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The Heavens or the Abyss: A Reading of Edith Wharton's "The House of Mirth" as a Romance

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THE HEAVENS OR THE ABYSS:
A READING OF EDITH WHARTON’S THE HOUSE OF MIRTH AS A ROMANCE

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Although contemporary critics generally regard Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* as a social critique that exposes the abuses of a patriarchal power structure, there is a strong strain of romanticism running throughout the novel that raises questions about such strictly materialist approaches. While recent interpretations assume a close correspondence between the novel’s portrait of society and upper-class culture in turn-of-the-century New York, I argue that the world of the novel is a figurative construct that reflects Wharton’s own romantic, Manichean moral vision. Rather than simply a narrative that depicts the destruction of Lily Bart, the novel’s protagonist, by oppressive social conventions, *The House of Mirth* is also a romantic fable of a young woman’s search for a higher, spiritual existence in a dark world pervaded by a destructive, largely sexual, evil, and of the attempts that her highly flawed spiritual mentor, Lawrence Selden, makes to help her secure it.
THE HEAVENS OR THE ABYSS:
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The House of Mirth is one of those unusual novels that have always tidily occupied the place in the American literary pantry labelled "novel of manners and social criticism" to which they have been, for better or worse, assigned. While other novels have, over the years, revealed new tastes, consistencies, and textures that have necessitated reclassification on the part of critics, or have proved themselves remarkably receptive to exotic critical seasonings imported from abroad, The House of Mirth has for some reason largely remained a traditional literary staple that can be counted on to provide, time and time again, the same flavor and tang. Feminist critics and new historicists interested in consumer culture at the turn of the century have of course greatly deepened our insight into the novel, but since most of them see The House of Mirth as a social critique exposing a materialistic, patriarchal culture's foibles and failings, their approaches could be said to expand on the traditional view of the novel as social criticism rather than to depart from it.¹ If there can be said to be a change in recent critical appraisals of the novel, it seems to consist in an intensification of this traditional view, whereby Wharton's status as a social critic is enhanced by a conferral upon her of our own contemporary attitudes about gender, class, the female body, and capitalism.

The critical harvest from materialist readings has been so rich in yield that critics have not often considered
another aspect of the novel that exists uncomfortably alongside its caustic skepticism about gender roles and class. There is a powerful strain of romanticism pervading the novel that does not quite square with our contemporary view of Wharton as an imperious, dispassionate documenter of social ills. Wharton’s fierce assault on the corrupt, materialistic society of the New York elite and her shrewd, unflinching analysis of the situation of the novel’s heroine, Lily Bart, is tempered by a romantic sensibility that surfaces most noticeably in scenes in which Lily is viewed in a softer, ethereal light that reveals ideal, spiritual qualities existing underneath her hard, artificial exterior. Although some contemporary critics of the novel dismiss this romanticism as a masculine fraud perpetrated upon its impressionable heroine by Lawrence Selden, a careful reading of the novel reveals a remarkable unanimity of sentiment between the narrator and Selden. It appears in Wharton’s evident approbation of Selden’s vague, transcendental doctrine of "the republic of the spirit"; in the narrator’s intermittent tendency to see Lily through the same sentimental haze through which Selden views her; and in a generalized longing for ideal states of being in which the self can shed its cumbersome social costume and inhabit an ethereal soul-world. Nor can this strain of romanticism be tidily restricted to scenes between Selden and Lily. The novel’s unrelievedly bleak portrait of the social world, its
disinclination to provide its heroine with realistic alternatives to her empty existence as an ornamental fixture in New York high society, are elements of a romantic fatalism that has divided the novel's fictional territory into two irreconcilable strata: a dark physical world of hostile matter and an ethereal region of ideal selves. If ultimately unrealizable, this world is nevertheless wistfully evoked throughout the novel as an ideal. It is not the intention of this essay to deny the validity of feminist and materialist interpretations of *The House of Mirth*, but rather to call attention to another dimension of the novel that has been for the most part ignored.

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Wharton is usually classed as a social novelist writing in a literary tradition noted for its accurate representation of the manners of a particular class and for its ability to register all of the delicate shadings and subtle distinctions of refined social discourse. Most of the criticism of *The House of Mirth*, richly varied in perspective as it is, assumes that the novel's representation of society is mimetic. When we read the novel, readings based on this assumption promise, we are looking into a clear mirror that faithfully reflects the monied upper-class of turn-of-the-century New York. It is perhaps this assumption that accounts for the vehement, impassioned tone of some critics, who seem at times to treat the novel as if it were not fiction at all but instead a
historical document dispassionately recording the abuses of a culture of consumption and of a patriarchal power structure.\footnote{3}

In a certain sense the reader must accept this view. Wharton writes about a society so alien to what most of us know, so byzantine in its social rituals and standards of decorum, that one cannot prove that The House of Mirth does not present an accurate picture of it. The dinginess, the misery, the futile schemings of the poor are instantly recognizable to the reader, whether they appear in nineteenth century Russian or twentieth century American fiction; there is, after all, little that is new, novel about poverty. The world of the bourgeoisie, the main province of the novel, is also familiar: the tedium and dullness of Emma’s life in Madame Bovary could be transferred, without too many significant changes, to any suburban town in contemporary America. But the obscene opulence of the society portrayed in The House of Mirth is unlike anything most readers can relate to; the novel may as well take place behind the walls of the Forbidden City in Beijing, for all of its tenuous relationship to the world most of us inhabit. And so the temptation to read The House of Mirth as social history rather than a novel cast in a romantic mold--a personal, idiosyncratic vision of the world with structural peculiarities and excesses--is very great. But Wharton’s presentation of the social world has certain characteristics that cause one to wonder whether this temptation should be resisted. The completed picture has a
static, monochrome quality, a lack of fine shadings and complexity, that give it an almost allegorical character.

Certainly in the first few chapters there is little superficially to suggest that the novel is anything other than a brilliantly sharp, acid picture of a frivolous society dedicated to conspicuous displays of wealth and of its "victim" (7), Lily Bart. In its early chapters one notices no lazy tendency toward abstraction and vagueness; instead it is all briskness, sharpness, lucidity, acuity. And the novel is nowhere more shrewd and worldly than in its rapid sketch of Lily's character and its quick delineation of the elements of her destiny. Early training and the materialistic ethos of the culture she inhabits, we discover, have conspired to transform her into a collection of attractive surfaces designed to please, ingratiate, and disarm. Her mother, a rapacious shopaholic who regards Lily's beauty as an "asset" and a "weapon" (34) that can lure monied suitors and restore the family to its former state of opulence, has devoted considerable energy to the perfection of this product before it is placed on the marriage market. The product in itself is of a very high quality; surely there are few prospective brides so sure in their practice of the arts of solicitous, self-effacing flattery or so well-endowed physically as Lily. But the lavish attention devoted to the perfection of Lily's exterior has not been matched by efforts on her society's part to cultivate the self under "the hard glaze of her exterior"
(53). As Irving Howe has observed, "Lily is pitifully lacking in any core of personal being" (125). Lily's mother and the hierarchical society of wealthy New Yorkers have produced a commodity that is outwardly fine but possesses only the most rickety scaffolding of an inner self.

The clearly drawn portrait of a young woman transformed by the coarse materialism of a profligate society into a hollow assemblage of attractive surfaces is painted by a hand that takes great pains to describe those societal forces that have shaped her. Lily's weekend trip to Bellomont, where the Trenors are giving a house party for the rich and well-born, affords Wharton an early opportunity to sketch out the social world of her novel and populate it with a number of characters who will figure prominently in later chapters. Here too, clarity and objectivity are the key. Wharton's survey of this frivolous society of pleasure-seekers is undertaken by a sharp, unforgiving eye greedy for the precise detail, the acid turn of phrase that will nail down the characters like cloth figures on a felt board. And yet though there is no romantic vagueness here either--no tendency to allow the focus of the harsh realist camera recording these scenes to blur--the combined picture of this society possesses certain attributes that suggest it is in some respects a figurative rather than a completely real portrait.

This is perhaps most of all due, rather paradoxically, to Wharton's fierce, caustic style. The prose itself is
exceedingly lively and inventive, brilliant in its corrosive portraits of the idle party-goers at Bellomont, but in a certain sense it is not a good medium for conveying the vitality of its own characters; its effect is surreal rather than real. The verbal ingenuity evident in the description of Bertha Dorset as "smaller and thinner than Lily Bart, with a restless pliability of pose, as if she could have been crumpled up and run through a ring" (23) and in the comment that Percy Gryce "looked like a clever pupil’s drawing from a plaster-cast--while Gwen [Van Osburgh]’s countenance had no more modeling than a face painted on a toy balloon" (48) gives great pleasure, but the prose, constantly slipping into metaphors that describe the characters in terms of objects or animals, has the effect of dehumanizing every character it touches. Rather than a living pageant of fully fleshed-out individuals, Wharton paints a satiric frieze populated largely by allegorical, two-dimensional personifications of vice: the dark witch Bertha, representation of illicit sexuality; coarse, bloated, grossly sensual Gus Trenor, Bertha’s male counterpart; vacuous Judy, an empty-headed Vesta dutifully tending the fire of social protocols. It could of course be argued that this mode of representation is appropriate for a class of people who have sacrificed their inner lives to the pursuit of money and pleasure. But in another sense they are emblematic, symbolic figures typical of the romance rather than completely realistic portraits. Richard Chase,
discussing the differences between the "novel" and the "romance," has observed that the romance can flourish without providing much intricacy of relation. The characters, probably rather two-dimensional types, will not be complexly related to each other....Human beings will on the whole be shown in ideal relation--that is, they will share emotions only after these have become abstract or symbolic. To be sure, characters may become profoundly involved in some way...but it will be a deep, and narrow, an obsessive, involvement. (13)

The great majority of the characters in *The House of Mirth*, and the relationships they have with each other, illustrate these qualities to a remarkable degree.

Once one begins to question the realism of the novel's social milieu, Lily's status as the naturalistic heroine of a realist novel becomes problematic. If the society that has formed her is not quite "real," then Lily, supposedly shaped by this society, cannot be interpreted in a realistic light either. And indeed a careful examination of Lily's character reveals that her relation to her milieu is not a completely realistic one. In some respects, as we have noted, she is the naturalistic "product" of social forces, the "victim of the society which has produced her" (7). And yet she is not a microcosm of its assumptions and prejudices; Wharton has endowed her with certain attributes that place her at a magical remove from it. Endowed with an extraordinary outward beauty and "all sorts of intuitions, sensations, and perceptions" (48) that raise her above "the lower organisms" (21), Lily is held curiously aloof from the personifications
of greed, gluttony and lust that surround her. "Specialized" and "exquisite" (5), fine and rare, Lily moves through her social milieu not only as an actual woman negotiating the complex hurdles of social intercourse, but also as a saint traversing a dark, fallen world, horrified by its unlikeness to the ideal realm she dreams of inhabiting but protected from its corrupting influence by some special otherworldly aura of grace and beauty. Lily is in servitude to this world, true; there is much "social drudgery" (39) to perform and many onerous social conventions to observe, but she is not yet a card-carrying member; that is, she has not married. It is Wharton’s mysterious preservation of her heroine from marriage, her thwarting of the conventional plot lines of realist fiction in which attractive, impecunious young women inevitably do marry no matter how "exquisite" or "special" they may be, that is most of all responsible for the novel’s tendency to stray outside of the bounds of the plausible and realistic.

