Lily as a Product of Her Upbringing

I. **Thesis:** Lily is a direct product of her upbringing; consequently, she lacks culpability for her life’s course and inevitable demise.

A. **Lily perceives herself as art, and handles herself accordingly:** Lily’s upbringing shapes her into an object, or piece of art, whose only focus is the maintenance of her rich appearance, by whatever means necessary. The way she perceives herself (as a piece of art) comes directly from her mother.
   i. Selden intuits that Lily is a piece of art, a product forged by means of physical wealth and by sacrificing others: “He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make” (7).
   ii. The jewelry Lily wears is symbolic of her materialistic upbringing: “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” (9).
   iii. Like her mother, Lily incessantly pursues money, especially as personified in a rich husband (e.g. Percy Gryce), to keep up her appearances: “‘I am bad through and through—I want admiration, I want excitement, I want money—yes money’ ” (163).
   iv. Lily as the tableaux vivant. She renders herself as a beautiful piece of art: “But keenest of all was the exhilaration of displaying her own beauty under a new aspect: of showing that her loveliness was no mere fixated quality, but an element shaping all emotions to fresh forms of grace” (129). Lily is aware of her beauty, and places herself in situations to enhance it to the utmost degree (i.e. the tableaux vivant).
   v. “But, after all, it was the life she had been made for: every dawning tendency in her had been carefully directed toward it, all her interests and activities had been taught to centre around it. She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty” (308).

B. **Lily perceives money as something to be given to her, not earned:** Lily’s upbringing ultimately renders her incapable providing for herself, both financially and physically. Her perception of money as a good that is to be received rather than earned stems from her mother. Lily has always counted on a rich husband giving her everything she needs; she was not raised with the skills to work. She is badly equipped to handle her own finances, and therefore unable to care for her own wellbeing.
   i. Her mother’s grand aspirations for Lily produce in her the belief that she will one day marry a rich man and be “set.” Yet, she does not marry and her money runs out.
   ii. When her money runs out, she is forced to borrow from Gus Trenor, which ultimately places her in greater debt. When she cannot pay the...
“debt” (really a sexual favor) expected of her, she must turn to her aunt Mrs. Peniston to borrow money.

iii. Her upbringing equips her with social skills quite impractical for the working class: “she vaguely imagined that such gifts would be of value to seekers after social guidance; but there was unfortunately no specific head under which the art of saying and doing the right thing could be offered in the market” (260-61).

C. Lily perceives marriage to be a means of providing herself with money, not love: Lily’s upbringing prevents her from marrying Selden, and consequently, from living a life of happiness. She is poorly equipped to handle her own heart; for, the idea of her marrying for money has been so deeply instilled in her as a means of survival that she cannot escape the idea. When she begins to love Selden, she does not know how to handle her feelings.

i. In the beginning of the story, Lily bluntly states that she does not want to marry Selden: “‘But I don’t think you dislike me—and you can’t possibly think I want to marry you’ (10).

ii. As the story progresses, Lily struggles with marrying for money (in a figure such as Gryce or Rosedale) or marrying for love (Selden). After the success of her tableau vivant, Lily walks with Selden to the garden, “and for the moment it seemed to her that it was for him only she cared to be beautiful” (135).

iii. A new life seems promising for Lily when she tells Selden she is leaving the “old” Lily Bart with him: “I have kept her with me all this time, but now we are going to part, and I have brought her back to you—I am going to leave her here” (300). Yet, she cannot leave truly leave her “old self”

iv. Ultimately, Lily gives in to her love for Selden, but does so too late. It seems that as she abandons her “old” self, she inadvertently sets in motion her own death.

II. Conclusion: Lily’s upbringing causes her death.

All of the factors that act to produce the figure of Lily Bart ultimately cause her demise. When she tries to leave off her “old” self, she begins to abandon everything that she has ever known. She has no experience to draw on, no field manual to guide her through the culture of the lower classes. Because Selden does not act sooner in confessing his love to her, Lily is left alone in a world she does not understand. She does not even understand how to take care of herself on the most elementary physical level—thus she overdoses and causes her death. She is reduced to such ignorance because she has been pampered as a child her whole life. While she may be able to support herself in a social context, Lily is unaccustomed to caring for her own physical health; for, maids and mothers have always taken care of her. Her whole life experience has contributed to such ignorance.

Outside Sources to use: Mary Wolstonecraft’s “Vindication of the Rights of Men”
John Stuart Mill’s “The Subjection of Women”
In Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart is direct product of her affluent upbringing; consequently, she lacks culpability for her life’s course and inevitable demise. At an early age, Lily’s mother shapes her into a complex piece of artwork, whose primary concern for her is to remain beautiful for the purpose of marriage. Because Lily’s identity is so closely intertwined with her physical beauty, she is rendered helpless when her beauty fails to support her financially. She completely lacks the practical skills of the working class, as these were replaced by the “skills” of manipulating high society. Thus, Lily resorts to borrowing money and creates a web of debt so detrimental that it takes every last penny of her aunt’s inheritance to escape from it. Finally, Lily’s upbringing causes her to focus so completely on marrying a rich man that she denies herself a happy life with Selden. When she finally realizes how desperately she loves Selden, it is too late; she overdoses and dies before she can tell him.

Throughout the novel, Lily Bart is portrayed as an object or piece of art whose only desire is to remain beautiful so that she can marry a very wealthy man. Her objectification is first mentioned at the beginning of the story when she meets with Lawrence Selden. As he examines her, he has “a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make” (7). He intuits that she is a piece of artwork, sculpted by the prior wealth of her parents as well as the present wealth of her aunt. Furthermore, the jewelry that she wears enhances her physical beauty and thus renders her a more aesthetically pleasing piece of art. Yet, Selden also notices that within her jewelry lies a deeper, darker symbol of her materialistic upbringing. He realizes 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” (9).