication and ability to absorb and easily learn necessary skills from the mentors around her. Lily, however, fails to rise from the depths of her struggles due to a lack in availability of positive and focused mentorship, as well as a failure to fully comprehend the value of such influence toward the outcome of her life. The chances of having both survival and success, without the presence of beneficial mentorship, are nearly impossible.

## CHAPTER 2

### MENTORSHIP AND ULTIMATE SURVIVAL

When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. (SC 3-4)

Written by two different authors, each from very distinct worlds, the stories of *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie*, share more in common than one might originally expect. One of the most interesting ideas consistently woven through the pages of these two narratives is the role of mentorship and how it pertains to the ultimate survival of protagonists, Lily Bart and Carrie Meeber. Both women first appear in the midst of life-altering transitions. Their paths are uncertain, their security unsteady, and although they face different dilemmas, each woman's story begins with her having to overcoming the tremendous odds against her. Not so similar, however, are their strengths and weaknesses. Each woman possesses her own power, yet the question remains whether or not that strength allows her to excel in the race for survival. As the stories progress, the protagonists' endurance is also largely dependent upon the role of positive and successful mentorship in each woman's life—without it, the women's staying power decreases greatly. In the end, each woman's struggle to survive and meet success depends upon her mentoring relationships. Additionally, and even more importantly, is the level of strength each woman develops as a result of these relationships, how she then applies that strength and knowledge.



Although differing greatly on both superficial and internal levels, Lily and Carrie's transitions into maturity are surprisingly similar. Both women enter into unfamiliar societal territory; both have high expectations, especially considering their previous or current circumstances; both are naïve about the challenges they'll face in attempts to reach possible success; and both demonstrate great potential with achieving their goals. Yet, this is where they diverge—one woman, Carrie, learns to appreciate, seek out, and make use of the guidance she receives. Unfortunately, the other, Lily, is either too stubborn or incapable of comprehending the immense value of her mentors.

Mentorship involves the creation of a supportive relationship between two people where knowledge or life experience is passed from the mentor to the mentee. A mentor, who also might be known as a teacher or counselor of sorts, is someone who is capable of offering guidance to another. A thorough description of mentorship explains it as “a fundamental form of human development where one person [the mentor] invests time, energy and personal know-how assisting the growth and ability of another person [the mentee]” (Shea 3). A mentor's goal is most commonly geared toward educating or influencing their mentee through the use of personal knowledge or previous life experiences. It is a process in which the mentor offers ongoing support and development opportunities to the mentee.

Mary Nyquist describes this tradition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century in terms of a male mentor who is able to “provide a new perspective,” or also, an alternative view that is able to challenge “the self-complacent heroine” (Nyquist, 57). Furthermore, when

specifically addressing the relationship between a male mentor and female mentee, she asserts that “the heroines self dramatizing, theatrical tendencies must be checked by the still calm voice or deeds of reason if she is to internalize the standard her male mentor sets” (Nyquist, 58). This is very much the case for both Carrie and Lily, women who depend greatly upon the reinforcement provided through their male mentors. Yet even more important in relation to *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie*, is the actual form and function of mentorship, and how it specifically pertains to Lily and Carrie’s successes and failures.

For many different reasons, the presence of a mentor is vital in the lives of those who wish to succeed. Whether or not the goal is to succeed professionally or personally, the insight gained from a mentor’s influence is often key in developing or accentuating one’s own knowledge and abilities. Traditionally, those who take advantage of mentors throughout their lives also receive the benefits provided by such a close confidant. When a mentee is able to experience a complete and committed level of trust through their relationship with a mentor, he or she is better able to take great risk. The “mutual trust” gained through a mentoring relationship is able to offer a secure realm in which a mentee can “step out in faith” and work toward achieving his or her ambition, while also feeling the safety and comfort provided by the mentoring relationship.<sup>1</sup> With a firm, yet also comfortable level of trust established within the mentoring relationship, the mentee is easily able to turn toward their guide when he or she is in need of specific direction, or help developing, structuring or refocusing their goals.

In the case of Lily Bart, a young woman in New York's upper-class of society, mentorship is inconsistent and rather unreliable. Lily's untimely death is the result of both tragic misfortunes within her family, as well as her own failure to adhere to the guidance of society or to absorb the beneficial influence of others. Her life is peppered with the sporadic presence of mentors—most of whom are also a step outside of her unique circumstances, and are therefore unable to properly influence her. Also important to note is the issue of Lily's indecisiveness. The few mentors who are occasionally able to benefit Lily don't always have her complete appreciation or dedication to assist them in providing her with an advantageous mentoring relationship. Lily's struggles to maintain her position in life often places her among several different social groups. As a result, she also falls prey to the unconstructive guidance of negative mentors who raise her hopes with false tactics or exploit her for their own benefit.

The implications of this kind of negative or unproductive mentorship in Lily's life nearly catapult her off course into further difficulties. For example, Lily's mother, Mrs. Bart, who depends solely on her daughter's beauty to regain their family's lost fortune, frequently expresses her distaste toward a marriage being formed through "love matches." Above all else, she advises Lily to marry for wealth and status. In their difficulty in adjusting to life after both financial ruin and the death of Mr. Bart, Lily and her mother are desperate for a way out of their economic hardship. Mrs. Bart becomes obsessed with the idea that Lily's beauty will guarantee them financial relief. Her persistent assurance of this "fact" leads Lily into a false sense of security. This is demonstrated through Lily's growing confidence:

Lily was duly impressed by the magnitude of her opportunities. The dinginess of her present life threw into enchanting relief the existence to which she felt herself entitled. To a less illuminated intelligence Mrs. Bart's counsels might have appeared dangerous. (HOM 54)

This could be conceived as a kind of destructive mentorship, and as a result, Lily often approaches marriage prospects flippantly, feeling justified in casting aside potential mates who don't meet all of her standards.

In addition to the somewhat vague role of mentorship throughout Lily's life, there is also a lack of consistency in her relationships with others. After the deaths of her parents (her only secure familial relationships) Lily loses any further parental guidance. Lily, however, remains too naïve to truly appreciate the consequences on her further development. In their absence, Lily is forced to recognize and come to terms with the tremendous challenges in her life, including her family's financial ruin. Yet despite this realization, as well as an acknowledgement of her having to independently deal with dilemmas, Lily still frequently avoids facing the true challenges in her life.

Lily's challenges stem mostly from her displaced position in society. As the only living descendant of her financially ruined parents, Lily is not only alone, but she also has no independent access to wealth or other means of support. Without wealth, she has no protective shelter to call her own, both figuratively and literally. Lily's only path to gaining material protection (hence, any success deemed worthy by her class in society) is through securing a financially stable marriage.

What Lily learns about marriage from her parents is also what upper-class society preaches; for a woman in her position, it is more important to marry with the intent of attaining financial security than it is to marry someone you love. Although she is portrayed as possessing great and timeless beauty, Lily's status as a 29-year-old unmarried woman reflects a failure to manage her proper place in society. When she finally realizes the need to find a husband sooner rather than later, Lily makes two mistakes; first, she believes she is capable of achieving her goal independently; second, when she does recognize the need for assistance, she can't seem to figure out who will provide the most successful and productive mentorship.

The indecisive and often inept choices Lily makes reveal her inability to properly navigate through the decision-making process. Although typically confident and well spoken in the presence of her peers, Lily's weaknesses become obvious. There are times, however, when it appears she really does try to adhere to the societal rules necessary for attaining the proper kind of spouse. Yet it is also clear that her personal ambitions and desires often outweigh any of these efforts to play by society's standards. This is evident when she carelessly casts aside a perfect opportunity to spend time prospective suitor, Percy Gryce, while the two vacation at Bellomont, the country home of friend. Gryce, who is marked with society's blessing but is boring to a fault, is a "perfect" candidate to offer Lily the financial stability she requires. Instead of focusing all of her efforts in attaining him, however, she spends time with Lawrence Selden, a lawyer Lily fancies, who is unable to meet her monetary standards. Once again, her failure to adhere to society's rules and traditions keeps her from securing any kind of stable and committed

relationship. Even in the face of a failure to achieve, Lily remains optimistic. Her overconfidence allows her to assume falsely that her beauty and breeding will eventually provide a partner who can offer her the monetary level of living she requires. What Lily cannot fathom, however, is that she is not invincible—quite the opposite, actually. Lily's failure to follow a suitable path fit more specifically for her own circumstances leads her instead toward the very path of self-destruction.

Furthermore, her carelessness with Gryce ultimately proves to be one of her most fateful decisions. With no independent wealth to lean upon, fading youth, and very few sincere and reliable family members, Lily doesn't have the luxury of options. Her recklessness costs her one of the last opportunities to secure the kind of marriage she so desperately needs in order to survive and maintain her societal position. Unfortunately, her wakeup call comes too late, and Lily is left scrambling. Sadly, there are positive mentors in her life, yet she is both too self-absorbed and too naïve to truly appreciate their value. Instead, she chooses to rely solely upon her own inadequate judgment, casting aside society's rules and regulations, while naively creating her own system as she goes along. This becomes more evident in her relationship with Selden. Despite romantic feelings for him, Lily still can't bring herself to place her faith and trust in his alternative beliefs, or in the happiness and security of their love. Selden's personal convictions help him to achieve personal freedom, yet these beliefs cannot guarantee the financial security that Lily's breeding encourages her to pursue beyond all else. Without a surrounding environment consisting of wealth and material beauty, Lily can't imagine a purpose in life. Moreover, the consequence of her growing emotional connection to

Selden leaves her common sense practically inept, also potentially inhibiting her from gaining the benefits of other mentors. Her insecurities also inhibit her from initiating a romantic relationship with Selden—a relationship that could easily produce the kind of true love that rarely comes along for someone like Lily. To her, the consequences in risking social status and potential wealth far outweigh a possible gain for love and happiness. In Lily's world, the absence of social status and wealth is equivalent to an absence of happiness.

Lily sees herself as far above average, and most others who know of her do as well. Standing out as an extraordinary being in a society full of average women, one might ask why it is that Lily has such difficulty achieving success in life. Not only is she unable to secure financial stability through marriage, but also she is unable to discover and find peace with a lesser, yet perhaps happier, alternative. Had Lily chosen to apply Selden's knowledge regarding happiness to her own circumstances, she might have at least survived and had the opportunity to find peace.

Contrary to Lily, *Sister Carrie's* 18-year-old protagonist, Carrie Meeber, understands the significance of cultivating relationships with beneficial mentors. She is able to supplement her own under-developed skills with the wisdom and experience provided through the influence of her mentors. Unlike Lily, Carrie is able to achieve upward mobility. Success isn't necessarily proof of the strength in her abilities, but rather evidence of the strength of her ambition. In a sense, Carrie accidentally collides with potential mentors and then consciously selects them to guide and support her financially,

culturally, and personally. In opposition to Lily, Carrie acts solely out of her own self-interest, often abandoning the few scruples she possesses, preferring material comfort and further achievement. She is far less concerned with the judgment she'll receive from others than she is with her own ability to survive. Dreiser and *Sister Carrie* are often recognized less for their unconventional subject matter or even the more taboo and explicit nature of sexuality revealed through Carrie's persuasive actions, but more because of Dreiser's creation of a protagonist "without moral bias," one who exhibits the strength of "her rise" strangely through "her fall" (Lundquist 45). What she does consistently value, however, is mentorship. She also reveals her strengths through her ability to maintain these kinds of productive relationships.

Carrie begins her transition in the hustle and bustle of the big city. Her journey starts with her traveling by train from the rural Midwest to Chicago, where she plans to rely upon her sister's hospitality. Her transformation from girlhood to womanhood evolves here, as she severs the connection between an existing network of support (her family) and moves toward that of outside influences—mentorship that eventually proves to be greater in aiding Carrie's achievement of independence and success. With little insight into her childhood or details about the specific mentoring role her family once assumed, Carrie is only viewed for what she is in the present—a young, naïve woman, taking great risk in hopes of gaining for herself a better, more exciting life. Like many other people, she feels a longing to acquire and achieve more than her surroundings are capable of offering. Yet what sets Carrie apart is her sometimes reckless abandon in pursuit of her dreams:



In Carrie, as in how many of our worldlings do they not, instinct and reason, desire and understanding warred for the mastery. In Carrie, as in how many of our worldlings are they not, instinct and desire were yet in part the victors. She followed whither her craving led. She was as yet more drawn than she drew. (SC 73-4)

With her inexperience plainly visible, Carrie's fortune lies not within her own ability to distinguish which mentors will benefit her best. Rather, it lies within the fortune that continuously institutes valuable (yet not always favorable) mentors all along her path.

The first representation of Carrie is that of a simple-minded girl, a greenhorn to most life experiences outside of her hometown, Columbia City, Illinois. As the train moves further away from the only life she knows, Carrie appears slightly sentimental, yet finds consolation in knowing she can always return home. It's not long, however, before a strong sense of determination is seen stirring within her. Carrie, whose "guiding characteristic" is described by Dreiser as her own "self interest," (SC 4) is a girl who knows what she wants in life—just not quite sure of the methods she'll use to attain it. It is in facilitating the process toward her achieving these goals that Carrie needs the most guidance.