Lily is a perfect candidate for marriage to one of the scions of the New York elite, but the last step in a brilliant social career has mysteriously not been taken. Her failure to wed is not because of a lack of opportunities; rather, it has to do with Wharton’s dark, superstitious conception of what marriage means for her heroine. What gradually becomes clear is that for Lily, marriage would be a debasing, defiling act rather than the unfortunate, dreary surrender to necessity
that it is for heroines of novels of a more realistic nature. In *Daniel Deronda*, in *Middlemarch*, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, for instance, the heroines follow the familiar arc from innocence to experience. In an unhappy marriage there is suffering, the destruction of youthful illusion, and the diminution of vitality. But in such misalliances the heroines may experience moral growth, a shedding of youthful self-absorption that may enable them to take action in the world rather than float at an enchanted distance from it. In *The House of Mirth*, on the other hand, there is a strong suggestion that marriage for Lily would mean not only a loss of freedom, but also a descent into an abyss of sexual pollution and an appalling transformation into a lower form of life. This suggestion is not only made by the suitors and admirers Wharton provides for her--who, with the notable exception of Selden, are at best materialistic connoisseurs and collectors like Sim Rosedale and Percy Gryce and at worst virtual rapists like Gus Trenor. Bertha Dorset, a dark allegorical double, also suggests the sexual corruption that would ensue from a successful marriage. Rather than have Lily undergo this metamorphosis, the novel prefers to freeze its heroine and the social world she inhabits into a static, allegorical tableaux that affectingly represents extraordinary beauty and purity stranded helplessly in a hollow, monstrous world of carnality.

While it is possible to view Wharton's presentation of
New York's upper crust as essentially mimetic, the social
terms in which the narrative's conflicts are portrayed--the
struggle between the dissenting individual and an oppressive
society--mask a more primitive, visceral set of conflicts: the
pure soul attempting to preserve its integrity in a fallen
physical world and to discover some ideal, spiritual form of
existence detached from the coarse concerns of the body. A
careful reading of the novel suggests that the novel's
submerged, romantic self has a great influence on the events
taking place on its surface.

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If the novel's romanticism appears only obliquely in the
presentation of the social world Lily inhabits, it emerges
quite openly when Lawrence Selden assumes a prominent place in
the narrative during Chapters Four and Five. Indeed
throughout The House of Mirth Selden's appearance will shift
the focus of the narrative's lens away from the dark social
sphere to an ethereal region where spiritual values seem to
take precedence over material ones, "real selves" emerge from
their shells, and "indwelling voice[s]" call "to the other
across unsounded depths of feeling" (72). His presence also
causes a distinct change in the narrative's style: the
aggressive, satirical tone softens, the prose loses its harsh
particularity of focus, and vague, faintly romantic
abstractions proliferate, as when we learn, near the close of
the novel, that "something lived between [Selden and
Lily]...and leaped up in her like an imperishable flame: it was the love his love had kindled, the passion of her soul for his" (309). There has been, however, a great unwillingness among some critics, such as Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Linda Wagner Martin, to acknowledge that the romanticism that Selden brings to the novel is a manifestation of Wharton’s own romantic ethos. Rather than see the romanticism with which he is associated as an integral part of the novel, they prefer to attribute all of it to Selden, whom they view as a villain just as victimizing to Lily as the other members of the materialistic society from which she wishes to escape. In their attempts to deny any sympathy or kinship between Wharton and Selden, they have severely distorted his role in the novel and consequently its meaning as a whole.

What appears to be responsible for this distortion is a desire to purge Wharton and her novel of all sentiments that do not sit well with our modern sensibilities. There is a certain wish, one senses, on the part of many critics to endow Wharton with our contemporary shrewdness about gender roles and our caustic suspicion of romantic abstractions, as well as a hesitancy to recognize in her certain assumptions about relationships between men and women that we consider unworthy of someone of Wharton’s biting intelligence and perspicacity. We are comfortable with the Wharton who brilliantly satirizes the materialistic society of which Lily is in some sense a victim. Her slashing, acid exposure of their foibles and
failings and sympathetic portrait of Lily nicely accommodate the contemporary view that *The House of Mirth* is about "the psychological disfigurement of any woman who chooses to accept society's definition of her as a beautiful object and nothing more" (Wolff 110). But when the novel slips into another vocabulary and outlook, there is confusion. Why, we ask, does the novel that seems so contemporary in its wary understanding of gender roles in a patriarchal society seem to regress in certain places into a gusty romantic diction and outlook? The most convenient and easy answer is that this language and perspective do not reflect Wharton's views at all, but only the deluded viewpoint of Selden. If Selden can be shown to be an antagonist, and the romanticism in the novel as an element of which he is the sole purveyor, then Wharton's status as an objective documenter of the abuses of a patriarchal power structure can be preserved.

And indeed there are good reasons to embrace this view. The most prominent of them is simply Selden's unattractiveness as a character: it is difficult to believe that Wharton could hold much sympathy for him. He appears noble, sensitive, and intelligent at one moment but displays a chilly aloofness and conceitedness at others that quite tarnishes him as a sympathetic character. Indeed Wharton herself described him, in a letter to her friend Sara Norton, as a "negative hero" (qtd. in Lewis 155). But one cannot split the first word from the second and concentrate solely on it, as some critics have
mistakenly done, without considering what the combined phrase implies. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in an otherwise brilliant study of the novel, declares that Selden "is nothing more than the unthinking, self-satisfied mouthpiece for the worst of society's prejudices" (111), and Linda Wagner Martin has written of his "vacuous and offensive hypocrisy" (40). And yet, difficult as it is to acknowledge, the viewpoints and attitudes of Selden and Wharton intersect with a frequency that would appear to challenge the contemporary view that Selden is a malefactor rather than--to repeat Wharton's phrase again--a "negative hero," someone who possesses admirable traits but is incapable of deploying them in a way that can save and redeem. Wagner Martin, evidently cognizant of the problem posed by the occasional conjoining of the narrator's perspective and Selden's, has cleverly argued that when the narrator adopts, or comes close to, Selden's viewpoint she is being ironic in order to satirize him and expose his hypocrisy; she goes on to say that Wharton deliberately tells much of her story through his perspective in order to emphasize the point that "only the male characters in The House of Mirth have necessary information" (17). But Wagner Martin's view appears to be an artful attempt to deny what the novel clearly suggests: Selden receives the approval of Wharton herself, who reveals herself to be quite sympathetic to his romantic notions of selfhood. The bleak, oppressive social world that she has constructed does not, as we shall
see, permit such notions to be put in practice, but the wish, the desire that they might be realized are Wharton’s as well as Selden’s.

Some materialist readings of the novel cast Selden as an apostle of patriarchy who differs from the other men in the novel only in a foolish aestheticism that is just as victimizing to Lily as Rosedale’s acquisitiveness and Trenor’s salacious advances, but he is far more similar to Lily in temperament and situation than to Lily’s male oppressors. Selden and Lily are less masculine aggressor and female victim than spiritual kin estranged from each other by the seductions and entrapments of the dark, fallen world they unhappily traverse. Over and over again their superiority, their specialness, their delicacy is emphasized in a way that yokes them together in a kind of figurative association. In Chapter One Selden compares Lily to the dingy throng of women in Grand Central Station and asks himself whether "it was possible that she belonged to the same race? The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was" (5). Several chapters later Lily looks at Selden and uses the exact same phrases in her appraisal of him: he has, we learn, "keenly-modelled dark features which...gave him the air of belonging to a more specialized race" (65). Both are fastidious in their tastes, and are imbued with a vague idealism drastically unsuited to the coarse world they inhabit. But "shades of the prison house"
have begun to close around these spiritually refined sojourners; the corrupting influence of the world has dimmed the unworldly glow that surrounds each. Lily, who once "liked to think of her beauty as a power for good" (35) has indentured herself to a vulgar faction of wealthy materialists who regard her as little more than an attractive ornament, and Selden, though he still searches for an unearthly Beatrice who can usher him into a spiritual realm of light, has meanwhile become captivated by the decidedly earthly attractions of Bertha Dorset. Rather than oppressor and victim, Selden and Lily are an errant Adam and Eve who have become separated from each other after expulsion from the garden, but are eager to renew this severed connection and restore themselves to a lost paradise.

Selden is arguably a less committed seeker of a higher, spiritual existence than Lily, for he displays little consciousness that his casual affairs with women like Bertha Dorset seriously compromise his idealism, and his sententious disapproval of Lily's comparatively minor offenses against his lofty creed suggests a shallow, niggardly nature. Lily, meanwhile, shows far more awareness of her own character flaws and the sordid compromises she makes with society; and her desire for deliverance from the shallow pleasure-world she inhabits is more impassioned than his pallid, lukewarm aspirations for a utopic "republic of the spirit." Nevertheless, Wharton assigns Selden a prominent role in the
novel's central drama, which concerns Lily's awakening from a state of spiritual darkness and her desperate attempts to secure an elusive salvation. The part he plays is that of spiritual savior, brother, and guide. He is to make Lily cognizant of her enslavement to the physical world and then initiate her into a new spiritual order. Perhaps by endowing Selden with this in many ways undeserved position Wharton intended to make the point that in a fallen, corrupt world, even those few individuals who speak on behalf of virtue and truth are nevertheless tainted with the corruption around them. But that Wharton sanctions Selden's efforts to spiritually awaken Lily seems clear, although Wharton does not endow him with enough strength or insight to save Lily and will not, as Irving Howe has written, "allow [him] to serve as a voice of final judgment in the novel" (120).

Selden begins fulfilling the duties of this role in the very first chapter of the novel, apparently with Wharton's complete approbation. He is her fictional accomplice in underscoring Lily's bondage to the dark social world she inhabits and in illuminating rare, fine, spiritual attributes that have been concealed under the hard surface of her social self. Wharton wishes the reader to see Lily as the victim of a crass, materialistic society; Selden makes this perception possible when we learn, through his perspective, that Lily "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" (7). Wharton also wishes to suggest that a nascent spiritual self is germinating under her polished exterior, that there are rare, unusual attributes in Lily that distinguish her from the coarse society in which she circulates. Selden alerts us to these elements in her character by perceiving a "streak of sylvan freedom" (13) in her and by comparing her to a "captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing room" (13)--a phrase that perfectly captures the enslavement to societal convention and the spiritual potentialities that are the two defining characteristics of Lily. Some critics, clinging tenaciously to the view that Selden is an antagonist who wishes to transform Lily into an abstract embodiment of his own ideals, seem determined to interpret his every observation and thought in the worst light possible. Elaine Showalter, for instance, writes that "'the streak of sylvan freedom' [Selden] perceives in her is rather what he would make of her, and we are reminded that Ezra Pound at this same period was imposing the title 'Dryad' on the equally plastic H.D." (140). But surely it is a willful misreading of the most basic fictional signs and signals to deny that Wharton wishes us to see Lily's extraordinary beauty as a sign of a bounteous human nature wasted on costly display and vulgar show, and of spiritual potentialities within. Although Selden is not an omniscient, or very sympathetic, interpreter of Lily's character, very few of his attitudes toward Lily diverge significantly from the
narrator's.

After Selden and Lily's meeting in his apartment in Chapter One, Selden disappears for a few chapters in order that the vacuousness and barrenness of the society Lily inhabits may be presented without the ameliorating presence of a character who may offer her a way of escape or an alternative ethos. When he does arrive at Bellomont as a guest at the same Trenor house party where Lily is spending the weekend, he takes a much firmer command of the role of spiritual guide and adviser that Wharton has assigned him. The first duty he performs is to let "the dusty daylight" in (55) on a corrupt social world that Lily has heretofore inhabited with complacency. At the dinner table at Bellomont, Lily for the first time "scan[s] her little world through his retina" and finds its denizens "dreary," "trivial," and in fact rather horrific (55); Wharton, in her survey of the assembled dinner guests, once again uses figurative expressions that emphasize their inhumanity (Gus Trenor, "with his heavy carnivorous head" [55] is described as "prey[ing] on a jellied plover," and his wife Judy, "with her glaring good looks," as "a jeweller's window lit by electricity" [55]). But Selden's role is two-part: he is present not only to alert Lily to the darkness of the social sphere, but also to throw open the door to an ideal alternative realm governed by the principles of spiritual freedom. For Selden, it is revealed, has "the happy air...of having points of contact outside the
great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to
gape at" (54). We suddenly learn that the "door" blocking the
way to the world "outside the cage" is not shut (54): "In
reality, as she knew, the door never clanged; it stood always
open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle,
and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom"
(54-55).

