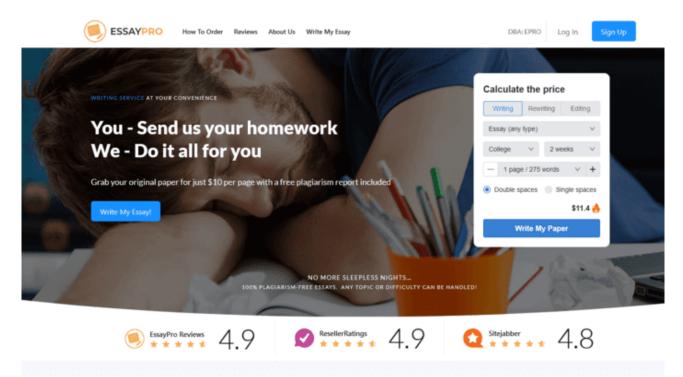
Lily as the Goddess Diana in The House of Mirth



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Lily on the Caddons Diona in The House of Mirth
Lily as the Goddess Diana in The House of Mirth One of the tragedies in The House of Mirth by Edith Wharton is that Lily Bart is unable to marry Laurence Selden and thereby secure a safe position in society. Their relationship fluctuates from casual intimacy to outright love depending on how and where Selden perceives Lily. Selden sees a beautious quality in Lily Bart that is not present in any of the other women in the novel. This mysterious beauty that is so often alluded to, in addition
her attraction for the other men, is best understood when Lily is conceived of as the goddess Diana. As Diana, Lily Bart hunts for the perfect husband but cannot marry, remains separate from the "dinginess" of society, and finally is crushed by a remorseless rejection that can even destroy a goddess.

Diana, the goddess of the hunt and of maidenhood, perfectly combines the traits that Lily

"She paused before the mantelpiece, studying herself in the mirror while she adjusted her veil. The attitude revealed the long <u>slope</u> of her slender sides, which gave a kind of wild-

Bart exhibits. Although never explicitly connected with the goddess, Wharton's first

description of Lily notes her "wild-wood grace" and "sylvan freedom":

wood grace to her outline, as though she were a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing-room; and Selden reflected that it was the same streak of sylvan freedom in her nature that lent such savour to her artificiality" (15).

Not only the description invokes the image of Diana, but also Lily's name. The lily-of-the-valley is Diana's flower. Lily Bart later chooses to <u>wear</u> a plain white dress for her part in the Reynold's painting, thereby choosing the color of Diana. ...

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...Wharton brilliantly interprets through Lily's downfall. Selden's unrealized love for Lily Bart hinges on his realization that it is her Diana-like qualities that set her apart; yet it is this same distinct quality that will bring about her demise. Lily's inability to resurrect her reputation and use the letters against Bertha Dorset is intimately tied to her inability to marry; her pattern of running away from each man that proposes to her plunges her into a downward spiral from which she cannot recover. It is not morals, but rather her qualities as the virgin goddess that ultimately doom her. By making Lily into a form of Diana, Wharton is able to condemn her society even more fiercely. She shows us that the society Lily lives in has the ability to destroy even a goddess.

Works Cited

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