Although some determination is evident in Carrie's initial description, her inexperience stands out more clearly. Not long after her short-lived, farewell to the rural countryside she once called home, Carrie's travels bring her face to face with her first mentor, Charles Drouet, a charming salesman, who finds both amusement and delight in

his ability to captivate Carrie. Although somewhat cautious of his bold and lively manner, Carrie is nevertheless also enchanted by her new friend. Her naivety, however, is easily visible, making her a prime target for either Drouet's influence or manipulation. The salesman's initial depiction of Carrie illustrates this well:

There was much more passing now than the mere words indicated. He recognized the indescribable thing that made for fascination and beauty in her. She realized that she was of interest to him from the one standpoint which a woman both delights in and fears. Her manner was simple, though, for the very reason that she had never learned the many little affectations with which women conceal their true feelings—some things she did appear bold. A clever companion, had she ever had one, would have warned her never to look a man in the eyes so steadily. (SC 8)

Carrie's blunders (as seen by Drouet) clearly indicate a lack of constructive mentors in her life thus far. Better mentorship would have prevented Carrie from engaging with her companion in such a bold or improper manner. If she'd been raised within the guidelines of proper etiquette, she would have known better than to interact with Drouet in such a way.

Drouet is first in a long line of mentors. Yet, unbeknownst to him, he is also the first host for her developing parasitic nature. With his influence, Carrie soon realizes her potential, and his mentorship will later inspire her to take advantage of others like him. He will encourage and influence her, while introducing her to life's culture. In return, Carrie will assume the role of his wife and offer up herself in exchange for his provisions.

She is attracted to his demeanor, but more for what is able to provide. She is able to learn from him in seeing how he too, is “lured as much by his longing for pleasure as by his desire to shine among his peers” (SC 47). Carrie identifies with Drouet on this level, and ironically, with his influence guiding her, she eventually realizes her ambition to outshine those around her who are like minded. These kinds of accomplishments help to develop Carrie’s growing independence.

What sets Carrie apart from Lily is that Carrie is wise enough to know her own weaknesses. She also knows the importance of detaching herself from unconstructive mentors, and in doing so, allows herself to focus on and devote her time to the nourishing of positive and constructive mentorships. This is evident in the straightforwardness with which she later separates herself from Drouet. Despite the high level of successful guidance with which he has provided Carrie. Carrie eventually comes to see she no longer needs him.

Yet, despite the push and pull of their mentoring relationships, both Lily and Carrie continue to recognize their own distinctive challenges. Through different measures and at dissimilar times throughout their lives, both discover that it is each woman’s individual responsibility to generate success in her life. It is through these diverging approaches toward mentorship that distinguishing factors in each woman’s mentality becomes most apparent. For Carrie, this means utilizing these influencing relationships to their fullest extent—even if it means altering plans at the last moment. She will do what is necessary to keep herself forging ahead in the direction of her goals. For Lily, it means

suffering through the awkwardness of taking the time to consider outside influences in a manner in which she is unaccustomed. It also means taking the time to see the potential gain resulting from that guidance. Carrie is able to do so without any doubt. Lily, however, with her solid reluctant nature, will not realize the benefits and subsequently suffers far more consequences.

## CHAPTER 3

## GOOD AND BAD MENTORS: LILY BART'S FAILURE TO DISCRIMINATE

The story of Lily Bart is a far cry from the more conventional, and also somewhat fanciful, accounts of beautiful young women rescued from dire straits by handsome, kind natured, and of course, affluent men<sup>ii</sup>. *The House of Mirth* is a different kind of tale. As a member of the turn-of the-century wealthy New York City society, Edith Wharton was uniquely qualified to present Lily's story; it is one that offers an exceptionally detailed look at the greed, struggles, and manipulation surrounding this upper-class world. We see Wharton's in-depth and poignant account of Lily's many failed attempts to adhere to (what she considers to be) her rightful position in society. These failures lead Lily into a downward spiral through the social classes and eventually compel her toward despair, loneliness and death. The downfall chronicled in *The House of Mirth* is also the consequence of a recurring pattern of poor or absent mentorship throughout Lily's life. The effects of her decline in societal position, and perhaps even her death, are linked to the unstable and often damaging guidance Lily receives. In this chapter, I will examine the complex relationships shared by Lily Bart with others in her world. By looking at the correlation between Lily's individual personality and the influence she receives from these relationships, I hope to demonstrate that failed mentorship is among the chief contributors to her eventual death.

In the first few chapters of *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton gracefully draws back the curtains of Lily's refined existence. She reveals a complicated insight into Lily,

exposing her lack of long-term survival skills. Despite an acute appreciation for all things cultural and material, even in regard to her own physical beauty, Lily fails to value a sense of self. Ironically, Lily knows her surroundings better than she knows her own identity; in fact, her one insight into her own individuality is an acute awareness of her own exceptional beauty. This trait, along with an ability to charm, allows Lily to maintain her place provisionally within upper-class society. However, as the story of Lily unfolds, Wharton demonstrates that beauty and charm alone aren't nearly enough to help keep her afloat. Missing the support of family, lacking financial security, and unable to manipulate or withstand exploitation, Lily cannot remain within her affluent social circle. Without the support of family or wealth, she simply isn't able to stay alive.

Lily's story is one that begins through the admiring eyes of Lawrence Selden. His initial view of her is as a "refreshing," naïve and somewhat shallow young woman. For the greater part of her life, others have catered to her every whim, providing her not only with any desired material objects, but also with a sense of entitlement; her parents have wealth, social status, and only her to dote upon. She is beautiful, charming and well bred. Yet for her to thrive, she must reside within a world of beautiful things. When the financial ruin and eventual death of parents leave her alone in the world, she struggles to maintain her position in society. Lily believes she can use her seductive qualities to gain financial support; nonetheless, she still wants to be seen as a respectable member of society (Goodman 50). As Lily ages and struggles to secure a future, her lack of self-awareness becomes more evident. This is also apparent during a conversation with her friend Gerty Farish. While attempting to become better acquainted with Lily, Gerty asks

with emphasis, “What is your story, Lily? I don’t believe any one knows it yet” (HOM 363). Lily, who appears caught off guard, mocks Gerty until she begins to weave together an answer:

Why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose--in the way I was brought up and the things I was taught to care for. Or no-- I won’t blame anybody for my faults; I’ll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress, who reacted against the homely virtues of New Amsterdam, and wanted to be back at the court of the Charleses!” (HOM 363)

Clearly, Lily is not the person she is because of her own critical thinking abilities or efforts to become a distinct individual. Rather, as is demonstrated here, she is most likely a culmination of hereditary traits combined with an ostentatious upbringing (which trained her for ornamental purposes, not to be a contributing member of society). Lily may be well enough versed to facilitate a discussion regarding her family and her own position within it, yet she continually struggles to comprehend or explain her own personality. The only purpose she knows is the one that has been given to her. For a young woman in her particular status of society, this is not that uncommon; however, when she later struggles to hold onto that status, her lack of self-awareness prevents her from regaining her position.

Throughout her childhood, Lily learns how to assume her proper place in society with the guidance and instruction of one person, her mother. Lily’s mother is a crucial component in the outcome of both Lily’s successes and failures in life. Despite the

apparent comfortable and well- furnished lifestyle of the Bart family, Mrs. Bart always wanted more; she has no sense of satisfaction or contentment with the amount of wealth Mr. Bart provides. In Mrs. Bart, Wharton creates a character who lacks an ability to feel fulfillment or true appreciation for what life affords her and her family. Like others in her level of society, she too creates a family which continuously “glided on a rapid current of amusement, tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need—a need for more money” (HOM 46). Without this constant yearning, Mrs. Bart—who was most likely trained by her own mother to demand more—would not succeed in maintaining their family’s position in society. No doubt Lily picks up on this during her childhood and eventually falls victim to the same *need* for more in order to survive or sustain life in her world.

During the majority of the Bart’s time as a family, Mr. Bart provides a far-better-than-average lifestyle for his family. Despite this, it appears Mrs. Bart believes that a person’s continual rise in society and accompanying image is more important than being content with what one has. To her credit, however, Lily’s mother works with exceptional diligence toward acquiring and maintaining proper status—even behind closed doors. Her aptitude for stretching every dollar makes her feel different from the women around her. Her skills help ensure the family’s needs are met and their appropriate place in society remains intact—as long as Mr. Bart is bringing home his paycheck. Wharton writes that Mrs. Bart “was famous for the unlimited effect she produced on limited means; and to the lady and her acquaintances there was something heroic in living as though one were much richer than one’s bank account denoted” (HOM 46). Her husband may have been the one to provide the financial resources, but it was Mrs. Bart who provided the luxury



and culture that helped her family achieve status. Ironically it is the family's devotion to acquisition and status, as well as their enabling of Lily's dependency, which contributes to their daughter's shaky sense of self.

Although Mrs. Bart successfully maintains her family's place in society and creates a refined and lavish lifestyle for them, she neglects to give her daughter a practical understanding of how she achieves this, how the wealth is actually acquired and preserved. Lily grows up in a home where her every whim is met, where emphasis is not placed upon gaining survival skills. She is a spoiled and naïve product of her upbringing. Mrs. Bart may feel she has succeeded as a parent through her ability to offer Lily a well-appointed lifestyle, yet she fails to guide Lily toward individual success and survival. Mrs. Bart most likely assumes that Lily will be married and well cared for, and therefore won't require the unique skills needed to preserve their kind of lifestyle. Lily's mother is proven to be wrong. Her carelessness allows Lily to move toward an adulthood lacking in any realistic understanding of how society works. Despite Mrs. Bart's no-nonsense and confident approach to life, Lily is not taught how to emulate her mother. Instead, Lily is emotional, inconsistent, and lacking in the basic survival skills she desperately needs; as a result, she is forced to remain dependent upon others for far longer than otherwise should have been necessary.

When Lily's family is ruined financially and her father dies, she and her mother must now rely on others. Their extended family offers temporary assistance out of obligation, yet with very little empathy or compassion. The Barts have become outcasts

within their own clan. Realizing this, Mrs. Bart begins to contemplate Lily's exquisite beauty as a means to their livelihood. Lily recalls the "vindictive" tone her mother used while reflecting upon their family's loss of money. In response Mrs. Bart would turn to Lily and remark, "But you'll get it back—you'll get it all back, with your face" (HOM 44). While Mrs. Bart is no longer able to stretch the family dollar, she gains a sense of hope in the possible resource Lily's beauty can provide for them. She perceives it to be "the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleolus around which their life [is] to be rebuilt (HOM 53)." To Mrs. Bart it is a method of re-establishing their place in society and, more importantly, a means to acquire financial security for them. It is in this final stage of Mrs. Bart's life that she attempts one final time to mentor Lily:

[Mrs. Bart] followed in imagination, the career of other beauties, pointing out to her daughter what might be achieved through such a gift, and dwelling on the warning of those who, in spite of it, had failed to get what they wanted: to Mrs. Bart, only stupidity could explain the lamentable denouncement of some of her examples. (HOM 53)

Sadly, Mrs. Bart's warnings are not taken seriously. Lily, who clearly believes she is indestructible, sees little significance in them.

It is difficult to place all of the blame for Lily's shortcomings on Mrs. Bart, however; she most likely never imagined the ruin of either their family's financial state or Lily's future. Lily, after all, is still a member of a wealthy extended family. Furthermore, she possesses immense beauty; an element that Mrs. Bart believes without a doubt will

guarantee her daughter a secure future—with or without her family's money. Unfortunately, Lily eventually finds herself disconnected from the wealth and status that once fueled her family, and despite her mother's certainty, Lily's beauty isn't enough to keep her afloat. Ironically, her mother's predictions echo poignantly throughout the final chapters of *The House of Mirth*, in which Lily fights to survive. Here, Lily finds herself alone, wandering the streets aimlessly in hopes of inducing enough exhaustion to ensure a decent night's sleep. In one last ironic measure, Lily comes face to face with Nettie Struther, a woman she helped through her work with Gerty. Nettie, who once saw Lily as a strong, vivacious member of society, now sees the weak and vulnerable person she has become. In response to Nettie's concerns, Lily explains, "I'm only tired—it is nothing... I have been unhappy—in great trouble" (HOM 506). The irony here is clear—in the presence of Nettie, who is now strong and supportive, Lily appears as the weaker woman. Lily, who began at the top, has plunged too far. The reality of the fate she has continually dreaded surrounds her—her beauty will not save her.

Unlike her mother's (albeit misguided) attempts to guide her, Lily's father offers her almost no mentorship. It is clear that Lily's father works industriously to support his family through the years, but his dedication to work leaves him mostly absent from the daily routines of his family, and most importantly, from the role of parent. His lack of presence amounts to more than a daughter simply missing out on bonding time with her father, however. What comes of the deficiency in their relationship is not necessarily poor mentorship, (as little opportunity exists in which Mr. Bart can even influence,) but, more importantly, there is a complete failure to even establish the idea of mentorship.