Selden, in the course of two chapters, produces a
revolutionary alteration in the novel's heretofore grim
presentation of Lily's character. Before Selden's arrival,
the reader has been encouraged to see Lily as helplessly
confined to a frivolous, artificial pleasure world, doomed to
a dull marriage with a Percy Gryce or to a life of poverty
should she fail to achieve it. Although there are occasional
suggestions that she may possess a certain inner spiritual
vitality, the novel has mainly portrayed Lily as the product
of environmental forces that have conspired to rob her of her
inner life and transform her into an attractive collection of
surfaces. But Selden's arrival, and the suggestion that a
door to another world may be open, radically alters the
external, naturalistic view of Lily: if the cage door is open,
and Lily can exit at will, then Lily cannot truly be said to
be the helpless victim of social forces. And in the next
chapter, when Lily passes through the door, a "new" Lily is
revealed as well. Selden will call forth a nascent "real
self" that has been concealed under the hard shell of her
social persona, and the spiritual potentialities that have so far only been intimated will be revealed in more definite shape and outline. With the emergence of this new self, the objective, epigrammatic prose that documented Lily’s extraordinary efforts to present a pleasing exterior and placate those to whom she owes monetary and social debts is replaced by an abstract style more suited to interior, spiritual states of being.

The new prose style and the new self become evident only when Lily and Selden have moved through the "door" leading into the other world. The door, rather disappointingly, does not open into a real world of money and work where Lily and Selden might establish a viable life together through determination and effort. Instead, it opens into an Edenic pastoral realm whose connection to reality is tenuous at best. Yet in presenting a "figurative" realm rather than a realistic one, the novel is only being faithful to the romantic model on which its architecture is based. To first present a dark social world peopled by grotesque allegorical personifications of vice and then to shift abruptly to a "real" realm inhabited by fully fleshed-out individuals in whom good and evil are combined in more complex proportions would violate the romantic symmetry of the novel. But supplementing the dark social Tartarus with a parallel world of spirituality--and the false social self with a spiritual, "real" self, a harsh prose style with a softer one--is an artistically sound fictional
strategy, given the tenor of the opening chapters. Selden is the fictional representative of this ethereal realm, just as Gus Trenor, Bertha Dorset, and Simon Rosedale alternately take on the role of ambassador for the novel’s social Hades. As such Selden is not a villain importing a corrupting romantic ethos into a realistic novel, as some seem to view him, but a crucial player in a novel designed on a romantic model.

The exultant, romantic language that proliferates in Chapter Six, the circumstances under which Lily and Selden depart from the social world, and the radiance and brightness that pervade the scene make it clear that the characters’ excursion into the countryside is not simply a brief departure from society but an entrance into a different fictional realm where spiritual values preside. At the beginning of Chapter Six, Lily and Selden forgo Christian worship at the chapel near Bellomont and seek the shrine of their own quasi-religion in the countryside. Both leave the sides of their profane earthly mates (Selden forgoes his intimate tête-à-tête with the salacious Bertha Dorset, and Lily abandons her materialistic suitor, Percy Gryce) and shed their social selves in order to wander, for a few golden moments, in a "zone of lingering summer" where "stillness and brightness" preside (63). Filled with light and warmth, reached only by an arduous ascent to a high rock overlooking a "sun-suffused world" (64), threatened, but not yet overtaken by the autumn that has encroached on the surrounding countryside, this is
clearly a figurative zone of the spirit.

Lily, upon entering it, undergoes a remarkable transformation. Attaining these heights has produced a sense of "buoyancy" (64), "lightness," and "emancipation" (65) in her, as well as an inner revolution that is described in the novel’s "new" style: a vague, exultant language very different from the harsh, concrete prose that has previously been used to analyze her character:

There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive’s gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them: the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the free spirit quivered for flight. (64)

This passage, of course, announces the birth of Lily’s "real self" that will exist uncomfortably alongside her false social self throughout the rest of the novel. Although the latter will for long periods of time eclipse the former, the "real self" will emerge whenever the ambassador of the republic of the spirit, Lawrence Selden, draws near, as in Chapter Eight, when Selden’s disdainful observation of Lily practicing her usual social arts at the Stepney wedding causes her to look "at him helplessly, like a hurt or frightened child: this real self of hers, which he had the faculty of drawing out of the depths, was so little accustomed to go alone" (95). By ushering Lily into this spiritual realm, Selden clearly does accomplish the objectives Wharton has charged him with: he has made Lily more cognizant of the emptiness of the social world
which she had before inhabited complacently, and he has coaxed Lily's dormant "real self" out of its hard social shell.

The centerpiece of the pastoral scene is of course Selden's discourse on the republic of the spirit, a central tenet of his transcendental doctrine. Before hearing this sermon, Lily undergoes a prefatory humbling in the form of disparaging remarks from Selden, who describes her as a "spectacle" and an "artist" whose chief talent is her capacity to "produce premeditated effects extemporaneously" (66). Lily bridles at these comments, which are evidently intended to emphasize her preoccupation with external things and her need of spiritual enlightenment, but she nevertheless recognizes them as accurate and "acute" (66). They are any rate in the same vein as remarks the narrator has made about her (i.e. in the previous chapter we learn that Lily, sauntering along a wood path in hopes that Selden will follow, chooses a "rustic seat" in a "charming" spot because "the combination of a handsome girl and a romantic setting struck her as too good to be wasted" [61]). It is difficult, therefore, to see Selden's comments as evidence that his "assessment of Lily...deal[s] almost entirely with externals" (Wolff 122). The narrator, though she of course is far more understanding than Selden of the reasons why Lily is enslaved to surfaces, shares Selden's view that Lily is spiritually impoverished and in need of guidance.

Nor does the narrator appear to censure or satirize the
"republic of the spirit," a mystical state of freedom from "money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents" (68). Indeed Selden's statement of faith seems to clearly articulate the values that were only implied in the narrator's corrosive appraisal of the inhabitants of the social world. Was it not the intention of this acid survey to censure greed, materialism, sexual misbehavior? All that had been lacking was a statement of moral positives that would act as a counterpoise to the corrupt values of New York society. In Chapter Six, they are clearly set out: spiritual freedom, detachment from material things. Although Wharton does alert us to Selden's failure to live by his own moral tenets, she does not appear to regard his teachings themselves with scorn and cynicism, nor does she encourage the reader to do so. Rather, Wharton intends the reader, like Lily, to be drawn to Selden's moral vision, which is like an oasis in the midst of the vast desert of the social sphere. "I have known, I have known!" Lily cries, like a parishioner testifying at a revival. "Whenever I see you, I find myself spelling out a letter of the sign--and yesterday--last evening at dinner--I suddenly saw a little way into your republic" (68).

The republic of the spirit does, however, possess certain attributes that make one hesitate to conclude that a dutiful adherence to its principles would be a solution to Lily's problems. In most contemporary critical appraisals of the novel, Selden is most frequently inculpated for the republic's
readily apparent flaws. The main charges made against him are that his doctrines are too amorphous for practical application, and that he is not of much assistance to Lily in her attempts to live up to his lofty standards. And there are certainly some good grounds for these judgments. The republic’s intense, militant otherworldliness, its radical irreconcilability with the real world of money and work, do not make it an ideal of much use to complex human beings in a complex world. Because the doctrine is so dauntingly abstract, it is not surprising that Lily has great difficulty putting it into practice once she resumes her life in the social sphere. And certainly it is true that Selden is not of much help in her attempts to reconcile spiritual values with material ones. Instead of helping her find compromises between the ideal and the real, and a new form of female selfhood in which spiritual ideals and practical realities are successfully synthesized, he simply demands that she reject the material world entirely, which is not a viable option for the adherents of any religious creed. In effect, Selden invalidates Lily’s old social self by drawing her attention to its emptiness and spiritual impoverishment, but does not give her the materials to construct a new self. Cynthia Griffin Wolff rightly argues that it is no wonder that Lily displays some hesitation to enter the republic, "given the flimsiness of Selden’s lofty moral system and--even more significant--given his incapacity to cast off his own cold disdain and
guide her through her moments of uncertainty" (124-25). As Lily herself protests, "Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead" (72)?

But Lily's impassioned question, and the critics' charges that Selden's heady doctrine is too vague for practical application, might just as well be directed at Wharton herself. It might be possible to indict Selden for Lily's failure to forge a viable form of selfhood in which spiritual ideals and practical realities are reconciled if he could be shown to import a pernicious romantic mythology into a book whose author opposes his values. But as we have seen, this does not seem to be the case; rather, Selden is only one part, though an important one, of a larger romantic fictional design that makes such compromises and discoveries virtually impossible. The House of Mirth's view of the world is, it becomes clear, Manichean. Its fictional landscape consists, as we have seen, of two radically polarized "realms": a social abyss populated by archetypes of vice and folly, and an amorphous heaven of spiritual bliss. And the values and forms of identity that proceed from these two "realms" are similarly polarized and inflexible. The novel does not show much interest in the imperfect truces that complex human beings forge between ideals and practical realities, good and evil, the false and the true. Those messy compromises are the province of the social novel, with its stress on bringing
order to disorder, its emphasis on reconciliation and community. The House of Mirth, on the other hand, seems to be informed by an "imagination....less interested in redemption than in the melodrama of the eternal struggle of good and evil, less interested in incarnation and reconciliation than in alienation and disorder" (Chase 11).

Selden's actual role in the novel becomes clear when the novel's system of polarized realms and values is recognized. Although Selden clearly possesses certain traits that would seem to identify him as an oppressive representative of a patriarchal power structure, his most important role in the novel is to set the conflict between ideals and cold realities in motion in the central figure of Lily. He shows her the emptiness and barrenness of the social world and awakens a latent spirituality in her. Wharton fully supports him in this mission; she too censures materialism, sexual misbehavior, greed, and she is also sympathetic to his notion of spiritual selves. She does not grant Selden or his doctrine the strength to save Lily, for she is not interested in the resolution of the conflict she has set up, but only in the conflict itself. Lily's vain, unsuccessful struggle to reconcile the ideal with the real, the false with the true, is what constitutes the central drama of the novel: it is the considerable tension that arises from this conflict that gives the novel its powerful, visceral appeal. If Selden were capable of providing an alternative life for Lily, and if his
doctrine were one applicable to the complexities of day to day life, then the sharply drawn lines that separate the realms of dark and light, the real self and the false social self, would blur and thereby upset the romantic symmetry of the novel, as well as diminish the tensions such a design creates.

If one is therefore looking for someone or something to "blame" for Lily's failure to reconcile the real and the ideal, then the logical choice would be the dark moral vision of Wharton herself, who has constructed a novel in which such compromises are impossible. But of course this kind of scapegoat-seeking is somewhat beside the point. Although it is a worthwhile endeavor to ask whether a novelist's moral vision is "good" or "bad," one of the primary questions readers of a novel should ask themselves is whether that novelist has been able to dramatize that moral vision successfully. The House of Mirth very expertly does this, as becomes increasingly apparent once Lily reenters the social world after her pastoral sojourn at Bellomont.

The Manichean division of the House of Mirth into realms of dark and light is made fully apparent by the precipitous plunge in Lily's social and financial assets once she returns to the social sphere. The overarching fictional scheme that controls the novel's action has evidently arranged that any journey, however brief, into the realm of "real selves" results in a severe, punitive reduction of her status in the
"real world." Once Lily arrives back at Bellomont after her pastoral sojourn, she finds that her position and power there have, during only a few hours' absence, rapidly deteriorated. Bertha Dorset has moved in and engaged in a sly form of character assassination, causing the diffident Percy Gryce to reconsider marrying Lily and set his sights on a safe girl who doesn't smoke or engage in other questionable pursuits. His sudden retreat causes an abrupt decline in Lily's financial prospects, which she had imprudently imagined to be rosy. Once these imaginary coffers are emptied out, Lily must seek financial assistance from the bloated, grossly sensual Gus Trenor in a profane pastoral ride in the country outside Bellomont that darkly duplicates her ethereal walk with Selden in the preceding chapter. Although Trenor will considerably increase Lily's dwindling cash flow, her request sets off a chain of unfortunate consequences that will lead to her destruction at the end of the novel. The uncanny, mathematical neatness of this series of dire events—which occur, one after the other, like a series of tumblers in a lock orderly falling into place—would not be very plausible in a more realistic novel. But this cold logicality of plot is entirely appropriate for a novel that has determined that its two realms of dark and light are so opposed that any time spent in one results in a penalizing reduction of status in the other.

