

A reader comments on *The House of Mirth*

29 December 2000

To arts editor David Walsh,

I saw *The House of Mirth*, a film you reviewed to high praise some time ago, last night at an art house in Pasadena. I was so impressed by the film I had to write this note, hoping that, now that the film is being released more widely and gaining some attention because of Gillian Anderson's performance, you might convince the WSWs to re-run that particular review. Is this possible?

Though the theater was packed when I attended a performance on Christmas Day, that in itself is no guarantee that the film will find a wide audience. If not, the American public will miss out on one of the wittiest, most tragic, and most corrosive commentaries on our class system. The film is a masterpiece from any angle, completely capturing Wharton's spirit of disgust with the social milieu she so well describes and knew. But were this sociological point the only one that mattered, the movie would be a pamphlet. It is far from such, though. It also works on the human level. Its final moments were among the most moving I have seen, at least this year, and certainly since *The Thin Red Line*. It put a lump in my throat and moved me to tears: tears for Lily's tragedy at the hands of a mercilessly cannibalistic ruling elite; tears at the accomplishment of the director and the actors; tears at how magnificent Anderson is in this film. One of the most outstanding characteristics of *Mirth* is its brazen honesty and the love everyone seems to have poured into it. It made Scorsese's film, *The Age of Innocence*, seem so tepid, flat, and pretentious—so Hollywood. Director Terence Davis must be congratulated for an exceptional job.

As for the film itself, it was, technically, a masterpiece, very much on the par with *Goya in Bordeaux*, an equally wonderful, if slightly pretentious, film. Everything in *Mirth* fits: the sumptuous decor, the costumes—each served to enhance the story and give it meaning. The interplay between light and shadows was of special significance. So often light comes through a

window—the teeming life of the outside world—but the interior chambers are draped in darkness. Light beckons Lily, but her class upbringing prevents her from seeing.

What a beautiful image of Lily at the opening of the film, arrogantly and teasingly sashaying in the shadows at the train station; how beautiful, but in an opposite way, of course, her walking home in the shadows toward her doom at the end of the film: hesitantly, forlorn, totally dejected.

It's only when she has joined the “working classes” that the film lets some light finally shine fully in a non-artificial way. And wouldn't you know it? She passes by a workers' demonstration on the street, an event which is presented so subtly one almost misses it, but which nevertheless makes its social point without sacrificing character. That moment represents hope, but it's too late for Lily to see it.

I have always thought that Gillian Anderson was a superb actress waiting to break out of the *X-file* crap. She has proven it. I have gone through every terrific actress in Hollywood/Europe in my mind, and I can't think of anyone else doing the role.

Well, these are my thoughts for now. I will re-read your review again. I just hope you can publish it again. It was published too long ago for it to illuminate some of our readers, who have probably forgotten about the film by now.

Yours truly,

P.D.Q.

(TV & film actor in Hollywood)

Terence Davies' *The House of Mirth*: a comment and a press conference with the director

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