Mr. Bart might have thought his responsibility toward Lily simply rested upon his ability to provide for her financially, and he is able to do this quite well for some time. It is clear that Mrs. Bart runs the house and creating their way of life; Mr. Bart just foots the bill, and does his best to stay in the background. Lily's memories of her father are vague, consisting of a "hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father" who only seems to fill "an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks" (HOM 45). The portrayal of Mr. Bart is not that of a wealth-obsessed man who is motivated strictly by greed or promotion; instead, he appears to work incessantly for obligation to his family and his wife's never-ending need for money. His long days working "down town," (HOM 45) keep him from any closeness with Lily. When he finally did arrive home late at night, his efforts to connect with Lily would involve his seeing her in bed and giving her a "kiss her in silence" (HOM 45). He might inquire about Lily's day to her nurse or governess; but then "Mrs. Bart's maid would come to remind him that he was dining out, and he would hurry away with a nod to Lily" (HOM 45).

Mr. Bart's actions suggest a strong commitment in providing for his family funds that afford the kind of life expected in their level of high society, yet, ironically, his dedication to these efforts greatly hinders his ability to establish any influential role in Lily's life. The only profound impact Mr. Bart leaves with Lily is his ability (or soon thereafter lack of ability) to provide financially for their family. When the Bart family fortune dissipates, so too does Mr. Bart's role within the family, as well as his only parenting method. To Mrs. Bart, he becomes "extinct" when he can no longer "fulfill his purpose" (HOME 51). Lily recalls to "always to have seen him through a blur—first of

sleepiness, then of distance and indifference—and [with his bankruptcy and slow death] the fog had thickened till he was almost indistinguishable” (HOM 51). The tenuous relationship between Lily and her father only worsens as time goes on.

Although both Mr. and Mrs. Bart have an understanding of finances, the knowledge and skills of Lily’s father are far more attuned toward the mechanisms of basic survival. If Mr. Bart had seen the importance in sharing with Lily his knowledge of all things financial or systematic, he could have also provided for her an ability to better perceive society’s world of economic politics. With this kind of mentorship, Lily could have been better equipped to handle the complex and shifting financial negotiations in her life.

The most significant mentorship in Lily’s life most certainly should have come from the guidance and influence of her parents, but this is not the case for Lily. Although her parents provide for her in the most tangible and privileged ways, aiming to ensure her permanent existence in their elite world, they continually fail to adequately mentor her with the knowledge and skills she’ll need in order to survive if that stability collapses. Inevitably, the Bart family’s world does crumble, and with it any financial and social stability they once possessed. Much like *Gone with the Wind*’s Scarlett O’Hara’s inability to handle the financial disintegration of her family, Lily, too, is without the capabilities to adapt or step outside the only existence she’s ever known. Early in the story, it is Selden who recognizes this. As he admires her hand, “polished as a bit of old ivory, with the slender pink nails and the sapphire bracelet, slipping over her wrist,” he comes to terms

with the idea that “she was 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” (HOM 10). In a moment that begins in simple admiration, Selden soon recognizes the deeper significance. Despite continued efforts, Lily will not rise above—her failure will come at the hands of an inability to successfully separate herself from the destructive nature of the very people with who she most identifies—those within her own social class.

As a result of her family’s bankruptcy and ultimate collapse, the greater part of Lily’s adult life is spent on a quest for financial security and companionship. She knows that any chance of acquiring success depends upon the support of others. Strange and incongruous to one another are Lily’s ability to appear strong and self-confident, along with her own doubts of not being able to survive if left on her own. To prevent this, Lily works hard to secure her relationships, thus attempting to guarantee both financial handouts and companionship from others. When Lily does find herself alone and subject to the reality of her situation, she can’t help but see her life for what it is—a desperate attempt at survival. The recognition of this often leads Lily into self-doubt and despair and contributes to her vulnerability. The aftermath of her family’s misfortune also leaves Lily struggling with the fluidity of her identity. So much of her character has been devoted to outward appearances, tangible objects, and refuge in higher societal status. Alone, penniless, and unsheltered by society, Lily’s identity is fragile, and any reckless maneuvers on her part will secure her position to head in one direction—downward.

As time goes on, Lily remains in a perpetual search for marriage. She spends her days as a permanent houseguest, making her way “from one country-house to another” (HOM 79) until she begins to realize that a desire for her once-sought—after presence is fading. The narrator suggests a dire prospect: her friends growing tired of the unchanged Lily:

They would welcome her in a new character, but as Miss Bart they knew her by heart. She knew herself by heart too, and was sick of the old story. There were moments when she longed blindly for anything different, anything strange, remote and untried; but the utmost reach of her imagination did not go beyond picturing her usual life in a new setting. (HOM 79)

Lily can't envision herself in any other surroundings other than what she knows because she simply isn't capable of imagining another kind of life. She can't heighten her popularity by altering herself without first altering the aspirations and expectations placed upon her at birth. Lily's dreams are as fixed as the blood that runs through her veins.

The one person in Lily's life who is able to offer an alternative view is Lawrence Selden. Having been raised within a family that values self-reliance, Selden understands the necessity and significance of adaptation and growth. This self-sufficiency appears to make Selden an ideal mentor for Lily. His influence could help Lily learn to make individual decisions, rather than abiding by society's dictates. Ironically, Selden's guidance is unable to produce the overall impact crucial to Lily's survival. Initially

Selden views Lily as strong, confident, and skilled. However, he soon sees her greatest deficiency—an inability to adapt to changing environments.

When Selden first sees Lily standing alone at the train station, he describes her as “wearing an air of irresolution” (HOM 3) which he assumes to “be the mask of a very definite purpose” (HOM 3). Selden’s error is in making the same assumption others make about Lily—that her confident and beautiful outward appearance reflects her inner strength. He is first attracted toward her outer being and believes that her confident character is multi-dimensional. As he becomes closer to her, he takes advantage of several opportunities to speak openly and honestly with her, and it is during these times that Selden realizes Lily’s social uncertainty and moral instability.

Selden first successfully discovers Lily’s inadequacies during an intimate and revealing rendezvous at a friend’s country home. Not surprisingly, Lily explains to Selden that her interpretation of the meaning of success is simply “to get as much as one can out of life” (HOM 108). Without hesitation Selden promptly defends his own idea of success:

“My idea of success,” he said, “is personal freedom.”

“Freedom? Freedom from worries?”

“From everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit—that’s what I call success” (HOM 108).



It is during this particular conversation with Lily that the strong differences between them become more relevant to the future of their relationship. Lily's materialistic response gives Selden a clearer understanding of her core beliefs. Despite the dissimilarity in their values, he sees Lily's remark as an opportunity to encourage and inspire her. He attempts to persuade Lily to explore the idea that success should be defined as personal independence. It is in this exchange that Selden offers his most significant mentoring to Lily.

Selden's invitation for Lily to join him in seeking personal freedom is one that Lily has not previously considered. His mentorship entices Lily, opening up a new door to freedoms she hadn't yet imagined. She suddenly sees an answer in Selden's proposition that could potentially provide for her "the freedom and power he represents" (Nyquist 49). For Lily, Selden is the symbolism of that freedom she so desperately craves, but hasn't the individual ability to attain. Selden's high self-esteem leads him to believe in his own ability to achieve happiness. The idea that Selden could move her to even think about such ideas is quite an accomplishment. Lily has had little to no spiritual or emotional guidance throughout her life; here Selden is able to offer a small glimpse of it to her. He encourages her to take a new look at herself as well as at her ambitions.

The rendezvous between Lily and Selden prompts Lily to make an effort to gain reinforcement from Selden. At the same time, congruent with Mary Nyquist's definition of mentorship,<sup>iii</sup> Lily's rhetoric aims to dismantle Selden's well-thought-out Republic. She remarks to him,

“It seems to me,” she said at length, “that you spend a good deal of your time in the element you disapprove of.”

"Yes; but I have tried to remain amphibious; it's alright as long as one's lungs can work in another air." (HOM 111)

After further discussion, it becomes clear that Lily's "tendencies" are reassured:

She had never heard him speak with such energy of affirmation. His habitual touch was that of the electric, who lightly turns over and compares; and she was moved by this sudden glimpse into the laboratory where his faiths were formed. (HOM 112-13)

It is here that we see Selden in the most influential light, one in which he is able to assume a position of one of the key mentors in Lily's life. No one else forces Lily to reconsider her concrete ideas as he does, and equally so, no one else but Selden gives the encouragement or the permission to actually step outside the boundaries of her existence.

Selden's influence becomes most apparent in the decision Lily makes about Bertha Dorset's letters. Her refusal to blackmail Bertha exemplifies Selden's confidence in her ability to act in a manner consistent with her ideals. Making this key decision sets Lily apart from the contradictory and competitive nature of those existing within the realm of her elite upper-class New York society. When Simon Rosedale, another of Lily's suitors, attempts to persuade her to use Bertha Dorset's letters as means of negotiating re-admittance into the closed upper-class circle, she first acquiesces. Yet soon after, Lily knows in her heart that she simply cannot employ such unethical means,

despite the potential gain. Her reflection is an acknowledgement of her own desires and determination:

There had been nothing in her training to develop any continuity of moral strength: what she craved, and really felt herself entitled to, was a situation in which the noblest attitude should also be the easiest. Hitherto her intermittent impulses had sufficed to maintain her-self respect. If she slipped she recovered her footing.... (HOM 422)

This understanding and value for her own individuality comes as a result of Selden's influence. Subsequent to the time she and Selden spent together at Bellomont, Lily experiences a growing fondness for all that his ideals represent:

I have never forgotten the things you said to me at Bellomont, and that sometimes—sometimes when I seemed farthest from remembering them—they have helped me and have kept me from mistakes; kept me from really becoming what many people have thought me. (HOM 496)

After a little consideration, she knows that in order to stay true to herself, she must reject Rosedale's proposal to blackmail Bertha, despite the possibility she might (by using them) redeem herself, regain success, and in due course, survive. She knows, however, that any kind of negotiation on her part would lead to her relinquishing the little sense of self she has worked so hard to possess. With this realization, she also discovers that she "could never be happy with what had contented [her] before," (HOM 497). Selden's influence is now seen as having altered Lily, thus placing her further apart from her competitors.

It is clear that feelings of love exist between Lily and Selden, yet there are too many barriers between them. The greatest difference between them concerns their life ambitions—Lily needs to secure a marriage to maintain success, and Selden needs to maintain his personal freedom. Their realization of the impossibility of their situation creates a larger set of challenges as well. Their romantic emotions for one another inhibit them from truly establishing a best case scenario within their mentoring relationship. Both concede, however, that most young women in Lily's position are geared toward a "vocation" of establishing a profitable marriage (HOM 12). What differs, though, is the distinction between how men and women go into marriage. Lily believes that a "girl must, [enter into marriage]" and "a man may if he chooses" (HOM 17). For Lily, marriage is simply the means to sustain her societal status and to afford her all of life's comforts. To Selden, a marriage is only worthy of his sacrificing personal freedom if the love it generates is genuine. Selden acknowledges that (even though she may want to) Lily cannot marry him—he hasn't the funds to support her need for "a great deal of money" (HOM 14). However, if Selden could persuade Lily to join him, he would "seat [her] on the throne" of his "republic" (HOM 113) and "stake his future on his faith in her," (HOM 532) yet these hopes never materialize. His cowardice holds him back, and his failure to offer a complete commitment makes Lily uncertain. She contemplates his guidance and even wants to apply it, yet in the face of such action, the risk remains great. Without a promise for her own security, financial and otherwise, through an established relationship with Selden, Lily views the risk of fully adapting herself to his mentorship as far too great. Her insecurity is especially felt in comparison to the comfort she finds in

adhering to the well established mentorship of the society she's been taught to trust and follow well beyond anything else. Ultimately, Selden's indecisiveness interferes with his ability to be a positive role model in her life. It also hinders either of them from taking a leap of faith and expressing their love for one another.

In terms of its overall effort and intent, Selden's mentorship should be considered successful. The success of it is found in his ability to awaken in Lily both an appreciation and a desire to gain personal freedom proves to be the beginning of what could have been a true transformation. However, although she still comprehends the motive behind his influence and even appreciates what acquiring such self-reliant ideals could mean for her, she never fully applies them to her life. This is where the breakdown occurs. On its own, Selden's mentorship should make the ultimate difference to Lily. Yet the mutual intimate feelings between them undercut his potential influence. His mentorship aims to steer Lily toward the rewards felt by a life of personal freedom and individuality; but despite the best of intentions, his love for her taints his efforts and biases his mentorship. Ultimately, it is Selden's feelings for Lily combined with a desire to see her content that makes him unable to help her prevent her downfall.