The possibilities for selfhood undergo a similar kind of
deterioration after Lily returns from the Bellomont pastoral stroll. The scene on the hill outside Bellomont--filled as it is with exultant language of flight and light, of "brightness" (63), "buoyancy" (64), "the harmony of things" (64)--appears to open up new conceptions of identity for Lily as broad and expansive as the landscape Selden and Lily look over; indeed, during the scene a new spiritual "real self" emerges in her that will fitfully flare up in her throughout the novel. But when she reenters the social world the possibilities for female selfhood offered to her are unappealing in some cases and in others even horrific. It is customary among critics to attribute Lily’s failure to find a viable identity as an adult woman to the oppressive society she inhabits, which presents few roles for women other than bride and wife.\(^7\) And of course there are good grounds for this judgment. But to the already severe restrictions that early twentieth century American society placed upon women’s lives Wharton adds others that arise not so much from the historical situation of women during the time period as from the romantic polarities of the novel itself, which has decreed that the glorious ideal of selfhood revealed in the pastoral realm in Chapter Six will be matched by coarse, drastically unappealing models of self in the social sphere, of whom the two primary representatives are Gerty Farish and Bertha Dorset.

The reader has already been alerted as early as Chapter Three that an identity similar to Gerty Farish’s was the one
alternative to Lily's role as an attractive drawing room ornament in the opulent houses of the New York elite ("What choice had she? To be herself, or a Gerty Farish" [25]), a notion that had seemed unnaturally restrictive even then. For one might expect that a novel set in the teeming, vibrant city of New York, and one very much concerned with the question of what constitutes a viable female self, might adventurously seek out more complex, less constricted forms of female identity that might lurk in the spaces outside the cramped pleasure-world Lily inhabits. Given the enormous range of human "types" that such a setting would seem to provide a novelist, there seems to be no reasonable justification for choosing the drab, drearily virtuous Gerty as the only option for Lily. Nor does the addition of Bertha Dorset to the roster of alternative selves significantly expand the novel's narrow view of female identity. But of course Gerty and Bertha are less realistic portraits than allegorical doubles who are intended, by their drabness and hideousness, to contrast strikingly with the golden model of selfhood unveiled in the pastoral scene at Bellomont, and thereby assist in Wharton's portrayal of the social world as a dark Tartarus where ideals are extinguished.

That many of the female characters in the novel are in some sense allegorical figures or doubles has often been recognized by critics. Carol Baker Sapora, for instance, has written that Wharton borrows the convention of fictional
doubles from nineteenth century male novelists, who use it to present various conflicting aspects of a hero’s self. Joan Lidoff, in a psychological interpretation of *The House of Mirth*, has similarly noted that some of the female characters are "projections of unintegrated fragments of [Lily’s] personality" (522), and Elaine Showalter has commented on "Wharton’s pairing of Lily Bart with her nemesis, Bertha Dorset" (146). Later in the novel, Carry Fisher will emerge as another significant player in this pageant of doubles, but Bertha and Gerty are arguably the central figures of this allegorical system.

These two characters have a double function in the novel. On a superficial level, they embody the two social roles that are available to Lily: an independent life as a philanthropic spinster and the wealthy, dissolute life of a society wife. But on a more figurative level, they are allegorical types in the novel’s spiritual drama depicting the conflict between dark and light realms. Gerty is a disappointingly drab representation of the incarnation the "real self" can take in a dark, fallen world, and Bertha is a personification of the sexual evil that Wharton consistently associates with the social sphere. Lawrence Selden, intimately tied to both women, is the character who unites the two figures into a kind of primitive triptych of female identity. Lily will stand uncertainly before it throughout the remainder of the novel, looking to Selden, the undependable guru of selfhood.
positioned in the middle, for guidance about what form of identity she should take and then gazing disappointedly at the two figures on either side of him, who represent its possible incarnations—dull, drab, "good" Gerty and demonic, hypersexual, "bad" Bertha. It might be objected that this highly restrictive picture of female identity—with its neat division of women into sybaritic temptresses and desexualized spinsters—is one created by the patriarchal society of which Selden is a representative. Yet Wharton herself demonstrates fairly conclusively, as we shall see, that she also believes it to be an accurate picture.

The narrator ensures that neither Gerty nor Bertha can serve as a viable alternative for Lily by portraying them in a distinctly negative light. Gerty—representative of an independent female life and deeply flawed embodiment of the citizen of the republic of the spirit—is of course treated less harshly by the narrator than Bertha, but she does not emerge as an appealing character. Her life is not a pretty picture: oddly enough, she is Lily's opposite in every way. Drab, poor, dingy, Gerty, in Lily's words, "has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap" (7). Lily concedes that Gerty's charity work is an honorable occupation but then she makes the derisive comment that "there was something irritating in her assumption that existence yielded no higher pleasures" (89). The narrator's attitude toward
Gerty is similar to Lily’s. A novelist is usually more tolerant of such stock types, even if they cannot, because of their lack of ameliorating physical charms, take a leading role; but Wharton is merciless in her exposure of Gerty’s shortcomings. At the Van Osburgh wedding, we learn that Gerty "typified the mediocre and the ineffectual" (88), and that "her eyes were of a workaday gray and her lips without haunting curves" (88). A little later the narrator informs the reader that Gerty is a "parasite in the moral order" because of her craven, shrinking tendency to derive vicarious thrills from the joys of other people (149). Wharton also appears to share Lily’s and her mother’s distaste for dinginess and drabness: her heavy reliance on Gerty’s dull appearance and dreary accommodations to make the point that the independent, alternative form of life she represents is not an option for the scintillatingly beautiful Lily makes this clear. The underlying implication of Wharton’s portrayal of Gerty is that if Lily removed herself from the marriage market and made an independent life for herself, the result would be a fairy-tale-like leeching of her beauty. The kind of superstitious assumptions about identity evident in Wharton’s portrayal of Gerty would not of course be very plausible in a novel cast in a more realistic mold, but they are entirely appropriate for a novel like The House of Mirth.

Gerty is not only a representation of an independent female life; she is also to some degree an embodiment of the
"real self" that Selden awakens in Lily during their pastoral retreat in chapter six—or rather she is the coarsened, dingy form it takes when it is transferred from the vague region of the spirit to the "real world," where everything, in Wharton's view, is debased, grotesque, "fallen" in an almost Christian sense. Gerty does embody, insofar as the novel's extremely circumscribed view of human possibility permits her, the attributes of Selden's republic of the spirit: "freedom from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents" (68). She eschews material things (though she likes to enjoy them vicariously); she is an ascetic; and she is also, interestingly, celibate, a state which Selden disingenuously says is not necessary for admittance into the republic but is obviously a much-desired credential. But of course Wharton does not at all intend the reader to see Gerty as an attractive, successful model citizen of the republic. By making her dingy, unattractive, miserably infatuated with Selden without any way of satisfying her longing, and deeply dissatisfied with her role as virtuous spinster, Wharton reveals that the glowingly idealistic concept of selfhood described at Bellomont can take only a coarse, unattractive shape in the social sphere. Wharton's aggressively negative characterization of Gerty makes an independent, virtuous life virtually impossible for Lily, and ensures that compromises between her social self and "real self" will not be reached.

Bertha Dorset is the opposite of Gerty: she is an
embodiment of the socially powerful, but corrupt figure Lily might become should she realize her ambitions to make a successful marriage in this society. Throughout the novel it is emphasized that none of Lily’s small errors of judgment and improvident actions would have the dire consequences that they do if she were safely protected from social censure by the teflon coating of marriage. In fact, during the latter half of the novel, many of the characters repeatedly press Lily to marry, assuring her that it is her only defense against Bertha Dorset’s formidable arsenal of malicious gossip and calumny. And marriage is of course the surest way to satisfy her appetite for opulent gowns and expensive household appointments. But with marriage comes sexual experience, and this aspect of human experience is presented by Wharton as a pernicious, corrupting force. Bertha is the primary means through which the novel makes this form of evil—which Wharton consistently associates with society—manifest. As a horrific, archetypal figure of sexual experience and its ruinous consequences, Bertha negates marriage and adult sexual life as an option for Lily, just as Gerty makes an independent virtuous life virtually impossible.

Bertha is an aggressor. She does not, like Gerty, hover meekly on the horizon of Lily’s world, beckoning ineffectually for her to come join her in a life of dingy spinsterhood; rather, she is a dark double who accompanies Lily throughout the novel, sabotaging her attempts to marry, rehabilitate her
soiled social image, and install herself in a new social milieu. The heated conflict between Bertha and Lily is superficially that of the society woman who has social power and the woman who does not, but the deeper, underlying conflict is the familiar struggle between the dark lady of sexual experience and the chaste maiden who has none. Bertha’s goal in this underlying conflict is to efface Lily’s pure, untainted persona and replace it with a corrupt self much like her own. In the early chapters of the novel, the conflict is a kind of petty tit for tat, but it quickly intensifies as the novel progresses.

At the beginning of Chapter Two, Bertha materializes on the train to Bellomont and foils Lily’s attempts to present herself to Gryce as a virtuous girl without coarse social habits by asking for a cigarette, fully aware that Lily has sworn off them in order to complete her courtship. At Bellomont, Bertha’s tactics become bolder. Lily finds herself "the centre of that feminine solicitude which envelops a young woman in the mating season" (46), but Bertha does not participate in this scheme to facilitate Lily’s courtship of Gryce. There is, for instance, a strong suggestion that she is trying to seduce him when Lily, climbing the stairs to her bedroom, observes that "Mrs. George Dorset, glittering in serpentine spangles, drew Percy Gryce in her wake to a confidential nook beneath the gallery" (25). Later, Bertha blackens Lily’s reputation to Gryce while Lily is on her
pastoral retreat with Lawrence Selden, another man whom Bertha has captivated through her skills as a seducer. Indeed it is Bertha's sexuality--presented as a kind of toxic substance contaminating everything it touches--that is most threatening to Lily. When Lily is presented with love letters from Bertha to Selden in Chapter Nine by the destitute cleaning woman, Mrs. Haffen, Lily's "strongest sense was one of personal contamination" (104). Later, at Monte Carlo, Bertha will succeed in sending a toxic cloud of sexual disgrace that has begun to accumulate around her in the wake of an imprudently-managed affair with Ned Silverton onto Lily, whose only possible course of action is to send it wafting back towards her through a disclosure of the letters revealing Bertha's illicit liaison with Selden.

But this is not all that Lily will be required to do to triumph over Bertha and survive in the world she inhabits. Wharton makes it clear that using the letters as defensive weapons against Bertha will not be entirely successful unless she can depend upon the safe citadel of marriage for protection should Bertha decide to launch retaliatory strikes. But by marrying, Lily will not defeat Bertha, but in effect become her. This is made particularly clear when Carry Fisher advises Lily to marry George Dorset, Bertha's husband, after crushing Bertha through a disclosure of the letters' contents (252). By taking such a course of action, Lily will become, like Bertha, a corrupt society wife who uses blackmail to
achieve her aims, and she will also be involved in the same evil with which sexual experience is clearly associated in the novel. Lily—chaste, desexualized, pure—clearly cannot assume this repellent role. Wharton presents Bertha, and the state of adult sexual maturity, as so corrupt and evil that it is not an option, just as the life represented by Gerty is not.

Gerty and Bertha stand on either side of Lily, totemic figures so exaggerated in conception that in the end they are less possible incarnations of self than shut doors barring Lily from the discovery of any workable, viable female identity in the social sphere. One might expect a novel commonly identified as a satire to provide, along with its criticisms of a hollow, materialistic society that grants women few opportunities for self-realization, a picture, a suggestion of what a viable female identity might be like to act as a counterpoise to the restrictive models of female selfhood in monied New York society. But no such "real" women exist in this novel, with the possible exception of Nettie Struther, a stock figure who is not observed with the same sharp focus as the other characters but through a dense sentimental haze that makes her difficult to take seriously. The female characters in The House of Mirth are for the most part allegorical actors in the novel's Manichean drama of conflicting opposites rather than actual pictures of women in turn-of-the-century New York. Their purpose is to demonstrate
that no compromise between the ideal "real" self of the pastoral realm and the social, material self of the social Tartarus is possible. They tell us that the only form a virtuous, spiritual life can take is that of a dingy, stagnant woman trapped in a state of protracted girlhood, and that the only alternative to this is the debased, witch-like existence of a corrupt voluptuary.

