House Of Mirth: Lily Bart - A Terrible Person

Lily Bart is a terrible person. She's a single-minded buffoon characterized by hypocrisy, gluttony, and greed. She's not only ignorant and lazy but proud of her ignorance and defensive of her laziness. So, how do I think I can get away with talking about her in a positive way when I spent an entire reading journal talking about how much of an empowered character she is?

Well, it's all about tone.

House of Mirth is a satirical comedy. The entire point of satire is to stand something up and mock it in an attempt at shaming society into reform. In the case of House of Mirth, the satire becomes a bit more confusing due to who it's about: the old-money aristocracy. In essence, Lily is a critical look at the female persona in the culture and media of late 19th Century aristocracy, showing off the double standard in gender roles and the high expectations of women set by high society. Because the story is critical of a high society that we have never been a part of, it's harder for us to get the satire because we don't only have to read the—rather dense—text but also put ourselves into the shoes of a 19th Century aristocrat. After all, Wharton wrote both House of Mirth and Age of Innocence to members of the high society she, herself, was a part of for so long.

When we look at Lily Bart from the perspective of a 19th Century aristocrat, we're supposed to think, 'Oh, jeez, are we really this greedy? This self-absorbed? This broken?' Lily mocks working people, and we're supposed to feel bad about our abuses of the workers. Lily treats her each of her small failings as individual catastrophes, and we're supposed to feel bad about our own exaggeration. Lily covets and abuses power, and we're supposed to feel bad about our own power-mongering. This disconnect between us and the aristocracy represents a larger problem that we, AP Literature Students, face with House of Mirth. The problem is one that all satire faces, which is that no matter how ridiculous you make your satire, someone is going to agree with what you say and not what you mean. The classic example of this problem is with Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal. A Modest Proposal—an early-18 Century satire on the racism, naivety, and excesses of the aristocracy that proposed the poor Irish people should sell their children as food to—was taken seriously by many people. And that's the inherent problem with satire; everything's just one big inside joke. If you don't know it's satire, then you're going to miss the point.

However, to limit Lily Bart as nothing more than a satirical character, a character with no purpose other than to bite at some real-life counterpart, is to commit a terrible disservice to Wharton and ourselves.

The final seven chapters of Book I and—due to how these chapters reframed the early narrative—the rest of Book I is a story, in my opinion, about depression, the critical role of self-acceptance in identity, and the toxic nature of obsession and fixation. Through Lily's emotional struggles, Wharton often demonstrates in harsh and abrasive ways that no one can really rely on others for their self-identity, not friends, not colleagues, not authority figures, not governments, not employers, not even lovers and family. None of them are a replacement for self-worth because, at the end of the day, other people have their own things to worry about.

Lily's life in Book I is an unending cascade of failures that drive home this point. The one thing Lily most wants in her life is to marry someone rich, charming, and willing to validate who she is as a person. However, one-by-one, all hopes of her finding someone are taken away from her until there's nothing left. No matter how hard she tries to seduce and impress Mr. Gryce, Gryce decides to marry Evie van Osburgh instead. Her 'friendships' and class relationships often let her down if she's not outright robbed of them due to her lack of wealth and/or a husband. Mr. Trenor, a man Lily believed she could turn to for help both emotionally (Chapter 7) and financially, betrays her out of his own despair. The status that she gets from being important ultimately makes her a target of gossip and becomes a liability that costs her any potential relationship with Selden, the person she truly loves. By the end of Book I, Lily is stripped of everything and left with only one option. In this sense, Lily has been chewed up by her own society—her own views, her own greed for wealth and power, her own selfishness—and spit out. It's a very brutal and emotional process that leaves Lily and the reader with a feeling of distraught and inescapability—the inescapability of society’s hold on your life, the inescapability of the system, and the inescapability from complete collapse.