An acute appreciation and respect for Selden also leads Lily toward a fondness and admiration for the trustworthy nature of his cousin, Gerty Farish. At first, Lily sees Gerty's middle-class status and unmarried position as barriers between them. Lily understands Gerty is satisfied with her social status and "content to look through the window at the banquet spread for her friends" (HOM 241). She sees Gerty as someone

who is able to enjoy independence, (unlike herself) and most importantly, she perceives Gerty to have a clear understanding of her own identity—something with which Lily continually struggles. In contrast to Lily, it is clear that Gerty's life does not revolve around finding security, status, and financial stability through marriage. Gerty's ability to accept this position in life allows her the unique opportunity to enjoy an immense amount of personal freedom, helping to establish her as an ideal and positive mentor for Lily.

Despite their similar age and single status, Lily still refuses to identify herself with Gerty. She believes Gerty's independent and satisfied approach to life is the result of her being unmarriageable. Lily believes that Gerty succumbs to singlehood, not by choice, but by nature. If nature intended Gerty to be married, then surely she would be asserting all efforts necessary to secure such a relationship for herself, not wasting her time focusing on making do with her own ambitions and abilities. Determined to accentuate the dissimilarities between herself and Selden's cousin, Lily insults Gerty, describing her as "unmarriageable" while also arguing that because Gerty obviously has no prospects, she is therefore "free and [Lily is] not" (HOM 10). Despite the power Lily's beauty and social position afford her, she still feels heavily reliant upon and dominated by the choices society makes for her. She sees Gerty as being "free," but at the same time, burdened by a "hateful fate," that she wishes to avoid. Lily would prefer to remain enslaved by a society that will not accept her rather than become a "Gerty Farish." Yet this same society also won't allow her to choose an individual identity away from the path it has chosen for her (HOM 38). If she is to avoid becoming like Gerty, Lily must continue to float along the ebbs and tides her environment creates for her.

Interestingly, Lily and Gerty's paths continue to cross in *The House of Mirth*, allowing Lily several opportunities to re-evaluate her original opinion of Gerty, while granting Gerty time to establish her position as mentor. At the height of Gerty's influence—a time that comes with her introducing Lily to the work she does with women of poverty—Gerty helps Lily achieve significant enlightenment. Wanting to satisfy her own “restless curiosity” (HOM 242), Lily agrees to join Gerty in her efforts to help enhance the lives of these women. The experience sets in motion an awakening in Lily--she realizes a sense of satisfaction from giving to the women (both her time and money). In the midst of her first glimpse into the real lives of individuals existing outside of her own social realm, Lily acknowledges, “it is one thing to live comfortably with the abstract conception of poverty, another to be brought into contact with its human embodiments (HOM 243).” Face to face with poverty, her abstract preconceptions collide with the bitter truth of these women's lived experiences.

In a position where she is forced to see the women in front of her as they really are, Lily begins to notice that they are “clothed in shapes not so unlike her own,” (HOM 243) and that they are individuals, not just representations of the “victims of fate” composing the “mass” (HOM 243). Lily finally sees the “interdependence of individuals and classes” when she takes a personal interest in Nettie Struther, one of the women she and Gerty help (Ohler 72). This revelation prompts in her an acute understanding that the poor women she is seeing are in fact not as different from her as she had once presumed. Although Lily has an epiphany, momentarily being “drawn out of herself” by an interest in having a “direct relation to a world so unlike her own,” (HOM 243) the narrator

suggests that Lily is incapable of a permanent transformation, or “such renewal” (HOM 243). Her genetic inheritance and rigid breeding simply won’t allow it.

Gerty, however, believes that Lily has been moved toward a better way of living by experiencing “that sharpening of the moral vision which makes all human suffering so near and insistent that the other aspects of life fade into remoteness” (HOM 243-4). Simple, yet dedicated Gerty desperately wants to believe that, like herself, her friend has been moved so profoundly by experiences with the poor, that she too will now resolve to alter her life. Gerty, who naively “rejoiced in the thought that she had been the humble instrument of this renewal” (HOM 244), is as incapable to understanding Lily’s nature as Lily is in transforming her character. Furthermore, although Lily’s small (and temporary) victory can be attributed to Gerty, her overall mentorship, like that of Selden’s, just isn’t enough to move Lily toward the comprehensive kind of transformation needed for her to succeed and ultimately survive.

In an effort to keep herself distinct from women like Gerty, Lily remains fixed to society’s prescribed course. However, her great need for financial support leads her to assume the status of professional houseguest. She soon becomes a fixture at the home of Gus and Judy Trenor, one of elite society’s most competitive and merciless couples. The Trenors take Lily in, accepting her for what she is, but also using her for their own benefit. Their position, knowledge and skill also (appear to) establish them as superlative mentors to Lily. If Lily wishes to remain in the upper class society, she needs to marry someone of shared status—soon. Judy Trenor, could be a key person to help Lily achieve



that goal. Judy's immense skills for entertaining, enhanced by her husband's enormous wealth, earn her a prime position at the top of the social ladder. Moreover, this social position brings her success within her sphere and allows Judy the freedom to disengage from the bitter competition associated with social rivals. Lily and Judy Trenor have no reason to compete with one another; they are searching for altogether different kinds of success.

Despite her close position to Judy Trenor, Lily does not see the vital influence Judy is capable of offering her through assistance and guidance. During Lily's stay at Bellomont, (the Trenors' country home) Judy learns of Lily's goal to seduce Percy Gryce into a marriage proposal. Judy, who wants to aid her friend in whatever capacity she's able, provides ample settings for Lily to achieve her plan. Judy realizes Lily's tough position and acknowledges that neither she nor any of their friends could "imagine [her] putting up with him for a moment unless [she] meant to marry him" (HOM 70). Yet, fully aware of the economic support Lily desperately needs, Judy encourages Lily to do what she must in order to gain a profitable marriage. Despite Judy's diligent efforts to aid and counsel her friend, she remains baffled when Lily's several attempts bear her no reward.

Lily's whimsical and hasty decision making instead prompts her to follow another personal desire, spending time with Selden. When Judy learns of Lily's carelessness and overall lack of gratitude toward the effort that went into assisting Lily's assault on Percy, she demonstrates her disappointment with Lily. "Oh, Lily, you'll never do anything if

you're not serious!" (HOM 120). Lily carelessly assesses Judy's concern, suggesting that she only meant to take "a day off" (HOM 120). Nonetheless, after listening to her friend "admonish" her absent-minded behavior, Lily then begins to see hints of the irreversible errors she's made. This idea threads its way through *The House of Mirth*:

That's Lily all over, you know. She works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic...sometimes I think it's because at heart, she despises the very things she's trying for. (HOM 303)

Regardless of Judy's efforts to guide her friend in a direction toward success, her attempts at mentoring fail. Lily does not move any closer toward achieving her goals with the support of Judy Trenor.

Lily's search for methods of financial support causes her to be more susceptible in the face of untrustworthy characters such as Judy's husband, Gus Trenor. Not intentionally a malicious man, Gus Trenor is, however, deceptive. In this case, his dishonesty is prompted by a keen lust for Lily. The status of Lily's role as professional houseguest at the Trenor home, as well as the homes of many other friends, gives Gus an understanding of her desperate and financial circumstances. Trenor sees Lily's dependant nature, and realizes this as her central vulnerability. Through his advantage, Gus proposes to invest Lily's last remaining funds in the stock market. Lily, who "understood only that her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without

risk to herself” (HOM 136) accepts, clearly naive about Gus’s sexually-charged ulterior motives. Moreover, after receiving a thousand dollar check from Trenor, Lily still believes that the money is nothing more than a return on her initial investment. Feeling a real sense of triumph at having earned her own money (with Gus’ help), Lily, who is accustomed to her dependency upon others, feels a sense of relief in “the lightening of her load” (HOM 136).

The money, however, is Trenor’s own, and the investment scheme is nothing more than a plot to exchange money with Lily for sex. Lily, blindsided by the truth, discovers Trenor’s intentions during a confrontation between them. Her comprehension of the severity of his manipulations shocks Lily to the core. Trenor’s placing Lily within this kind of compromising position charges her with sense of “inward loathing” (HOM 238). The altercation between herself and Trenor exemplifies her continual sinking. Within moments of her departure she seems “a stranger to herself,” or composed of two separate entities within herself, “the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which she found herself chained” (HOM 238). In her recognition of this, Lily is frightened by her circumstances; she leaves Trenor, and begins to contemplate her situation. This reflection brings to life the sad truth that Lily has “no heart to lean on” (HOM 240). Her choice to trust in Trenor’s (negative and in genuine) mentorship, leads Lily to fail herself. Although she believes she is staying true to society’s course by adhering to the guidance of someone within her realm, the chance she takes in doing so pushes her further away from establishing her own security. She is now more alone than ever before.

Later, reflecting on the situation with Trenor, Lily recalls other influences in her life. She remembers Selden's encouragement to follow her own instincts, or to adhere to her own "republic of the spirit" (HOM 108). She acknowledges that her attempt to do so with Trenor endorses this influence—therefore fulfilling a moral obligation—to herself. The result allows her freedom from any sexual obligation to Trenor, but commits her to arranging a complete payoff of the financial debt owed to him. "This reaction bears the mark of Selden's idealism (and possibly his jealousy) and the former's influence on Lily," suggests Ohler (68). It also exhibits Lily's growing strength and an emergence of her individuality.

In an effort to ease herself out of the worsening situation, Lily digs herself into a deeper hole. Her efforts remain invisible, however, and the upper-class society continues to portray her in a scandalous light. As Lily herself observes, "the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about, she's done for, and the more she explains her case the worse it looks" (HOM 364). Her adherence to Selden's "vision" of "a country one has to find the way to one's self," (HOM 108) causes Lily "to act in ways that ruin her" (Ohler 68). Finally, Lily's (already indecisive) ideals are polluted by the many positive and negative outside influences with which she surrounds herself. As Ohler says, Lily's mentors, both positive and negative, have an overwhelming power to aid in her destruction. Their seductive influence, mingled together with the ever-present brainwashing of her society, send Lily spinning out of control.

Lily's vulnerability provides Bertha Dorset a perfect opportunity to enhance her own social standing, while also destroying Lily's. Bertha stages a very public and humiliating betrayal of Lily, who refuses to set the record straight. The closer she stands to the side of morals, the farther she walks from her own society's ideals. In choosing her own rules—based, of course, on the influence she's received from others—Lily removes herself morally from her comrades. This, combined with Bertha's maliciousness, creates a harsh, yet well-known reality for Lily—friends and allies lend their support to those who triumph. Bertha's defeat of Lily leaves Lily virtually alone. Furthermore, this vindictive ousting not only exposes the tremendous lack of ethical values in the elite upper tier of society. It also serves as a reminder that the rules stand firm: compete, no matter the cost, or be conquered.

Lily's case proves to be cautionary. Any hope for redemption is impossible; in the eyes of society, her failure to obey the rules justifies her punishment. Lily's inability to adhere to any set of ideals offered by her various mentors contributes greatly to her failure. Left in a world of her own with little support or strength from which to benefit, Lily's fate is sealed. Her limitations (which strangely coincide with her virtues) inhibit her from differentiating between positive and negative mentorship and finally enacting constructive influence into the actions of her life. Despite all of the efforts of her mentors, she never fully commits to choosing one form of guidance over another. She walks the line between choosing from what is right for herself and her own individual survival, versus what is right for her survival as Lily Bart, socialite extraordinaire. Furthermore, Lily's failure to rise and join her peers in their ruthless standards also acts as a key

contributor toward her inability to survive. She simply cannot compete. Moreover, her mentors—each for their own individual reasons—are unable to fully influence her one way or another. This, combined with her indecisiveness and failure to commit to any side, or any influence, is what leads to the ultimate disintegration of Lily Bart.

## CHAPTER 4

PREDESTINED TO FALL, DETERMINED TO RISE: CARRIE MEEBER'S CLIMB  
TOWARD SUCCESS

In his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser creates a female protagonist, Carrie Meeber, who is quite unlike any other heroine of her time. She interestingly combines occasionally passive behavior with bold decision making and even outright rebellion. Such a portrayal of a young, determined and also multi-dimensional woman was revolutionary for the early 1900's. However, the idea that a woman would be willing to sacrifice her virtue —often using her own sexuality as a bargaining tool—in hopes of achieving success, was as unconventional during the early twentieth century as it is familiar (if still criticized) today.

The story of *Sister Carrie* is based loosely upon the personal experiences of Dreiser's own sister, Emma, who at a young age began an affair with an older married man. Soon after, her lover steals a sum of money from his employer, and in an effort to escape the criminal act, runs away to New York City with Emma. Carrie's story resembles Emma's, yet she is far more successful than Emma. Initially, Carrie's humble roots cause her to be somewhat naïve, but they don't hold her back for long. Although her background is rural, Carrie refuses to accept a fate to which so many others like her so passively agree. At the age of 18, Carrie takes a leap of faith. Motivated by an insatiable appetite to discover and consume the alluring world beyond her, Carrie says goodbye to

her family and boards a train headed to Chicago—a place in which she believes all of her aspirations will be fulfilled.