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There is another role or form of female selfhood far more palatable than those manifested by Bertha Dorset and Gerty Farish that seems to be open to Lily, that of the lover and spouse of Lawrence Selden. Similar in temperament and outlook, fastidious, sensitive, and attractive, Lily and Selden would appear to be ideally suited for each other. Given the intensity of their feelings for each other, the obstacles that bar them from a viable, though perhaps modest, life together do not seem to be very substantial. But though Wharton permits Lily and Selden a fleeting spiritual union at Bellomont, she does not allow their ethereal relationship to partake of more earthy, social aspects of human experience that might grant it permanency in the social world. Just as the novel's rigid Manichean system of irreconcilable opposites has prevented the consolidation of Lily's newly awakened "real" self and her social self, so it also thwarts the synthesis of spiritual and sexual kinds of intimacy between Lily and Selden.
The scrupulous absence of sensuality in the scenes between Lily and Selden is remarkable. In every scene in which one would expect sexuality to intrude, it is deliberately kept on the sidelines. In the pastoral scene at Bellomont, for instance, one might naturally assume that an ideal vision of sexuality might be presented along with the visionary concept of real selves, since writers have habitually used pastoral settings as places where sensuality, shriven of its corrupt worldly associations, may be freely and guiltlessly expressed. But the scene remains determinedly g-rated. R. W. B. Lewis, in his introduction to the Riverside edition of The House of Mirth, lauds Wharton’s capacity to convey sensuality subtly without being explicit: "The gesture by which [Lily] leans forward to light her cigarette from the tip of Selden’s has more real suggestiveness...than a dozen pages of anatomical espionage from popular fiction" (xxi). But truthfully the scene cannot be said to be sexually suggestive in any meaningful way. At the end of the scene, Selden and Lily are described as "children who have climbed to a forbidden height from which they discover a new world" (73). The description of the two protagonists as "children" is touching, and effectively underscores the idea that they are in some sense innocents in a corrupt world; but Wharton’s severe censure of adult forms of physical love that might grant this ethereal relationship a needed earthly gravity makes their bond a dangerously frail one in the social sphere,
as becomes abundantly clear in the tableaux scene.

The tableaux scene, in which Lily and several other society women caparison themselves as figures in famous paintings before an audience of the rich and well-born, is perhaps the most important point in *The House of Mirth*, for it is here that the book’s two separate strata, the ethereal and the profane—as well as the two ways of seeing associated with each—are deliberately brought together. Heretofore they have been kept at a great distance from each other. The two visions of Lily—as a hollow collection of surfaces and as a woman capable of spiritual rebirth—have not been placed side by side, but kept apart; the dark social world and the sublime region of spiritual selfhood are clearly separated; the novel’s harsh, satirical prose style is rarely juxtaposed with the vaguer, abstract diction of the "romantic chapters." In the tableaux scene, these polarities are not reconciled or fused, but they do inhabit, for a brief moment, the same turf. In effect what occurs on this "turf" is a kind of battle between light and dark as representatives from each realm (Lawrence Selden on one side, and Ned Van Alstyne and Gus Trenor on the other) offer two conflicting interpretations of Lily’s performance and then attempt, at its completion, to claim her as their own. The basic questions that the scene asks are: is Lily’s performance a sublime representation of the eternal principles of harmony and truth, or is it simply a kind of high class strip show intended to arouse and
titillate? Does her "real self" appear on stage, or is Lily simply an enticing assemblage of pleasing outlines and surfaces? And is the appropriate response to the spectacle to attempt to help her escape from the coarse world she inhabits to a place where this "real self" can flourish, or to try to possess the attractive body through an act of sexual aggression? Wharton's and Selden's answers to these questions are the same, although unfortunately Selden, and the spiritual ethos he represents, are not given the earthly power necessary to contest the claims of the social sphere.

Some contemporary critics of course deny that Wharton is sympathetic to Selden's idealistic view of Lily's tableau, believing that the scene is intended to reveal Selden's incapacity to see Lily except in terms of surfaces and his habit of transforming her into an abstract personification of the beautiful. For instance, Elaine Showalter writes that "Selden is enraptured by [Lily's] performance, finding the authentic Lily in the scene; but it is rather the carefully constructed Lily of his desire that he sees" (147). It is interesting to compare this view with that of Diana Trilling, who twenty years before Showalter writes of "Wharton's manifest pleasure in Lily's pagan sensuality and the approval his author gives to Selden for his warm reception of the scene" (113) -- an interpretation that seems far more accurate. True, Trilling was writing at a time before feminist scholarship revolutionized our view of the novel and alerted
us to many disturbing aspects of the tableaux scene that did not present themselves to most critics of her generation. The picture of a solitary, speechless woman in a state of virtual undress standing before a sea of ogling male eyes is one that will now immediately provoke discussion about the tyranny of the male gaze, the attractive woman reduced to beautiful object, and the regrettable tendency of some men to transform complex women into abstract symbols of grace, eternal harmony, and the sublime. These are all, of course, worthwhile, illuminating ways of looking at the scene. But once refreshing, novel points of view can easily become as orthodox and inflexible as the staid, conservative ones they replaced. When presented with such a scene, we tend nowadays to slip so reflexively into this materialist way of thinking that we may neglect, and even willfully pass over, certain clues that remind us that Wharton, though not in any sense a dated author, may not share all of our current preoccupations about gender and the female body, despite her obviously profound sensitivity to the difficulties that women face in a world made by men. It is still possible to read the scene much as Diana Trilling does: as an enthusiastic, if somewhat reserved, endorsement of Selden’s transcendental view of Lily’s tableau.

What appears to be responsible for some critics’ unwillingness to recognize Wharton’s approval of Selden’s view of Lily’s tableau is their failure to make distinctions between Selden and the other oppressive male figures in the
novel. As discussed earlier, such critics regard his spiritual doctrine of real selves as no different in intention from the materialistic ethos of Trenor and Rosedale: all men in the novel, in this view, seek to exploit Lily, whether sexually or spiritually. Likewise, they fail to draw clear distinctions between Selden's "spiritual" reading of Lily's tableau and Ned Van Alstyne's and Gus Trenor's libidinous interpretation. In both cases, this argument goes, Selden, like the other men in the audience, sees surfaces, outlines, body parts rather than the real woman within. But as we have already demonstrated, there are two distinct views of Lily in the novel: an ethereal view of her--associated with the pastoral realm in Chapter Six and shared by Wharton and Selden--and a coarse, worldly view represented by the other society figures in the novel. Where one sees a spiritual real self within, the other only sees surfaces. And where one, in the tableaux scene, sees Lily's beauty as a medium in which the "real self" is momentarily incarnated, the other sees, again, only attractive flesh.

These two views of Lily's outer self have been developing in the novel since the first chapter, but it is not until the tableaux scene that the implications of both views are made clear. Contemporary critics of the novel who regard Selden as a villain focus on only one of them, believing that it is the only view in the novel. Lily's beauty, in this view, is a depersonalized thing, an object that does not belong to her
but to the corrupt society it is in the service of. First it
is her mother's "asset" or "weapon" (34); then it is passed
into Lily's possession, but she does not regard it as an
intrinsic part of her being, but simply as a device that will
open the doors of the monied manses of the New York elite.

Her beauty itself was not the mere ephemeral
possession it might have been in the hands of
inexperience: her skill in enhancing it, the care
she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to
give it a kind of permanence. She felt she could
trust it to carry her through to the end. (49)

Viewing her beauty as an impersonal object designed to please
its observers, Lily is only too willing to let others use it
for their own purposes. She is, for instance, a valuable
asset to the Trenors, who regard her as a decorative addition
to their house-parties. To Percy Gryce, we learn, Lily's
beauty would become "the one possession in which he took
sufficient pride to spend money on it" (49), should she be
successful in marrying him. To Sim Rosedale, similarly,
Lily's beauty is another valuable collectible that brightens
up his opera box in Chapter Ten. In effect, what Lily engages
in is an aesthetically refined form of prostitution. The
tableaux scene, in this view, is merely another instance of
this perverted system of services rendered and payments
received, with one crucial difference. Heretofore Lily has
auctioned off her beauty in the appropriately decorous guise
of a chaste maiden whose attractive surface is to be
appreciated visually but not touched. But in the tableaux
scene, Lily presents her beauty in a more exotic, enticing
form, free of the corsets and stays that have tutored it into a socially acceptable form. And since she has previously allowed her observers to use her beauty as they see fit in a societal context—to titivate house-parties, balls, and dinners—it is not surprising that they interpret her tableau performance, in which she temporarily abandons her social guise, as permission to use her beauty in coarser, less genteel, ways.

But this is, it should be made clear, the view of the dark, fallen social sphere, a soulless realm of surfaces and illicit sexuality. It is decidedly not Selden’s or Wharton’s view. Instead, they see Lily’s beauty—or wish to see it, because it is only under certain circumstances that it can appear in its ideal form—as a transparent medium that reflects the spiritual "real self" flickering within her. Rather than a substance altogether different from the spiritual self within, it is a form ideally suited to it. This view of her beauty was introduced to the reader in the very first chapter, when the "sylvan streak of freedom" (13) Selden sees in Lily is evidently intended to alert the reader to rare, fine, possibly spiritual qualities underneath her exterior. But this ideal fusion of interior and exterior selves is virtually impossible to achieve in the fallen social world, which of course denies the existence of Lily’s spiritual self.

For Selden and Wharton Lily’s spirit and flesh are
momentarily reconciled in her tableau. When Lily appears on stage in the guise of Joshua Reynolds's portrait of Mrs. Lloyd, Selden "seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part" (135). In other words, Lily's outward self is not simply a "hard brilliant substance" (192), an ornamental commodity that admits no discourse to the spirit within, but a medium that reflects the "real self" awakened at Bellomont. Indeed Selden sees Lily's tableau as a reenactment of the pastoral scene where he and Lily experienced a fleeting spiritual union.

It was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out suppliant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overmastering longing to be with her again. (135)

The narrator participates fully in Selden's appreciation of the spectacle. It is easy to dismiss the sentiments in the passage above as florid and delusively romantic; what is somewhat more difficult to do is deny that Wharton is not encouraging the reader to see Lily this way as well. For the scene is not, after all, narrated entirely from Selden's viewpoint. When we are told that Lily's tableau is "simply and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart" (134); that Lily has "banish[ed] the phantom of [Joshua Reynolds's] dead beauty by the beams of her living grace" (134); that her "pale draperies...served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves"
(134); and that "the noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty" (134), we are not seeing Lily through the mediating consciousness of Lawrence Selden but receiving, apparently, the narrator's unadulterated perspective. True, the paragraph from which these passages are taken eventually segues into Selden's point of view, but this is exactly the point: the narrator and Selden show a remarkable unanimity of sentiment regarding Lily's tableau.

But just as the Manichean polarities of the novel have prevented Lily from reconciling her real self with her social self, the false and the true, the ideal and the real, they also will make it impossible for this ideal fusion of Lily's beauty and inner self to endure. For other members of the audience do not see Lily's tableau as a spiritual, transcendent moment, but as a rather crude, though enticing, display of attractive flesh perhaps intended to lure monied suitors. And though the narrator is sympathetic to Selden's idealistic viewpoint, it must be admitted that Lily's tableau has certain characteristics that would seem to support Van Alstyne's and Trenor's coarse interpretation. The original purpose of the spectacle, after all, was not to refresh its viewers' aesthetic or spiritual sense, but to inaugurate the entrance into high society of the Brys, parvenus who rely on glitzy displays to enlarge their social credit. And though Lily, after her performance is over, delusively believes that
"it was for [Selden] only that she cared to be beautiful" (137), her initial intent in appearing in the Brys' tableaux was not to usher Selden into a spirit world of ideal beauty but to refuel a social reputation that was fast running out of gas. Selden would like to believe that Lily's tableau is a triumph of the spirit over the physical world, but the inherently worldly nature of the event, and the competing claims of other less idealistic viewers of spectacle, make this victory impossible.