In spite of her keen determination, Carrie's knowledge and abilities remain quite undeveloped. Early in *Sister Carrie*, Carrie is drawn toward various mentors and soon begins to appreciate the vital role of mentorship in the fulfillment of her dreams. With the guidance of mentors, Carrie is able to fine tune her skills, enhance her appearance, and apply key methods of achieving success. She closely watches those around her, taking note of their attributes and mannerisms, even considering their personal taste in items such as shoes. Her choice to emulate others does not necessarily imply passivity, suggests Priscilla Wald, author of *Dreiser's Sociological Vision*. Furthermore, Wald asserts that "Carrie consciously emulates the traits that will please those whom she believes she needs to please" (Wald 189). Carrie's doing so emphasizes her desire to broaden her cultural understanding, while also heightening her own social status. This also suggests that she has a keen ability to seek out specific traits that appear to be major attributes of success. It's not long before she begins to build upon this recognition by also absorbing valuable knowledge supplied by her mentors. Carrie's final goal of attaining similar status and success is established through the application of these characteristics to her own persona.

Although Dreiser's family influenced the origin of a large portion of his writing (Lehan 2), it is interesting to note the relatively insignificant role Carrie's biological family assumes in her life. With little background information from which to draw, the



reader must conjecture that Carrie's childhood has been guided by the likes of her parents, siblings, extended family and perhaps others community members. Somehow, she reaches adulthood accompanied by a fair, yet not quite exceptional, balance of scruples, knowledge, and life skills. The narrator, however, suggests that Carrie is lacking in "excellent home principles" (SC 78) from which she could draw moral strength. Although, in many ways Carrie resembles any lower-middle-class American girl her age, there is a quality in Carrie that is very different. A yearning to strike out—to leave behind her parents, her sense of community, and all that is familiar—in search of ascertaining the unknown, sets her apart.

Up until the late nineteenth century, small-town families like the Meebers of Columbia City usually maintained their family's social and financial position. Yet with the arrival of the twentieth century, a distinct transformation had begun. All over the United States family members left home, looking for a better life elsewhere. This new breed of expatriates was drawn to the enticing arms of nearby metropolises. Thus, when Carrie leaves her hometown, it is not surprising that she plans to join her sister Minnie, who has already left for the big city. The desire for independence and hope for eventual success is of course no guarantee that either girl, Carrie or her sister will achieve it. Yet, as Carrie's train moves further away from her small hometown and any parental support, Carrie is the picture of resilience. Despite a "small gush of tears at her mother's farewell kiss," a sense of sadness while passing the "mill where her father worked," and an obvious attachment to the familiarity of the "green environs" of her passing hometown (SC 3), Carrie maintains her focus on the future, and the "threads" that tie her "so lightly"

to all that she has ever known, are “irretrievably broken” (SC 3). The one familial tie that still remains, however, is Carrie’s connection with her sister Minnie Hanson. The narrator suggests neither a close nor fond relationship between Carrie and Minnie, yet Carrie needs their relationship in order to ensure her initial security after leaving home. However, while en route to Chicago, Carrie encounters a lively and attractive man named Charles Drouet. Through their conversation, Carrie discovers that Drouet, a smooth talking traveling salesman, is charming and fascinating—he is her first taste of the unknown and exciting city of Chicago. In his presence, she becomes even more hopeful. What Carrie has yet to realize, however, is that this chance meeting shifts the weight of support and guidance from her sister, to this man—a complete stranger.

Upon arriving in Chicago, Carrie steps off the train and onto the platform where she sees Minnie waiting for her. Noting the difference between the pleasant, carefree company of Drouet in contrast to the “cold reality” (SC 11) of Minnie, Carrie can’t help but feel her spirits deflate. In Minnie’s presence Carrie is forced back to the actuality of her situation. She is a poor, small-town girl, new to the unsympathetic and often callous ways of urban living. Her initial appearance is vastly different from that of “her more fortunate sisters of the city,” with whom she later realizes she “compared poorly” (SC 23). Drouet’s warm and inviting nature had helped to sooth the uneasiness Carrie felt about such a move. Now, in the chaos associated with the train station and the matter-of-fact character of her sister, Carrie realizes that the growing comfort she had in his presence had falsely bolstered her security throughout her transition from Columbia City. His is not the world in which she will reside with her sister. When Minnie approaches

Carrie on the platform, takes her hand in an unaffectionate manner and leads her away from the train and Drouet, Carrie begins to realize how she is now very “much alone.” She sees her existence in relation to her companion as that of “a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea” (SC 12).

Like Carrie, Minnie once may have envisioned life outside of Columbia City providing a greater opportunity to achieve the American dream. Yet life in Chicago has not produced the kind of success that Minnie may have wanted for herself. In Carrie’s eyes, Minnie’s position as wife and new mother prevent her from taking advantage of what the city offers. The roles Minnie has assumed allow her little personal freedom and prevent her from accomplishing any achievement outside of the home. Furthermore, Minnie’s own identity is now merged with the entity of a family, and any “ideas of life” she had once envisioned for herself had now become “colored by her husband’s” (SC 15). With the exception of her family’s urban location, Minnie’s life as a homemaker could easily resemble the same life of so many other young women in smaller or even rural Midwestern towns. Each day is no different from the next; she wakes and works until the day’s end to create a nurturing home for her family. Minnie is no longer an autonomous individual; any guidance or mentorship she offers to Carrie is no doubt influenced and/or supplemented by her husband. The consequence of this to Carrie is a sacrifice of the kind of life she wishes to achieve, and an imitation of theirs. Any of the Hansons’ mentorship accepted by Carrie might as well be synonymous with an acceptance of their ambition and their way of life—an act that Carrie appears to greatly resist.

The several years that Minnie has lived in Chicago away from her family have also widened the gap between her and her sister. When Carrie arrives in Chicago, she has already begun developing her own sense of self. It's not long after Carrie's arrival that Minnie begins to see the changes in her sister—changes that reveal a more rebellious side. The narrator describes this aspect of Carrie's personality:

Naturally timid in all things which related to her own advancement, and especially so when without power or resource, her craving for pleasure was so strong that it was the one stay of her nature. She would speak for that when silent on all else. (SC 32)

This side of Carrie's persona reveals itself one weeknight evening when Carrie suggests she and Minnie and Sven go to the theater together. The very idea of such an extravagance catches Minnie off guard. And although she exhibits no particular aversion to living in the city, she sees Chicago's seductive entertainments as a financial and (perhaps) moral risk. Minnie quickly regains her matter of fact state of mind and the answer becomes clear—such indulgence as the theater just isn't an option:

Minnie pondered awhile, not upon whether she could or would go, for that point was already negatively settled with her, but upon some means of diverting the thoughts of her sister to some other topic. (SC 32)

Minnie's efforts to prevent her sister from even considering their attending the theater indicates her growing concern over Carrie's potential irresponsibility.

Carrie's insistence leads Minnie who knows all too well that her husband will never agree to such an outing, to at least approach the topic with him. Minnie's desire to steer her sister away from the recklessness of such immoderation is all too clear. She sees such action as the first step away from a secure and responsible way of life. Furthermore, below the surface of Minnie's tentative role of caretaker to Carrie lies the truth—the Hansons' agree to host Carrie solely based on her potential financial contribution toward their living expenses. If Carrie is blinded by the light of Chicago's amusements, she won't be able to focus as single mindedly on work.

Minnie and her husband are disheartened by Carrie's desire for indulgences when she has barely begun working. Their concern leads them to worry "unless Carrie submit[s] to a solid round of industry and [sees] the need of hard work without longing for play, how [is] her coming to the city to profit them?" (SC 32). Minnie wants to have a little more faith in her sister; "she just feels a little curious...everything is so new," she explains in Carrie's defense to Sven one evening (SC 33). Yet Sven does not care. The prospect of Carrie's financial contribution is not coming to life, and although he voices "nothing at all," his thoughts, which leave "disagreeable impressions" hanging in the air, are felt (SC 56). Minnie's raising of concerns, (which mostly stem from the distress felt by her husband) demonstrates her desire to assume a mentoring role with Carrie—one that has potential to be quite influential. Additionally, her growing apprehension over Carrie's foolish yearnings could work to steer Carrie in the direction of a more accountable way of life. Instead, Minnie remains passive, and her efforts to sway her sister are halfhearted and finally ineffective.

Through their reactions to the theater, Carrie begins to gain a better idea of her sister and Sven's "way of life." It is one that sustains their visions and goals, yet scarcely resembles the life Carrie desires for herself. Despite an appreciation for their good intentions and a consideration for their concern, Carrie views her sister's suggestive tone as one hinting at "opposition," that fails to take any firm or "definite form" (SC 33). Much younger than her Minnie, Carrie sees a future for herself that involves "days of love...things she would like to do...and places she would like to visit" (SC 50). The longer she stays on with Minnie and her family, the more "opposition" she fears she'll face. Additionally, Carrie also begins to see that if she remains with Minnie and Sven, no one will be able to "call forth or respond to her feelings."

All the while Carrie halfheartedly continues to look for work in the blue collar market. She attempts to secure positions within local shops, department stores, and offices. When these fail, she makes a halfhearted effort to seek a position as a factory worker. When she finally lands a job at a one of Chicago's many overcrowded factories, her dissatisfaction is fueled by a growing distaste for her fellow workers. Listening to their talk, Carrie "instinctively [withdraws] into herself," feeling "that there [is] something hard and low about it all" (SC 40). As her disgust with her work increases and she also reconnects with Drouet, Carrie grows more intent on escaping this exhausting and unrewarding way of life. Her inability to sustain work, combined with her bitter disdain for the labor and her peers, places even more of a barrier between her and the Hansons. She is drifting, and it is clear that the expectations of neither Carrie nor the Hansons' are being met. The resulting distress felt by each party only intensifies with

every passing day. When the subject of Carrie possibly returning to Columbia City finally arises, Carrie is forced to come face to face with her predicament:

She did not explain that the thought, however, had aroused all the antagonism of her nature. Columbia City—what was there for her? She knew its dull little round by heart. Here was the great mysterious city which was still a magnet for her. What she had seen only suggested its possibilities. Now to turn back on it and live the little old life out there—she almost exclaimed against it as she thought. (SC 65)

Carrie acknowledges that if she doesn't separate herself altogether from the Hansons' influence, she will be forced into mere survival mode—thus sacrificing any hope of achieving success as an individual. This realization—stemming in part from Drouet's influence—results in Carrie's withdrawing herself from the support, and therefore mentorship, of the Hansons. In doing so, Carrie also removes herself from any burden of obligation to them. Although relieved, Carrie is also nervous to sever such familiar ties. Yet, when the time comes, she leaves a simple note for Minnie explaining that she is not choosing to return to Columbia City, but that she will stay on in Chicago. She offers no other information, allowing Minnie to assume not only a separation from their support, familial and otherwise, but also from their responsible and ethical way of life.

Waiting in the wings, and ready to assume the next mentoring role in Carrie's life, is the charming Drouet. All too happy to escort Carrie away from her sister's "way of life," Drouet seduces Carrie through his abilities to provide both the culture and security

for which she so desperately longs. A successful salesman by trade, Drouet also appears to be so by nature. His ability to tempt—and eventually acquire Carrie—by introducing to her glorious foods, fine clothing, and stunning views of an alternative lifestyle makes him a powerful influence.

Drouet's personal appearance and his character act as a representation of the art of persuasion. Despite an imperceptible measure of lacking intellectualism, Drouet's well-dressed exterior, accomplished affiliations and cultured mannerisms easily mark him a successful man of the time. He is both attractive and accomplished. Furthermore, his ability to find common ground with those he encounters helps to make him appear trustworthy and respectable. His whole being, especially when seen through the eyes of a young, naïve girl like Carrie, is a very appealing package. Therefore it is not surprising that through their meeting on the train, Carrie is immediately smitten. Although comforted by the effortless nature of this new relationship, Carrie still cannot ignore the "instincts of self-protection and coquetry confusedly mingling in her brain" (SC 5). She is trapped between the new and exciting allure of such a charismatic individual, and the fact that she has just left the security of home and the shelter of her parents. Although she struggles with an intuitive sense of self-protection, it's not long before Drouet has secured Carrie's Chicago address, as well as a date to visit with her.

From the start of her time in Chicago, Carrie's original (and also more respectable) plan is tainted by Drouet's influence. His initial impact on her cannot be shaken; his presence helps her to see her own potential. Throughout all of her time with



the Hansons, Drouet and all that he represents remain foremost in Carrie's thoughts. She attempts to stay the course, yet the more frequently she thinks of him and then eventually begins to visit him, the more she falls prey to his influence. The more involved with him she becomes, the harder it is for her to resist sliding toward the relief he offers. Drouet has taken the place of Minnie as Carrie's new mentor. When she is with Drouet, Carrie has no qualms about what she wants in life, yet while under the moral roof of the Hansons, she begins to doubt her convictions. She feels "ashamed" and "depressed" and confused by how it all seems "so clear when she [is] with Drouet" (SC 66). Her time spent with him allows for her to indulge in a kind of ravenous absorption of the city's culture, and refinement. When apart from him she feels the weight of the Hanson's determined morality hovering all around her. Carrie's conscience, which usually only emerges "when the pleasant side" of life "was not too apparent" is not "interested to praise" (SC 89). Instead, it is the voice of reason, the reminder to act in a morally responsible manner, it is "truly the voice of God" (SC 89).