The other view of Lily's tableau is given full expression by Ned Van Alstyne, for whom the scantness of draperies covering Lily does not suggest an inner spiritual nature emerging from the societal trappings that have confined it, but is simply a pretext for "the study of the female outline" (135). His libidinous reading of the scene is further illustrated by his vulgar comment that it was a "deuced bold thing [for Lily] to show herself in that get up; but gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it" (135). Whereas Lily's state of undress has a spiritual meaning for Selden, it has only a sexual significance for Van Alstyne. The marked contrast between these two views is another illustration of the novel's system of polarized extremes. Rather than allow an erotic and a spiritual reading of the tableau to be fused, Wharton keeps the two views scrupulously apart. Her disinclination to seek compromises between sexuality and spirituality ensures that
the tableaux scene has a tragic conclusion for Lily and Selden.

There are two separate denouements to the tableaux scene, one for each of the two interpretations that were presented. None of the observers of Lily’s tableau regards her performance as simply a frivolous entertainment empty of content; rather, they view it as an explicit communication from Lily of how they are to act in regard to her. Selden, for instance, sees Lily’s tableau as a welcome invitation to join her in the pastoral world where they had once enjoyed a brief spiritual union. During the previous few chapters, Lily has been "treading a devious way" that has led her far from the heights of the pastoral realm into the dank, swampy bottoms of society (127); now, Selden thinks, Lily is attempting to reach some rapprochement with her estranged spiritual guide.

Selden and Lily try to reclaim this lost world at the completion of the tableaux, when they wander in a kind of dreamy stupor through the crowds of assembled guests to the "fragrant hush of a garden" (137) adjoining the Bry conservatory. But this garden--"a magic place" where there is "no sound but the plash of the water on the lily-pads, and a distant drift of music that might have been blown across a sleeping lake" (137)--is not a perfect facsimile of the pastoral world of Chapter Six but a counterfeit, stylized approximation, and in the midst of society rather than at a
sublime remove from it. Because the scene—the artificial pleasure garden of vulgar social climbers—is unreal and worldly at the same time, Selden’s attempts to reestablish the spiritual communion they shared at Bellomont are unsuccessful and in any case misguided. For what is required to solidify their relationship in the social sphere they now inhabit is not another exchange of ethereal sentiments but a more demonstrative, physical display of their feelings for each other. But because Wharton has associated sexuality with evil, and accordingly expunged its traces from the relationship of her two main characters, Lily and Selden’s attempts to establish a deeper connection are curiously unfocused and impotent. Their sensations are "dream-like" (137) rather than specific, and their one effort at physical contact has the studied, carefully choreographed quality of a Japanese tea ceremony ("...her face turned to him with the soft motion of a flower. His own met it slowly, and their lips touched" [138]). The kiss is one of only two exchanged by Lily and Selden in the entire novel (the second comes at the end of the novel, when Lily bids a final farewell to Selden). Shocked out of her dreamy inertia by this lapse into carnality, Lily flees the scene, and Selden, rather than pursuing her, is content to muse ineffectually in the garden, knowing "too well the transiency of exquisite moments to attempt to follow her" (138).

On the "morning after," the two potential lovers are
still fixed in preadolescent states of longing and self-absorption. To Lily "the scene in the Brys' conservatory had been like a part of her dreams; she had not expected to wake to such evidence of its reality" (139); Selden is even more impassioned in his desire to "lift Lily to a freer vision of life" (159), take her "beyond" (158). Neither appears to realize that the opportunity to forge a viable relationship that could be carried on in the social sphere instead of in an ethereal dreamworld has come and gone. But of course the novel prevents Lily and Selden from availing themselves of this chance by purging their relationship of the earthy sensuality needed to solidify their spiritual bond in the real world. Lily's tableau could have been the catalyst for a deeper intimacy, but instead its ultimate result is a separation between Selden and Lily for the remainder of the novel. Of course, their intense spiritual bond will not be entirely broken; they will still long passionately for the "illumined moment" they once shared together (272). But their incapacity to consummate their relationship leaves the door open to other observers of the tableaux whose feelings toward Lily are far less delicate than Selden's.

The tableaux scene's second denouement is Lily's confrontation with Gus Trenor, who acts as Selden's carnal, illicit double much in the way that Bertha is Lily's polluted second self. Trenor, a corrupt emissary of the novel's social Tartarus, is a kind of demon of sexuality who is always
following Selden's spiritual overtures with salacious proposals of his own. The pastoral scene between Selden and Lily in Chapter Six is followed in the next chapter by a profane ride in the countryside with Trenor, whose offer to "invest" for Lily is made on the understanding that she will offer services of her own in return. Trenor, in his inarticulate way, has made it known in the chapters leading up to the tableaux that he is unhappy with Lily's failure to deliver on her part of the bargain, whose nature she has sadly misunderstood, believing that she can blithely inhabit the dark social world without becoming tainted by the sexual evil that pervades it. The tableaux scene, with its titillating display of flesh, fires Trenor with a keen desire to collect on this long-unpaid debt. For his view of Lily's tableau is not spiritual or aesthetic, but like Van Alstyne's, quite crude: if Lily can make such displays of attractive flesh to the multitude, then she is surely capable of providing him with disrobings for his own private enjoyment. It is time for Lily to abandon any pretensions of maidenly chastity and give the devil his due. "Oh, I'm not asking for payment in kind," he answers when Lily asks whether she owes him money. "But there's such a thing as fair play--and interest on one's money" (146).

This lewd proposal marks the real turning point of the novel. Heretofore Lily has pictured herself as somehow "lifted to a height apart by that incommunicable grace which
is the bodily counterpart of genius" (116), enshrouded in a kind of aesthetic mist that protects her, like some rare embalming substance, from the corruption around her. The reader has long been aware that Lily's continued existence in the social sphere will eventually exact its toll from her, although one had hoped that the fine spiritual attributes with which Wharton endowed her would preserve her from this fate, and perhaps guarantee her admittance into a purer sphere of life with Lawrence Selden. But Wharton has demonstrated that this realm, and what it represents, is unattainable--except in infrequent transcendent moments--and at any rate it is irreconcilable with the social world she inhabits. At last Lily recognizes the true nature of her world: it is a place of "darkness and pollution" (148). But her awakening to evil around her has also made her aware of how deeply she is involved in it. When she unwittingly consented to Trenor's dark proposal in Chapter Seven, she surrendered herself to the foulness of the social sphere. Thus the "new abhorrent being" (148) that Lily suddenly finds herself chained to in this chapter is not so much "the female personality produced by a patriarchal society and a capitalist economy" (Showalter 140) as a potential corrupt sexual self that has taken its place next to its opposite, the "real self" Selden has awakened. It is the specter of this potential second self that Lily is describing when she asks Gerty if she "can imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement--some
hideous change that has come to you while you slept" (164)?

Just as Lily fled from Selden's anemic romantic overtures in Chapter Twelve, so she flees from Trenor's vulgar proposition in the following chapter. Each suitor offers her such polarized forms of romantic involvement, and such extreme forms of selfhood, that neither is a viable mate. Selden can only provide a vague spiritual union that cannot be consummated physically and an amorphous "real self" that cannot be reconciled with the social self; Trenor offers a debasing initiation into carnality and a repellent sexual self. Sim Rosedale, who will become an increasingly important figure in the latter half of the novel, will present Lily with a somewhat more palatable form of romantic involvement, but the Manichean elements of Lily's own character will, as we shall see, make the marriage he offers her an impossible option as well. Lily's only course of action at the close of the tableaux scene's second denouement is to seek another model of selfhood. After fending off Trenor's attempt at rape, Lily tries to return to a purer, morally upright identity embodied by Gerty Parish, the double who is a coarsened incarnation of Lily's "real," better self. (Ironically, Lily arrives at Gerty's apartment precisely at the moment that Gerty is longing to escape from her drab, dingy life of virtuous spinsterhood and cursing her incapacity to interest Selden romantically.) They sleep this night in the same bed, a chaste coupling that mirrors the profane
alliance with Gus Trenor she has luckily extricated herself from. But Gerty can offer only temporary solace; the novel has already made it clear that she is not a viable alternative form of female selfhood. Selden may have offered Lily a way out, but his exaggeratedly ideal conception of her identity cannot tolerate the smallest suggestion of worldly taint that his glimpse of her descending the stairs with Trenor provides. Lily’s only option is to seek to rehabilitate her social self and regain her footing in society. But her social self has been irreparably damaged, and the remainder of the novel will trace its disintegration, not its reconsolidation.

The system of polarized values and identities that has been developing so far in the novel will of course not lead to any other conclusion. A novel based on a more realistic model might have presented a scenario in which impossibly extreme forms of selfhood were combined to form a complex, imperfect, but viable alloy of the two; but the Manichean vision that controls The House of Mirth’s action makes such compromises virtually impossible for Lily. Characters like Gerty Parish— and, later in the novel, Carry Fisher and Sim Rosedale—seem to present more palatable forms of identity, but it becomes clear that the Manichean outlines of Lily’s character will make the "selves" they represent impossible choices as well. Real self/social self; ideal spiritual unions/debased sexual unions; pastoral realm/social sphere: these are the basic choices that the novel presents Lily. None of them, as we
have shown, is possible. In the middle of these two extremes is a no man’s land, a vast blank space where life is impossible. It is into this gap that Lily heads in the second half of the novel.

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Book one, while deeply pessimistic in its presentation of Lily’s situation, nevertheless includes scenes in which a tantalizing model of spiritual selfhood is unveiled, as well as several "transcendent moments" during which Selden and Lily achieve a fleeting spiritual union. At the end of Book 1 Wharton has conclusively demonstrated that this form of selfhood and Selden and Lily’s otherworldly bond are absolutely irreconcilable with the social world, but she does not on that account reject them; rather, she clings doggedly to this romantic vision even in the absence of any realistic means of integrating the ideal with the real, the spirit with the flesh. Book 2 is mainly a chronicle of Lily’s destruction by a hollow, cruel world virtually uninterrupted by romantic interludes, but the "illumined moment" (272) that Lily and Selden shared at Bellomont and, less successfully, after the Bry tableaux, is nevertheless held up as an ideal which, if unattainable in this life, is still wistfully evoked. Indeed, in the last chapter of the novel Wharton will powerfully affirm their spiritual bond and its accompanying doctrines in a highly romantic scene in which the lovers attain in death what they could not achieve in life.
Of course at the beginning of Book 2 Lily and Selden are very far from the mystical union they will later share at the conclusion of the novel; their aborted love scene after the Bry tableaux and Selden's unfortunate glimpse of Lily leaving Gus Trenor's house have almost sundered the intense spiritual bond that had been developing in Book 1. Because that bond could not be cemented in the social sphere without becoming tainted by the sexual corruption that characterizes all other relationships in the novel, Lily and Selden have no choice but to resume walking the paths they trod before their meeting at Bellomont. Selden's path leads him back to the life of a bachelor voyeur who maintains a protective, ironic detachment from the world; Lily attempts to retrace her steps back to her existence as an ornamental presence in New York high society. But the route she follows will not lead her back to the golden pinnacle of society she desires to reach, but through a dark subterranean region of pollution and suffering, and finally to death. Yet it is precisely through this process of moral and physical degradation that Lily will at last come to the end of the spiritual pilgrimage she began at the arrival of Selden at Bellomont in Book 1. Deprived, at the novel's conclusion, of the material advantages that made her existence in the social world tolerable, as well as of the opportunity to make an honorable life for herself, Lily is finally able to accept the burden of her real self as well as commit herself wholly to the spiritual bond she shares with Selden.
Lily's decision to accompany the Dorsets on their Mediterranean cruise is an attempt to reclaim the chaste, pure self of attractive surfaces and scintillating social skills that she possessed at the novel's beginning, before Selden invalidated it by his harsh moral judgments and Gus Trenor tainted it with his lewd sexual advances. Although Selden has alerted her to the moral corruption of the society such a self is predicated upon, Lily delusively believes that a renewed dedication to the upkeep of her ravishing exterior will protect her from it. A return to a superficial, soulless life on the surface of society and the extirpation of a latent, troubling spiritual self would seem in many ways to be her only option. After all, Selden's awakening of this inner self has done little but destroy all her prospects for a viable livelihood and provoke punitive retaliation from those around her. For a while, her return to her old way of life seems to provide simple solutions to the metaphysical quandaries in which she found herself entangled earlier. The evil in which she became ensnared in Book 1 is not an omnipresent cosmic force but simply "prosaic and sordid difficulties from which she had escaped" (196). Regarding herself and the world she inhabits simply as a collection of hollow surfaces with nothing threatening underneath, Lily views insoluble moral problems as small defects of decor that can be rectified by leaving them behind, as one swaps an unsatisfactory hotel room for a more attractive one. The cruise--a "romantic adventure"
(196) that "plunge[s] [her] into new scenes" (196) and brings her at length to Monte Carlo, the place "where the human bond is least close" (204-5)--she thinks, is a perfect antidote for her troubles. Trusting absolutely in the power of attractive surfaces to smooth away all difficulties, Lily indulges in a fantasy of self-regeneration.