"Oh thou failure," said this voice.

"Why?" she questioned.

"Look at those about," came the whispered answer. "Look at those who are good. How would they scorn to do what you have done. Look at the good girls, how will they draw away from such as you, when they know you have been weak. You had not tried before you failed." (SC 90)

She struggles between an obligation toward this voice of conventional morality and her own desire to improve the quality of her life. During her final days with the Hansons, all the while struggling with which path to choose, Carrie finally believes she has chosen the ethical side. Her conviction is set until she comes face to face—literally—with Drouet. Drouet learns of Carrie's intent, and within seconds of encountering him, "the whole fabric of doubt and impossibility [slips] from her mind" (SC 67-8). Just like that, Carrie is swept away, beyond the saving hands of morality. She tries to resist, but, as the narrator says, "Like all women, she [is] there to object and be convinced. It [is] up to [Drouet] to brush the doubts away and clear the path if he could" (68). He prevails, and soon enough he reinforces the picture of the desolate life waiting for her back in Columbia City. If she is to succeed, she must lean on him:

"I'll tell you what you do," he said. "You come with me. I'll take care of you."

Carrie heard this passively. The peculiar state which she was in made it sound like the welcome breath of an open door. Drouet was of her own spirit and was pleasing. He was clean, handsome, well-dressed and sympathetic. His voice was the voice of a friend. (SC 68)

Drouet is such a gifted salesman that all his efforts are finally rewarded. Carrie chooses the life he represents and all that he can help her achieve through his guidance and provision.

Despite having physically removing herself from a life of moral responsibility, however, Carrie still bears the burden of her own nagging conscience. The voice in her head, fueled by the few moral objectives she possesses, often harasses her. She struggles to drown out the voice that encourages her to leave the new comforts provided by Drouet and directs her to return home—it is the right thing for her to do. She mentally defends her actions, however, brushing aside the incessant nagging:

“I have nice clothes...They make me look so nice. I am safe. The world is not so bad now. It is not so dreadful—what have I done?”

“Step into the streets, return to your home, be as you were. Escape!” (SC 91)

But Carrie isn't swayed. Instead, she convinces herself that she already has escaped. In essence, Drouet's semi-miraculous presence in Carrie's life saves her from falling back into mere survival mode. She is determined; she cannot—and will not—return to such a way of living. With Drouet on her side, “the world is not so bad now.” His praise motivates her, his influence charges her spirit, and his support ensures her comfort and security. In this environment, she will do more than merely survive. Drouet provides the most appealing method of escape for Carrie—yet by choosing to “escape” through his influence and provisions, she also chooses to forgo a life of ethical responsibility. Ironically, through her “fall,” Carrie continues to rise, “and she will not act the part of the ruined girl” (Lundquist 31). She sacrifices morality to fulfill her desires, and she starts to “rise.”

Upon their establishing a more permanent relationship—one where Carrie assumes the role (but not the legal title) of wife—the two settle into the Ogden Place flat. There Carrie is described as, “free of certain difficulties which most ominously confronted her, laden with many new ones which were of a mental order, and altogether so turned about in all of her earthly relationships that she might as well have been a new and different individual” (SC 89).

While they live together, Drouet’s mentoring takes a strong hold upon Carrie. Naturally able to absorb and eager to apply such positive guidance, Carrie becomes a changed individual. In Drouet’s presence, she is better equipped to appreciate the seductive nature of the “city’s hypnotic influence” (SC 78). And with this, she is able to see more clearly all that she wishes to achieve and acquire. Yet, it is through the mentorship of a fellow neighbor, Mrs. Hale, that Carrie obtains even more influential guidance regarding what she should desire and how she should go about attaining it. While reflecting upon the “trivialities,” the “praises of wealth,” and the “conventional expression of morals,” Carrie views of the city, she struggles to gain a clear comprehension of it all (SC 102). Yet, Mrs. Hale, who also strongly influences Carrie’s interest in the theater, works to continually remind Carrie to stay focused on the idea of gaining “something better” (SC 102).

Drouet also helps Carrie establish that “something better,” and in doing so, he, too, learns from Carrie. Motivated first by attraction, Drouet acknowledges that Carrie’s “pretty face” intensifies “his mental resources” (SC 69). Yet soon enough he also begins

to sense that is something different about Carrie. He is drawn to the idea that “she [seems] to have some power back of her actions. She was not like the common run of store-girl. She wasn’t silly” (SC 69). He understands, and moreover he appreciates her overwhelming desire to assume the manner and dress the city’s more refined women. He stirs Carrie’s own self-awareness, pointing out one woman passerby and referring to her as a “fine stepper.” His doing so prompts Carrie to see “a little suggestion of possible defect in herself... If that was so fine she must look at it more closely. Instinctively, she felt a desire to imitate it. Surely she could do that too” (SC 99). These small, yet monumental, influences are what contribute most to Drouet’s successful mentoring. His unique ability to ascertain and understand Carrie’s yearnings, allows him plenty of opportunity to apply his influence. Clear to the both of them is the understanding that Carrie feels with a “whole and fulsome heart” (SC 23) the longing to blend in and associate with these women. Instinctively, she is aware of the process she must undergo to transform this desire into her reality—and Drouet holds the power to help her. This bargain must come at some cost to Carrie, however. What isn’t articulated, but nonetheless understood, is the silent acceptance between the two to exchange Carrie, herself, as the commodity.

Quickly aroused by the prospect of all their relationship has the ability to produce, Carrie and Drouet allow themselves to partake in honeymoon-like indulgence. Drouet is intent on helping Carrie to transform herself, for his own purpose, as much as her own. Through a tour of the city’s cultural displays, Drouet works to appease Carrie. After dining one day, Drouet takes her to the theater:

That spectacle pleased her immensely. The color and grace of it caught her eye. She had vain imaginings about place and power, about far-off lands and magnificent people. When it was over, the clatter of coaches and the throng of fine ladies made her stare...

...Her head was so full of the swirl of life. (SC 77)

Drouet is “as much affected by this show of finery and gaiety as [Carrie]” (SC 77), but he is also moved by her response. He turns to her, realizing how appealing she is at this moment, and is overcome by a “keen sense of desire” for her. Amid the churn of novelty and culture Carrie and Drouet’s relationship strengthens.

Drouet’s mentorship, in combination with his ability to introduce Carrie to culture beyond her knowledge, helps to transform Carrie. To Drouet’s credit, her ambition begins to extend as much as her appreciation for fine living. For example, when given the opportunity to assume an acting role in an amateur theatrical production, Carrie nervously accepts, but feels unsure of her abilities. It is Drouet who keeps her dedicated, and motivates her past her once-bashful attitude, fueling in her a desire to succeed. Carrie’s initial acting experience propels her into the discovery of a talent she never before considered. It also, however, works to stimulate the admiration and passion felt for her by both Drouet and her ensuing suitor, George Hurstwood, a friend of Drouet’s. During the opening night, Carrie, who initially suffers from stage fright, goes on to astonish the audience with her moving performance. Both Drouet and Hurstwood are so

drawn in by her performance that they feel as though Carrie's words are directed toward them. Each man is also incredibly charmed by her newly revealed power:

The two men were in a most harrowed state of affection. They scarcely remaining words with which the scene concluded. They only saw their idol, moving about with appealing grace, continuing a power which to them was a revelation. (SC 192-3)

Carrie is not blind to their recognition. She, too, is proud of her accomplishment, and in the midst of all the praise she takes note of her shift in power. She takes the time to bask in her new strength, independently celebrating the idea of finally being the "admired," or "sought-for" individual (SC 193). It is also here that "the independence of success now made its first faint showing" (SC 193). Carrie is continuing her climb.

It is not long before Carrie's self-esteem begins to strengthen as a result of her new-found success, and her need for Drouet begins to fade. Their relationship reaches a point of complacent comfort, and Carrie eventually surpasses Drouet. She moves onto a new, fresh relationship—drawn by the allure of raising her own status. Ironically, it is through Drouet's own introduction, that Carrie encounters her next mentor, George Hurstwood, the bar manager of Chicago's elite Hannah and Hogg's. Hurstwood, who is described as a "very successful and well known man about town" (SC 43) immediately falls for Carrie after spending an evening socializing with her and Drouet. As a result of growing lack of interest in Drouet, Carrie returns Hurstwood's attention and quickly becomes entangled in the newness and sophistication of their evolving relationship.

At first, Carrie feels a slight sense of remorse over her betrayal of Drouet. She acknowledges his help during a time when “she was worried and distressed,” and admits to having “kindest feelings for him in every way.” Yet, she is unable “to feel any binding influence” that might keep her attached to him, as opposed to any other (SC 123). Carrie is ready to move on, but not quite willing to relinquish the security she feels with Drouet. When she is “brought within Hurstwood’s reach” (SC 122), she initially underestimates the power of his influence upon her. When she realizes the course their relationship is upon, she feels confused, and “honestly affected by a feeling of trouble and shame” (SC 121). Yet, in the face of this dilemma and “shame,” Carrie remains an active part within the courtship, eventually surrendering to the impact of Hurstwood’s influence.

When her relationship with Hurstwood is discovered by Drouet, his status as mentor to Carrie deteriorates even more. Angrily, Drouet reveals to Carrie that Hurstwood is a married man—information which Hurstwood neglected to share with Carrie. Yet, instead of hurling her anger in the direction of Hurstwood, the man who has actually deceived her, she launches her frustrations at Drouet. She blames him for bringing Hurstwood into her life, and then for not sharing all of the necessary information with her. Strangely, in all of their unraveling, Carrie cannot see past this one act. He is astonished at Carrie’s failure to see all that he has done for her:

“I’ve given you all the clothes you wanted, haven’t I? I’ve taken you everywhere you wanted to go. You’ve had as much as I’ve had and more too.”



“Did I ask you to?” she returned.

“Well, I did it.” said Drouet, “and you took it.”

“You talk as though I had persuaded you,” answered Carrie (SC 229).

When all is said and done, Drouet, whose feelings for Carrie still generate sympathy, offers to move out of the flat, leaving Carrie the gift of a few more days of security—rent free. Surrounded by frustration and confusion over her current state, Carrie isn’t sure how to proceed past “the effect of the argument” between her and Drouet (SC 229). The consequences are dreadful and any attempts to gather her thoughts only leave her feeling as “a mass of jangling fibres—an anchorless, storm beaten little craft which could do absolutely nothing but drift” (SC 229). In essence, the circumstances bring her right back where she was before her meeting Drouet. Yet despite the sudden downfall in the security of her circumstances, Carrie’s charged ambition remains intact.

Although Carrie eventually discards Drouet, there is no doubt that initially his mentorship brings to life an important, yet hitherto missing feature in Carrie’s life—a “clever companion,” one who can help steer and motivate the dreamy and ordinary Carrie toward a more fulfilling life. Through Drouet, Carrie begins to solidify her own desires. To her, he not only symbolizes what one can achieve in life, but he also acts as the means through which she can begin to obtain her desires. Without Drouet’s influence, support and initial finance, Carrie most likely would have settled for someone in her sister’s working-class world. Without Drouet’s mentorship, her life would have been dramatically different.

Following Drouet's departure, Carrie barely has the time to contemplate the uncertainty of her next move before she once again falls prey to the power of persuasion. Despite her having ended her relationship with Hurstwood after learning of his deceit, Carrie is still moved by his influence. Distraught over the idea of losing Carrie, and faced with legal difficulties with his wife, Hurstwood steals a large sum of money from his employers, and then convinces Carrie to escape with him to New York. Swept once again into his reckless current, Carrie realizes new strength. For the first time in her life, she feels a sense of authority, one that will enhance her abilities to achieve further success. Ironically, this is also the beginning of Hurstwood's downfall, and Carrie's abandonment of his mentorship.