It is a fantasy because her flight from moral corruption has ironically brought her into a close, almost sisterly relationship with the figure who has been clearly identified with that corruption throughout the novel, Bertha Dorset. And Bertha has craftily managed to enlist Lily's help in her latest erotic conquest, Ned Silverton, an impoverished hanger-on of the New York elite whose willingness to earn his keep through sexual favors suggests what Lily, whose situation is similar to his, will inevitably have to do if she is to continue in her present post as companion to the Dorsets. Indeed she already is, in a sense, "doing it": no innocent bystander, Lily is helping her dark double obtain illicit sexual satisfaction by distracting her husband, George Dorset. In figurative terms, Bertha has installed Lily in her former position as dutiful attentive wife, while she, succubus-like, glides into the night in search of vice and debauchery. Lily's attempts to make herself into an inviolable collection of spotless surfaces are thus doomed to failure. Though she remains nominally chaste, her involvement in sexual evil will eventually taint her as well. Lily recognizes this long
before she actually suffers the consequences of this involvement when she observes that "the surface of life had shown such ominous cracks and vapours that her fears had always been on the alert for an upheaval" (203)--a highly suggestive image similar to one used earlier when Lily purchased love letters from Bertha to Selden ("Now the other side presented itself to Lily, the volcanic nether side of the surface over which conjecture and innuendo glide so lightly till the first fissure turns their whisper to a shriek" [104]). The surface is not safe after all, and cannot protect her from the dark sexual forces fomenting underneath.

Selden, regarding this series of unpropitious events from a distance, is of no help to Lily in her most serious moment of spiritual crisis. Whereas earlier in the novel he liberally doled out spiritual advice, now he is silent, although Lily's dangerous proximity to a witch-like voluptuary who has the power to transform her instantaneously into a corrupt facsimile of herself would seem to warrant an abundance of priestly ministrations. But of course the spiritual tie that might have made such assistance possible has been almost dissolved by Lily's renewed subservience to the dark social sphere from which she had, in Book 1, considered fleeing. Unable to provide spiritual assistance, Selden is enlisted by Lily to offer help in his worldly capacity as lawyer: he counsels the dyspeptic, self-absorbed George Dorset, who has at last become aware of Bertha's latest
dalliance, to seek a rapprochement with his wife rather than a separation, which would entail an unpleasant airing of several wardrobes' worth of dirty laundry. But if Selden's spiritual counsels severely complicated Lily's life, his worldly advice does much to destroy it. For Dorset's conciliatory overtures to Bertha grant her the opportunity to perform a brilliant coup de grâce in a melodramatic dinner scene in Chapter Three, in which Lily's attempts to reclaim her old social self are permanently thwarted.

The dinner scene at Becassin's, before its catastrophic denouement, seems to be a kind of triumph for Lily. She appears to have climbed out of the subterranean region of depravity into which she had sunk during her confrontation with Trenor to a safe public realm whose surface is so thickly coated with the varnish of luxury and superficial social repartee that the destructive forces underneath cannot crack through. Gloriously beautiful, detaching herself "by a hundred undefinable shades, from the persons who most abounded in her own style" (215), Lily has, it seems, again become the chaste maiden whose "specialness" and "exquisiteness" lend her a kind of talismanic protection against the corrupting influences around her. But it is precisely at the moment that her arduous efforts at self-regeneration are almost complete that Bertha foils them by her public announcement that Lily will not return to the yacht.

Throughout the novel Bertha, like a raging, appetitive
id, has sought to begrime the chaste Lily with the filth of her own illicit behavior and thereby transform her into a corrupt facsimile of herself. In the scene at Becassin's, Bertha is successful. Lily is of course not guilty of any sexual sin herself--save that of assisting Bertha in managing her affair--but she is nevertheless contaminated; her spotless image is soiled. By transferring her own sexual disgrace onto Lily, Bertha commits a vampiric act of self-renewal. She robs Lily of her protective cloak of innocence and purity and uses it to prolong her own threatened existence as a powerful society wife, while Lily becomes, in the public eye, the corrupt seducer that Bertha actually is. One might think that this devastating public humiliation would sate Bertha's appetite for revenge, but she will not cease in her efforts to destroy Lily during the remainder of the novel. Instead, in the role of the "pursuing furies" (296), Bertha will continue to work her black magic against the innocent Lily--a "deposed princess" (220), an "angel of defiance" (225)--until Lily is either completely destroyed, or until Lily crushes the spiritual self that has thwarted her attempts to forge a viable life for herself in society and fight Bertha on her own terms.

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With the Monte Carlo episode Wharton eliminates the last of the limited range of options Lily has for a viable existence in the social world. Book 1 has demonstrated that
the state of spiritual purity and moral uprightness that Lily longs for is irreconcilable with the social sphere, and that the intense spiritual bond between Selden and Lily cannot be transubstantiated into a viable relationship that can survive in the real world of money and work. The disastrous finale of Lily’s Mediterranean cruise now blots out the possibility that Lily might cut her losses and make a respectable, if morally shallow, life for herself in society; any attempt to do so will inevitably result in moral degradation and the loss of the "delicacies and susceptibilities" (235) that differentiate her from her coarse associates, consequences that the novel presents as horrific. Because Wharton makes all ideals unattainable and presents life lived on society’s terms as unthinkable, Lily’s situation becomes, as the novel reaches its conclusion, less and less real and more and more metaphysical. For the novel ceases, during its closing chapters, to present Lily’s dilemma as a difficult choice between a better and a worse way of life. Rather, her choices are now between evil and good, as is evidenced by the only two possible courses of action that she is permitted to take. Lily can use the letters against Bertha Dorset--an "evil" action that will save her life but also transform her, the novel makes clear, into a vengeful, sexually-corrupt woman very much like Bertha--or she can refuse to use them, a morally upright action but one that eliminates her sole opportunity to survive. The novel never entertains the notion
that using the letters might not result in an irredeemable corruption of Lily's moral sense, nor does it provide her with more palatable ways of saving her life. In *The House of Mirth*, it is either the heavens or the abyss; there is no middle way.

Perhaps Lily could escape from this trap if there existed somewhere in society some haven where she might make a viable, respectable life for herself; but as she plummets rapidly through the subsidiary tiers of society she discovers that they are all pervaded by the same spiritual darkness that made the pinnacle of society such an impossible place to inhabit. The only difference between the lower levels and the "inner Paradise from which she was now excluded" (240) is that the latter allows its inhabitants to conceal their vices under a glittering surface of baroque social conventions whereas in the "social outskirts"--like the Gormers' residence, a "flamboyant copy of her own world" (234)--such things are more exposed. Rather than a carefully observed, realistic picture of society, the cross-sectioned view of the social world that Wharton presents in Book 2 is a vast infernoesque Tartarus whose tiers may show some localized differences but are all nevertheless part of the same corrupt confederation. No matter what level Lily inhabits, she will still be contaminated, compromised, vulgarized, and learn "to live with ideas which would once have been intolerable to her" (262). This process of contamination begins at Monte Carlo when Lily
"covers" for Bertha, continues at the Gormers, where a "hard glaze of indifference" forms over her "delicacies and susceptibilities" (235), and accelerates at Norma Hatch’s residence, a "vast gilded void" (276) where Lily almost finds herself taking part in Fred Stancy’s sleazy scheme to launch "Mrs. Hatch at the perfidious bosom of society" (277). Nor will existence at the bottom of the social totem pole arrest this process of degradation, although the novel holds up Nettie Struther, an impoverished working woman, as an example of an honorable, noble life. Instead, society’s bottom-most tier is a vast, dimly lit region where all distinctive individual traits are bleached away, as is evidenced by the dingy throngs of anonymous women who inhabit it.

Because the novel has decreed that Lily chooses evil if she chooses to make life-saving accommodations with the world, the only way she can remain "good" is to perish. The Manichean severity of Wharton’s moral vision, picturing the world as so irredeemably fallen and pervaded by evil that all efforts to counteract it are virtually useless, makes renunciation, passive withdrawal, and self-extinction the only moral, "good" actions Lily can take. The presence of Gerty Farish, whose efforts on behalf of destitute working girls do have some positive results, does seem to represent an acknowledgement on Wharton’s part that human beings are capable of acting in a morally upright manner; but the novel suggests that Wharton is deeply dissatisfied with the feeble,
ineffectual character of human efforts at virtue and the unglamorous, often unattractive aspect of those who make such efforts. Wharton’s conception of "the good" is too monolithic and inflexible--too romantic, in short--for a deeply flawed, all-too-human character like Gerty to be its fictional exemplar. Gerty, after all--despite all her almsgiving and charitable work--has made her pact, her settlement with the world, and has undergone the coarsening of character in which all such sordid arrangements result. Lily, on the other hand, though she comes close to making a similar settlement, ultimately does not, and it is her ultimate renunciation of every opportunity to make a place for herself in the world, her dedication to the spiritual ethos that Selden represents--her loyalty, in other words, to an abstract, otherworldly standard of goodness and purity--that the novel celebrates as the superior moral act.

Lily’s doomed, romantic commitment to an otherworldly ideal achieves its fullest expression when she burns Bertha’s love letters, which represent her sole opportunity for survival, but she demonstrates it in all the chapters that precede it, even at the same time that her moral sense is gradually being corrupted. For as Lily’s gradual acquiescence to worldly standards of moral conduct brings her to the verge of committing morally reprehensible acts, her "real self," heretofore little more than an amorphous potentiality, emerges in moments of crisis to prevent her at the last moment from
caving in to vice. She demonstrates this commitment most notably in her refusal to accept the somewhat more palatable compromises with the world that are offered to her by two of the novel's more appealing characters, Carry Fisher and Simon Rosedale.

Carry Fisher and Rosedale stand out from the novel's static frieze of caricatures of vice and depravity but cannot be completely detached from it. They are distinguished from their baser associates by their genuine sympathy for Lily and by the efforts they make to save her from her nemesis, Bertha Dorset. Carry makes numerous attempts to install Lily in a new social milieu, and Rosedale shows real sympathy for Lily when she sinks into penury. He is even willing to take the risk of marrying her, even though she is "damaged goods" and Rosedale has achieved sufficient social standing to choose a spotless bride. But both Carry and Rosedale are worldly characters bent on material profit in this world rather than spiritual salvation in some amorphous ideal realm. Although they are capable of human feeling, their ideals are materialistic and they are unable to comprehend the metaphysical, spiritual nature of Lily's dilemma. Nor are the worldly solutions they offer to her plight acceptable to her. The novel, in its closing chapters, clearly divides its characters into those who are "with the world" and those who are against or apart from it. Rosedale and Carry are clearly with and of the world, and Lily must consequently reject them
and their assistance if she is to obtain the spiritual salvation she yearns for.