In the beginning, however, Hurstwood's influence and guidance takes the place of Drouet's and fuels Carrie's growing confidence. Carrie, who is attracted to Hurstwood's wealth and societal status, which exists within the "first grade below the luxuriously rich" (SC 44), also feels drawn toward all that his appearance represents. She is greatly impressed by good looks, his display of "excellent, tailored suits of imported goods," his fine jewelry and watches of the "latest making" and by the success that earns him acquaintanceship with "hundreds of actors, merchants, politicians and the general run of successful characters around town" (SC 43). Furthermore, she is drawn to his willingness to discard all morality in the face of attaining happiness or success:

He would promise anything, everything and trust to fortune to disentangle him....He would be happy, by the Lord, if it cost all honesty of statement, all abandonment of truth. (SC 209)

In a short period of time, their relationship evolves to a state where Hurstwood recklessly abandons all responsibility, giving in to his own temptations. He confesses his love to Carrie and in doing so seduces her, not only emotionally, but physically. He invites her to join him on an entirely self-serving adventure. He asks her to move—literally—to leave Drouet and to be with him. Although at first she drifts, feeling the “[loosening] of her moorings, uncertain and unsatisfying as they were” (SC 207), she soon feels overpowered by his persuasion:

Carrie was finding it more and more difficult to see him longing thus without offering the consolation which he so much desired. Her own quandary became less and less important. Her doubts were dissolving in the fire of his affection. (SC 208)

Carrie is more moved by Hurstwood’s passion for her than she is by Hurstwood himself. It is clear that she is somewhat attracted to him; she remains “the victim of his keen eyes, his suave manners, his fine clothes” (SC 205), yet she still feels the struggle that accompanies what she feels is a “hopeless” state. She gives in, feeling Hurstwood’s “influence over her,” finding it “sufficient almost to delude her into the belief that she was possessed of a lively passion for him” (SC 205). Hurstwood’s fervor so awakens her belief in her own power that she can’t help take action. One of Hurstwood’s most

victorious abilities lies within his capacity to decipher Carrie's unsatisfied feelings for life (SC 119). This disclosure not only reveals Hurstwood's insightfulness, but also establishes his potential as mentor to Carrie. If he is able to reach this level of honesty with her, through his suspicion of such unhappiness, he might also be able to act as the guide in discovering such contentment—through the nature of their own relationship, of course.

As their relationship progresses, Carrie eventually gives in to Hurstwood's persuasion, agreeing to leave Drouet. By doing so, she once again takes a leap of faith and chooses to venture further into the unknown with Hurstwood, "with what result we might guess, where innocence has neither wisdom nor counsel at its call" (SC 122). Hurstwood's persuasion is so powerful that it prompts her to "[believe] herself deeply in love" (SC 210). Yet, even the love she begins to imagine she harbors isn't enough to rid her own the challenge of her conscience once she leaves the "warmth" of Hurstwood's presence. The narrator gives voice to that conscience:

You do not know what will come. There are miserable things outside.  
People go a-begging. Women are wretched. You can never tell what will  
happen. Remember the time you were hungry. Stick to what you have.  
(SC 222)

Upon reflection, Carrie begins to see that despite her verbal contract with Hurstwood, she is still unsure of her ability to accept the change he offers. Despite a few previous efforts on her part to take risks in hopes of attaining personal gain, Carrie still sees herself as

someone who is “not one to whom change [is] agreeable.” Ironically, she doesn’t see within herself “daring” characteristics “of an adventuress,” believing she is “too uncertain of herself, too much afraid of the world” (SC 207). Stuck between this fear of lost security, and the excitement of gaining further success, Carrie continues to debate Hurstwood’s proposition “illogically, until she [is] on a borderless sea of speculation” (SC 206).

Amid Carrie’s struggle to choose the most beneficial path, Drouet learns of the affair and threatens to expose the relationship. Hurstwood then kidnaps Carrie, and, despite the mixed emotions of anger and fear, she once again falls prey to his persuasion. He convinces her that his strong feelings for her still remain and asks her to give him another chance. When he tells her of his plans for the future, Carrie’s interest grows. She feels that the “first gleam of fairness shone in this proposition” (SC 279). Through Hurstwood’s incessant pleading with her to stay with him, Carrie sees her power over him, and she is forever changed. This sudden turn of events offers Carrie her first opportunity to take the reins. With her assumption of control, however, Hurstwood’s persuasive force is diminished:

This was due to a lack of power on Hurstwood’s part, a lack of that majesty of passion that sweeps the mind from its seat, fuses and melts all arguments and theories into a tangled mass and destroys, for the time being, the reasoning power. (SC 222)

It is through her own recognition of Hurstwood's "lack of power" that Carrie sees an opportunity to enhance her own position by exploiting Hurstwood's remaining abilities. Despite her initially having fallen for him on an emotional level, Carrie soon recognizes all that she is capable of learning from him. She allows him into her life, also welcoming the opportunity to incorporate his influence. Yet, once again, she reaches a point where her mentor's ability enhances her growing strengths, and it isn't long before she is able to move on, surpassing them in her abilities.

After arriving in New York, Hurstwood fails to sustain an income, thus also losing his once dynamic rhythm for success. Sadly, the once successful Hurstwood has now traded places with the once dependant Carrie. When Hurstwood is unable to gain work in New York, Carrie does find a job increasing his growing dependency upon her. His continual failure leads Carrie to initiate her greatest deception yet—applying to him the same level of shrewdness and calculation he once applied to her. When Carrie finally feels the weight of her own strength and capability upon her, she can't help but slowly, yet steadily break away from him in every capacity. The deception begins with Carrie's decision to use money toward the purchase of a new pair of shoes, (in hopes of augmenting her appearance, and thus her acting career) rather than saving it to pay upcoming rent. Eventually, when Carrie finds enough "excuse in Hurstwood's lassitude," she abandons her share of responsibility, first toward the cost of their flat, and then toward him altogether. Yet in the wake of this severance, Carrie feels a twinge of debt—after all, she is still able to recall her own near destitute experiences:

Carrie had experienced too much of the bitterness of search and poverty, not to sympathize keenly with one about to be cast out upon his own resources. She remembered the time when she walked the streets of Chicago—and only recently when she searched here [in New York].

Where would he go? Without money, he would starve. (SC 435)

Yet, at the end, in recognition of her own experiences, and perhaps even in honor of the mentorship Hurstwood provided, Carrie cannot completely abandon him. She leaves him, but also gives him money to help aid in his survival.

Once Hurstwood is removed from Carrie's life, she is free to move forward and apply all that she has gained from her mentors toward the pursuit of finding success at working in the theaters. It is at this point that Carrie meets her next mentor, Lola, a chorus girl with whom Carrie works. Lola's encouraging influence boosts Carrie's already growing confidence. With the help of Lola's valuable knowledge about the theater, Carrie is suddenly acclimating very well to New York's theater world. In fact, she learns so quickly that it isn't long before she has become so much more in tune with the depth of her own talent. With this growth, her talent and ambition shine, setting in motion her longed-for fame and accomplishment.

In addition to advising Carrie about the unspoken rules in the theater world, Lola also aids Carrie after she leaves Hurstwood. Lola, who also benefits from the friendship, lends Carrie money, and invites her to share a flat while she gets back on her feet. Lola's presence and influence helps Carrie to realize the growth of her strengths amid the

rawness of her newly-established independence. This beneficial guidance ascertains Lola's mentoring role as one of great value to Carrie.

Carrie works with great ambition to become one of New York's best actresses. She moves about freely, finding companions (but not friends) here and there. Evidence displaying the impact of her previous mentors appears here as Carrie critically comes to terms with distaste for an attitude she once strove to achieve. She senses this as she dines with a suitor who does "not talk of anything which [lifts] her above the common run of clothes and material success" (SC 444). Strangely, through her achievements and gain of "material success," Carrie remains unsatisfied.

It is after her rise to this level that Carrie meets, and is moved by, her most influential mentor yet. Robert Ames, the visiting cousin of a friend of Carrie's, represents to Carrie a new and unexplored breed of man. His scholarly ambitions awaken Carrie to a life beyond wealth, fame and success. He is the first person to address the kind of issues worthy of intellectual contemplation.

Additionally, Ames' interest in Carrie as an actress takes her by surprise. He appears to see Carrie in a new light. After taking note of her naturally poignant appearance, he remarks that she "would do well in some sympathetic part..." that her "natural appearance would suggest more to the audience than the careful make-up of most people" (SC 484). Carrie is so moved by his "careful" consideration, that she too begins to see herself differently. She is further impressed by the idea that he is "not talking to hear himself talk." Through his straightforward communication, Ames is able



to provide for Carrie the very understanding of “*thought*,” and because of this, “she could have kissed his hands in thankfulness.” (SC 484)

With the help of Drouet and Hurstwood, Carrie has succeeded in all the ways she once dreamed, yet it isn’t until her encounter with Ames that Carrie begins to realize the extent of the emptiness within her. She shares this concern with the scholar, and he remarks, “Perhaps you’re too comfortable. That often kills a person’s ambition. Many people fail because they succeed too quickly” (SC 484-5). Ames’ response may provide the answer for which she’s been searching all her life. He continues to address all that she is capable of influencing and attaining through the mere utilization of her own talents:

I should say turn to the dramatic field. You have so much sympathy and such a melodious voice—make them valuable to others. You will have them so long as they express something in you. You can preserve and increase them longer by using them for others. The moment you forget their value to the world, and they cease to represent your own aspirations, they will begin to fade. Mark that. (SC 485)

As Carrie absorbs his ideas, she understands his stress upon the fact that there is more to life than achieving material success. Without responsibility toward others, and a fully developed moral sense, life might not be worth living. As if looking straight into Carrie’s soul, Ames, assures her of this:

The sympathetic look will leave your eyes, your mouth will change, your power to act will disappear. You may think they won’t, but they will.

Nature takes care of that. You can't become self interested, selfish and luxurious, without having these sympathies and longings disappear, and then you will sit there and wonder what has become of them. You can't remain tender and sympathetic, and desire to serve the world, without having it show in your face and your art. If you want to do most, do good. Serve the many. Be kind and humanitarian. Then you can't help but be great. (SC 485-6)

For most of the novel, Carrie is seen looking outward. She gazes upon and often carefully inspects all that surrounds her. Yet as much as Carrie looks outward toward objects and others around her, she spends very little time looking inward. Carrie is often identified as “confused,” “uncertain,” or struggling due to a “nature of her mental state” which “deserves consideration” (SC 87). Yet, she rarely complies, failing to study the exact nature of her life desires. As a result of her intense discussion with Ames, Carrie is finally provoked enough to realize the significance in dedicating time toward the contemplation of her own state of mind. She is so moved and affected by his deliberation over her, that an unfamiliar feeling of self doubt overcomes her:

She felt very much alone, very much as if she were struggling hopelessly and unaided, as if such a man as he would never care to draw nearer. All her nature was stirred to unrest now. She was already the old, mournful Carrie—the desireful Carrie—unsatisfied. (SC 487)

In the end, despite all of her success, Carrie still comes face to face with the realization that she is unfulfilled and, therefore, in her mind, also unsuccessful. Yet she survives, and far beyond her original expectations. Without her mentors' wisdom and guidance combined with her own willingness to absorb and apply their influence, Carrie would not have been able to reach this point. Her initial ambition led her to abandon her moral principles, and her life is spent in the pursuit of her moving significantly beyond mere survival. Yet through the success of Ames' mentorship, Carrie comes full circle. Without realizing the damaging extent of his argument, he negates her personal beliefs, everything upon which she has built her life's success. Within moments of his appeal, her understanding is irreversible. She is changed, and is so at the mercy of his suggestion, his guidance, and his mentorship. The significance of Ames to Carrie arises not only through his invitation to consider this kind of reasoning, but also through his ability to convince her of the righteousness found within doing so. His faculty to persuade Carrie through a kind of intellectual foreplay toward the fellowship of virtue deems his mentorship to her the most victorious yet.

All in all, Carrie's surpassing survival and developing methods in which she is able to reach her aspirations prove the beneficial influence gained through the art of mentorship. Even greater than this, however, is the impact created by her own willingness to adapt to an ever changing environment. The once timid and hesitant Carrie learns from her mentors to appreciate all that can be gained through risk. Her ability to overcome emotional complexities proves her growing ability to maneuver triumphantly through life's continual multifaceted circumstances. To the victory of her mentors, this, in

addition to her eventual exchange of life's principle values, establishes Carrie's probability for both continual survival and also success, as highly achievable.

## CHAPTER 5

## MENTORSHIP PUT THE TEST:

## WHY CARRIE SUCCEEDS WHERE LILY FAILS

The story of Carrie and Hurstwood is “representative because it was the story of longing and desire, of weakness and strength, of struggle and ambition, success and defeat.” (Lehan, 56)

The many dissimilarities between protagonists Carrie Meeber of *Sister Carrie* and Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth* often make it challenging to see that they have a fair number of similarities. Each woman grows up surrounded by her family (although in very different worlds) within the security and comfort of the home. Yet, as both Carrie and Lily enter their adulthood they are alone, severed from their families, (either by choice or circumstances). As a result, they both are at the mercy of society, as well as being forced many times to draw upon of their own abilities. Furthermore, although each woman is encouraged to pursue a distinct path, each eventually finds it difficult—if not impossible—to remain on that course. Both also recognize the necessity of other people for survival. Initially, both women depend on others financially, but eventually each woman looks for mentors for reasons other than financial support. In fact, the presence of these mentors in their lives is one of their most important similarities. However, how each woman benefits from mentorship is where the most significant difference comes to light. Simply put, based on their abilities to absorb and apply the lessons of their mentors, one woman survives, and one does not.

There is no simple answer to the many questions surrounding the reasons why Carrie lives and Lily dies. First, their individual outcomes are the result of a complex of

varied traits, natural and learned abilities, facilities for adaptation, and most importantly, the positive and negative mentoring relationships in their lives. Thus the presence of mentors in each woman's life is not enough to guarantee her survival or success. What really matters is their recognition of the necessity of mentorship for success—only Carrie understands this. Moreover, she not only recognizes the importance of mentors, but also absorbs the beneficial knowledge of her mentors and apply it her own life. Carrie's ability to do this immediately sets her apart from Lily, who is finally unable to comprehend the value of beneficial mentorship.

The lack of responsibility existing on both sides of Lily's mentoring relationships—her own role, as well as that of her mentors—reflects a shared misunderstanding of the significant communication and trust that are imperative in achieving a successful mentoring relationship. Refocusing on the general concept of mentorship establishes the important responsibility shared by both mentor and mentee. This asserts the significance for the necessity of a co-dependent relationship in order to achieve the desired effect.

In terms of the function of mentorship as it pertains to the lives of heroines in literary works, (as discussed in chapter I) both Lily and Carrie's mentoring relationships must meet the standard level of guidance and response. In order for mentorship to be effective, the mentee must be able to recognize a new perspective provided for her by her mentor and see in it a challenge that also serves as a means of motivation. Additionally, the mentee must see the importance in reinforcing the learned ideas through realistic discussions with their mentors.

For good and ill, Lily has been raised within a family and level of society which fit her for one purpose only—to marry a man who has much (or even more) money than her family. When the Bart family suffers financial ruin and Lily's parents die, it is not surprising to see both her purpose and identity severely compromised. These setbacks cause her to lose a sense of purpose for her life. In her resulting bewilderment, Lily is unable to consider other options. Her path should have been straight and focused, eventually rewarding her effortless journey toward the security of a financially stable marriage. Instead, her path becomes twisted and obscure. In place of her anticipated reward, she finds herself facing economic hardship and social ostracism.

Furthermore, Lily is completely unfamiliar with any other way of life, especially in any other social class. It is not only all she knows, but it is also all she wants. Rather than accepting her family's financial ruin, Lily remains dedicated to staying the course—at all costs. Her biggest mistakes come from her refusal to play by society's rules and her failure to appreciate and apply the guidance of mentors within her social circle. Additionally, Lily is so devoted to fulfilling her original expectations that she is unable to appreciate the influence of outside mentors, who offer her a chance at survival through accepting an alternative way of life.

In contrast to Lily, Carrie lacks any predetermined destiny. Her path, although initially unclear, is most likely toward assuming the roles of wife and mother and raising a family in her rural community. When she chooses an alternate route, her family may have been slightly surprised, but it is not seen as a rebellion against everything they taught her to appreciate and achieve. It is merely a change in course, a decision about

which Carrie is both excited and optimistic. Although Dreiser suggests that Carrie hasn't the taste for change, she is, despite some struggle, certainly able to acclimate herself to it throughout her life. This is due to her lack of a clear purpose in life and, even more importantly, to her desire to survive no matter what.

Lily's shifting circumstances should shake her confidence and uproot her faith in the future, yet she won't consider other options, and, therefore, won't adapt. She remains either too stubborn, or too ignorant, of the very real possibility of her failure to succeed in her world. Her unwillingness to adapt prevents her from recognizing the influence of key mentors throughout her life. Although she often encourages these mentoring relationships, somewhat open toward the ideas they present, she continually fails to fully comprehend and apply the advice she is given. Without an ability to adapt, Lily's prospects for the future begin to break down. In contrast to Lily, Carrie's willingness to modify her ambitions so they reflect her life's continually changing course leads to her survival, and to her success.

Ironically, one of Carrie's strengths lies in her position in the lower middle class. Although this may not appear to be an asset, her social class helps determine her motivation, ambition, and yearning to achieve and acquire more. Also, it is fair to suggest that her parents raised her with no specific expectations. This obviously sets her apart from Lily, for whom parental and social expectations are the focal point of living. Carrie's lack of a particular purpose in life may be the cause of some initial hardship, yet it also allows her to assume several different roles and identities throughout her life.



Lily's upper-class childhood led to her every whim being met. She is born into all that she—or anyone else for that matter—could want, and she has no need for motivation or ambition, other than to secure an appropriate marriage. She has no need to move upward—she is already at the top, and all she has to do is stay there. Additionally, Lily's family fails to help her imagine living life in any other way. Her family dedicates their efforts toward raising her to fulfill one expectation, to meet one purpose—to marry well. Had they not suffered financial ruin, their efforts would have likely met with success—yet their downfall prevents Lily's success in the marriage market. In essence, Lily is set up to fail in any other kind of life other than the one she has. Carrie, however, is not afraid of shifting social status. She is also neither predestined to succeed nor bound to fail.

What Carrie does struggle with, however, is maintaining relationships. Although mostly reliant upon others, her desire for advancement far outweighs the comfort she finds in relationships. Her involvement with both Drouet and Hurstwood strengthen Carrie's individual abilities—mostly highlighting her ability to put their advice into practice. In many cases, the impact of their mentorship is quickly acknowledged and applied, and she rapidly grows and transforms. At some point with each man, Carrie exceeds her mentor, and she moves on.

Both women also entertain, playing roles in order to please their mentors. Interestingly, after Carrie's acting debut, both Drouet and Hurstwood are drawn to her more than they had ever been before. They were greatly impressed by her new-found talent, and they could sense her power growing. Additionally, they are both proud of their

“possession” of her (SC 136). Ironically, however, it is at this point that Carrie’s power has increased so much that she is in fact, no longer their “possession” at all. Along with this development also comes a realization that she is finally one to be “sought after” and respected.

Regardless of her slightly-better-than-average looks, Carrie also recognizes the power her sexuality generates. Although Carrie briefly struggles with the few scruples she possesses, she relinquishes them not out of desire, but from will to survive, and eventually a will to succeed. It isn’t until she encounters Ames that she realizes what she might have sacrificed in her climb up the ladder.

Lily also struggles with the cost of risking her morality. However, Lily’s failure to sacrifice any of her firm moral ground results in her losing what she desires most—financial security and social stability. Because she cannot fathom sacrificing her morals, she also cannot comprehend the possible consequences of her failure to do so. In Lily’s world, the people aren’t as interested in the truth as they are in the consequences of telling it. Yet, when Lily has nothing else, she has the truth. Her parents, and later other mentors outside her social network, teach her to see more value in her own thorough understanding and appreciation of the truth, than in using it as a tool of manipulation.

In Lily’s world, manipulation is a realistic aspect of daily life. Despite Lily’s insistence on having her actions reflect her ethical character, she does, however, attempt manipulation through her beauty and charm. She does so in a way that she can convince herself she is not crossing the line. When it comes to her view of men, Lily is willing to

trade sex (within marriage, of course) for financial security. Their function, as it pertains to her, should fall into one of three categories: potential suitor; father figure; or (no strings attached) friend. In the face of her family's financial collapse, Lily's immense beauty is seen as one of the only ways to re-establish the family in upper-class society. The combination of her exquisite beauty and charming nature is seen as a guaranteed method of regaining status and wealth. When Lily fails to secure this reward from any relationship, it is difficult to comprehend. Yet, a closer look reveals a level of overconfidence oddly combined with a too-careful regard for morality. Lily is not able to restore her family's wealth or even secure a marriage simply because she values her self-worth more than any act of financially-based seduction. Despite the encouragement of several mentors, including Judy and Gus Trenor, Lily knows she cannot negotiate her soul. She refuses to barter her dignity, even if it is at the cost of her life.

Sadly, Lily's circumstances offer her little choice, however. She can maintain her untainted morality by keeping the knowledge of Bertha Dorset's letters to herself, or she can share the truth, and use the power gained in doing so to help initiate her rise. To Lily the choice is obvious—she chooses self-respect over self-preservation, by also choosing financial and social defeat over a rise in power, or even over basic endurance. In the face of such choices, Carrie, on the other hand, fueled by mentors who support her strengths and encourage her ambition, she chooses self preservation regardless of the moral sacrifice.

It is fair to say that Lily's mentors, with the exception of Selden and Gerty, advise her to remain on the same path as every other girl in her position, despite her unique

circumstances. None of her mentors comprehends the complexity of Lily's personal challenges. As a result, it is nearly impossible for them to draw from their own experiences to help her transition through her challenges. Yet on a different, but also important level, Lily's indecisiveness prevents her from focusing on the strength found in her mentors' influence and guidance. Because of her inability to do this, she is also unable to apply any learned knowledge from them to her problematic life. The result of this prospers very little benefit from the overall impact of mentorship.

Lily remains trapped between two worlds, one she desperately wants but scorns, the other she dreads but can't avoid. With limited mentors available who truly understand her dilemma, she is forced to draw from the support of those who are often rivals, and actually inhibit her progress, and those who can't understand her inability to adapt, and question her unwillingness to abandon the only purpose in life she has ever known.

Contrary to this, the majority of Carrie's mentors, (with the exception of Minnie and Sven) foster her aspirations, igniting in her a keen recognition of her own individuality and growing independence. The benefits of this positive influence not only help Carrie to survive, but to also achieve great levels of success. With the help of her mentors, Carrie is able to rise above the actions of her counterpart Lily and succeed by applying what she learns to the circumstances of her life. With this kind of skill set and strength, combined with perseverance and diligence, Carrie's endurance is easier to understand. Not only is she able to survive, when Lily fails, but she is also able ascend in social status, when Lily falls. Without the beneficial influence resulting from her interaction with mentors, Carrie's abilities would have remained underdeveloped; she

would have arrived in Chicago and failed. Her path would have led her out to the streets as a prostitute or possibly back to Columbia City, where regret would have consumed her. Instead, Carrie slows down to listen, to reflect, to reinforce, and finally, to improve upon her personal circumstances. Her strengths, and therefore her success, lie in her capability to employ mentorship for all it can offer, and finally, in her ability to enact all that she learns as a result.

Finally, Carrie's endurance is an obvious effect of the successful impact mentorship contributed toward her life. Yet, sadly, through Ames's influence, Carrie also realizes her failure to attain true contentment. *Sister Carrie* concludes with the results of neither a fairytale, nor a tragedy. It does appear, however, that with Ames' mentorship, Carrie is able to recognize the lack of appreciation she attains for aspects in life unrelating to materialism, wealth or status. The mere realization of this deficiency establishes Carrie's desire to further transform in hopes of attaining addition success through an implementation of acquiring true happiness.

Lily's failure to survive is an evident measure of her failure to fully ascertain and apply all of the benefits resulting from her mentoring relationships. Despite her final surrender to death, she triumphantly keeps her morality intact, and stays true to herself to the very bitter end. This too, can be deemed a measure of her achieving success. However unfair it may seem though, Lily's level of accomplishment still isn't equal to the strength that lies in the ambition and desire to achieve at all costs—as Carrie's actions prove. In this particular case, Carrie's ability to utilize and benefit from mentorship far outweighs the strength of Lily's grounded morality. In this case, only one woman survives in all of

the essential and meaningful ways. Carrie's skills are enough to carry her beyond the necessary means of survival and well into a successful and affluent life. It is through this unique difference in Carrie and Lily's stories that evidence supporting the theory of mentorship and its relevance in a person's success or failure in life, truly evolves.

## REFERENCES

- Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Ed. John C. Berkley, Alice M. Winters, James L. West III, Neda M. Westlake. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.
- Goodman, Susan. *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends & Rivals*. Hanover: University of New England, 1990. 50.
- Gordan, Jan. "Qualities of an Inspiring Mentor Relationship." *Quality Coaching*. 2002. <<http://www.qualitycoaching.com/Articles/mentor.html>>
- Lehan, Richard. *Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1969. 2, 56.
- Lidoff, Joan. "Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in The House of Mirth". *American Realism New Essays*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982.
- Lunquist, James. *Theodore Dreiser*. New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co., 1974. 31, 45.
- Nyquist, Mary. "Determining Influences: Resistance and Mentorship in the House of Mirth and Anglo-American Realist Tradition," *New Essays on Edith Wharton's 'House of Mirth,'* ed. Deborah Esch. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000. 49, 57-8.
- Ohler, Paul. "Blind Inherited Scruples: Lily Bart's Evolutionary Ethics." Cain, William E. *Edith Wharton's "Evolutionary Conception" Darwinian Allegory in Her Major Novels*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 68, 72.
- Scarnhorst, Gary with Jack Bales. *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Shea, Gordon. *Mentoring: How to Develop Successful Mentor Behaviors*. Boston: Crisp Publishing, 2003. 3
- Wald, Priscilla. "Dreiser's Sociological Vision." *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*. Ed. Leonard Cassuto and Clare Virginia Eby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 189.
- Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.

## NOTES

---

<sup>i</sup> See Gordon, "Qualities of an Inspiring Mentor Relationship."

<sup>ii</sup> Examples of such fairy-tale like accounts can be found in many of Horatio Alger's "rags to riches" stories, in which the protagonists' ultimate goals foster the American dream. See Scarnhorst, *The lost life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*

<sup>iii</sup> See Nyquist, 57.