Carry Fisher, who does not "wish to probe the inwardness of Lily's situation, but simply to view it from the outside" (238), is, like Gerty and Bertha, another model of female selfhood, but one that falls somewhere between the polar extremes of virtuous spinsterhood and corrupt hedonism that these two figures represent. Carry Fisher is deeply involved in society, but her position as a duenna to up-and-coming aspirants to society's innermost circle has given her an ironic distance from this society that has allowed her to keep basic human feelings and impulses intact. She is also a mother, and perhaps on that account sensitive to the difficulties that the motherless Lily faces. But Carry's position--a compromise between dingy virtue and salacity--is not one that Lily can assume. It requires a constant willingness to abase herself before the capricious demands of the rich (Carry is "smashed to atoms" [198] by Louisa Bry in Chapter Two because of her failure to finesse an entrance into the Duchess's society), as well as to slavishly observe all social protocols, even when they are brutal and unjust (in Chapter Four Carry follows the lead of Judy Trenor in "cutting" Lily at an expensive restaurant, though she later apologizes). As a barnacle clinging desperately to the bottom of society's swiftly sailing ship, Carry may curse the perverse social arrangements that have reduced her to the role
of a parasite, but she is still a part of society and of the world, and when she speaks, she speaks its language. To Lily, Carry is voice of worldly expediency urging her to live by the world’s rules, no matter how unsavory they may be. "It’s not a pretty place" (252), Carry responds to Lily’s bitter observation, "The world is too vile" (252) (which could almost serve as an epigraph for the novel), made after she learns that Bertha Dorset is "insinuating horrors" about her to Mattie Gormer and that her tenure in the Gormers’ society will therefore be brief (252). "The only way to keep a footing in it," Carry continues," is to fight it on its own terms" (252).

But Lily is ultimately committed to beliefs and convictions that transcend Carry’s narrow, profane sphere of existence. The promptings of her "real self" do not permit her to make the sordid accommodations with the world that Carry counsels, but instead to seek a spiritual salvation outside of it.

Carry is never, at any rate, suggested to be a possible "self" for Lily in the way that Gerty and Bertha clearly are, but the novel does seriously entertain the possibility that Lily might become Simon Rosedale’s wife. Yet this, too, is an impossible role for Lily, even though some critics see Rosedale as a viable mate for Lily and endow him with admirable character attributes that he does not possess. Linda Wagner Martin pronounces that "the reader senses that [Rosedale] does have Lily Bart’s best interests at heart" (61-62); Elaine Showalter astonishingly argues that Rosedale
"offers the hope of continuity, rootedness, and relatedness that Lily finally comes to see as the central meaning of life" (142). The novel, however, does not support this rosy interpretation of Rosedale. It reveals him instead to be a vulgar, predatory materialist, willing to take the most base measures to achieve his aims, and suggests that his feelings for Lily, while infused with some tenderness, are those of a connoisseur attracted to a beautiful piece of merchandise. But the novel also does more: it demonstrates that Rosedale is an embodiment of the same evil that pervades all of society, and that the marriage of convenience he proposes with Lily is just as base as the perverse sexual alliance in which Gus Trenor pressures her to involve herself.

Showalter’s and Wagner Martin’s misreading of Rosedale proceeds from their misunderstanding of the role played in the novel by Selden, with whom Rosedale is clearly intended to contrast. If one regards Selden, as they do, as a foolish aesthete who victimizes Lily with his vague, transcendental doctrine, then the candid, plain-speaking Rosedale will tend to improve in stature--indeed, he will seem to be a suitor superior to Selden, ready to offer practical solutions to Lily’s problems rather than amorphous spiritual therapies. His open declaration of his feelings for Lily (256)--so different from Selden’s anemic, non-committal overtures--seems to suggest that he is a man of some emotional depth and full-bloodedness. Yet the novel repeatedly demonstrates that it is
Selden, despite his numerous flaws, who is Lily's ideal mate, precisely because of his spiritual, if inconstant, nature. Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes that Selden's "assessment of Lily Bart is gradually revealed to deal almost entirely with externals" (122), but this description is far more appropriate for Rosedale, as we shall see.

True, Rosedale is capable of perceiving and appreciating Lily's fine "scruples and resistances," the "fastidiousness of manner" that differentiates her from other women of her set (299), but these attributes, to Rosedale, "remain unexplained" (299); he cannot see that the source of her "external rarity," her "air of being impossible to match" (300) is a spiritual purity within, as Selden can. Even though Rosedale's coarse nature is capable of love (or so he says), "a certain gross kindliness," "a rather helpless fidelity of sentiment" (300), he still sees Lily only as a beautiful object that has been unjustifiably shelved in some dark crawlspace rather than being prominently displayed for all to gape at. In Chapter Seven of Book 2 Rosedale's "small stock-taking gaze" makes Lily feel "no more than some superfine human merchandise" (256), and in Chapter 11, when Rosedale makes another offer of marriage to Lily, we get a more elaborate, and damning statement of his attitudes toward her: "As he advanced in social experience [Lily's] uniqueness had acquired a greater value for him, as though he were a collector who had learned to distinguish minor differences of design and quality in some
long-coveted object" (300). It is difficult to see how a man who regards Lily in this manner can truly offer her, as Showalter says, "the hope of continuity, rootedness, and relatedness" (142).

Chapter Seven of Book 2 most effectively demonstrates Rosedale’s baseness and the impossibility of Lily’s ever becoming his wife. This scene, in which Lily takes an afternoon stroll with Rosedale at Tuxedo, is obviously intended to contrast with her pastoral excursion with Selden in Chapter Six of Book 1.

It was one of those still November days when the air is haunted with the light of summer, and something in the lines of the landscape and in the golden haze which bathed them, recalled to Miss Bart the September afternoon when she had climbed the slopes of Bellomont with Selden. (253)

Of course if one has read the Bellomont scene, like Wolff and Showalter, as a satirical expose of Selden’s vacuous moral system, then the Tuxedo scene is simply another situation in which Lily shares an intimate moment with an unwanted suitor, albeit one whose romantic overtures are refreshingly direct and free of transcendental claptrap. But if the Bellomont scene is read as an expression of ideals that Wharton clearly sanctions, then Lily’s actions at Tuxedo, in a similar pastoral setting, constitute a betrayal of a noble creed that censures her crass pursuit of monetary gain through a marriage with the materialistic Rosedale. "Her walk with Selden," we learn, "had represented an irresistible flight from just such a climax as the present excursion was designed to bring about"
Lily's earlier excursion with Selden was the occasion for spiritual illumination, but this profane pastoral scene is the setting for the signing of worldly contracts that guarantee an abundance of money but the death of the soul. Bertha's black magic is working: by forcing Lily into contemplating a marriage of convenience with a man who is repugnant to her, she has succeeded in making Lily more like herself.

Rosedale at first refuses Lily's acceptance of his earlier offer to marry her on the grounds that she is now morally compromised. His unflinchingly frank account of why he cannot marry her makes Lily gain a "half-reluctant respect for his candour" (256): "After the tissue of social falsehoods in which she had so long moved it was refreshing to step into the open daylight of an avowed expediency" (256). But this illumination to the ways of the world is very different from the spiritual light in which she basked with Selden at Bellomont. The principles of the republic of the spirit, as we have demonstrated, are ones that the novel holds high, but expediency, opportunism, cold, calculating ambition--the traits that define the worldly, materialistic ethos for which Rosedale is a spokesman--are unquestionably base. For as we discover it is just a short step from a brisk, business-like attitude toward ethical matters to committing what the novel encourages us to see as a morally reprehensible act: using the letters against Bertha, betraying Selden, and renouncing her
spiritual self. When Rosedale makes his offer to marry Lily on the condition that she use the letters, Lily recognizes the true nature of the candour she had momentarily admired in Rosedale:

There was no time now to wonder how he had heard of her obtaining the letters: all her world was dark outside the monstrous glare of his scheme for using them. And it was not, after the first moment, the horror of the idea that held her spell-bound, subdued to his will; it was rather its subtle affinity to her own inmost cravings. (258-59)

Monstrous glare, horror, spell-bound: this language does not express the finicky distaste of a "lady" too refined to take practical action but the disgust of a spiritually pure woman for the evil she is about to accede to. In fact her reaction to Rosedale's proposition is quite similar to her appalled response to Gus Trenor's salacious proposal in Book 1, Chapter 13, when Lily suddenly found herself "alone in a place of darkness and pollution" (148). Lily's speechless horror, her revulsion, her sense of being drawn helplessly into committing defiling acts are the same, and they help us to see what is similar about the two men. The precise forms of evil that Trenor and Rosedale represent may differ (Rosedale does not of course share Trenor's tendency towards physical violence), but what is revealed in this scene is that both men are agents of the same moral corruption that permeates all of society. They are both acquisitive collectors of human objects, users of human capital, materialists; they are not spiritualists. Lily is tempted by
Rosedale's variety of evil in the way that she is not tempted by Trenor's because of its deceptive appearance of "business-like give-and-take" (259), but she realizes that what Rosedale proposes is, in its own way, as evil as the obscene sexual liaison that Trenor offered her.

Rosedale could be said to be, in figurative terms, the embodiment of Lily's coarse material ambitions who possesses the power and ruthlessness to satisfy his appetite for riches that she lacks. If Selden is her spiritual kin who counsels abstinence from worldly pleasures, then Rosedale is her evil twin who attempts to legitimize her avarice under the name of good business sense. His affection for her is that of like for like. They both want the same things--luxury, social standing, power--and perhaps, should they join their forces together, they could achieve them. But Lily rejects Rosedale; she remains true to the principles of the republic of the spirit, and to Selden, the spiritual brother whom she would betray by sealing her compact with Rosedale. By the end of Chapter Seven it should be clear that Selden is the only possible mate for Lily and that the ethos he represents is the only faith she can embrace. Lily's union with Selden may not be one that can be consummated in life, but Wharton will nevertheless give her to Selden in a spiritual marriage after death.

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It is clear throughout Book 2 that the ultimate
destination of the novel is a rapprochement between Lily and Selden. As Lily's few remaining opportunities for a viable existence in the social sphere topple, her relationship with Selden remains standing on the novel's playing field, although it too has been seriously damaged by both characters' devotion to worldly, rather than spiritual, modes of being and behaving. And yet this relationship still represents to both Selden and Lily an ideal that they long passionately to achieve, even if it is not ultimately realizable. Selden recalls ruefully the "region where, once or twice, he and she had met for an illumined moment" (272), and Lily realizes, during Selden's impertinent visit to her at Norma Hatch's hotel rooms, that "the sound of his voice, the way the light fell on his thin dark hair, the way he sat and moved and wore his clothes...even these trivial things were inwoven with her deepest life" (278). Theirs is not, of course, a relationship that can flourish in the social world except in transient moments of spiritual union; this the novel has conclusively demonstrated. But in the last chapters of the novel the otherworldly nature of their bond--the impossibility of its ever being realized in the social world--grants it a kind of sublime superiority to all other concerns in the novel. The world, the novel tells us, is base, dirty, defiling, irredeemably soiled; their relationship is, on the other hand, not of this world, and is for that reason worth invoking and acting upon, even if such action is ultimately self-defeating.
The novel, in its closing pages, rather perversely celebrates Lily's doomed, fatal commitment to this high romantic, impossibly impractical, ideal.

The final meeting between Lily and Selden at his apartment in Chapter 12 is yet another fleeting moment of spiritual connectedness, but it is differentiated from their previous meetings at Bellomont and the Bry tableaux in that it is not followed by another resignation on Lily's part to worldly expediency. Rather, in this scene Lily surrenders her last vestiges of worldly power in the form of Bertha's letters and commits herself wholly to Selden, even though this makes continued existence in the world impossible for her. It is not, of course, her intention to make this grand gesture when she first knocks on the door of Selden's apartment. Indeed, her visit is initially an impetuous ruse formed on her journey to see Bertha Dorset, whom poverty, ill-luck, and a gradual process of moral degradation have finally persuaded Lily to blackmail. It appears, when she begins her journey, that she has finally managed to subdue to her will the spiritual self that has thwarted, even in its weakened state, her attempts to seek a worldly salvation. "Encased in a strong armour of indifference," her "finer sensibilities" benumbed (303), Lily seems prepared to commit the action that will save her life but thoroughly corrupt her character. But on the road to hell she passes the shrine to otherworldly ideals, Selden's apartment, a chance encounter that "loosened a throng of
benumbed sensations--longings, regrets, imaginings, the throbbing brood of the only spring her heart had ever known" (304). She decides to pay her last respects to these ideals that she is about to renounce.

Even after Lily enters Selden’s apartment, it is not her plan to recommit herself to the spiritual ethos that Selden espouses, but rather to commend into his hands the "real self" that he brought to life in her, since the black deed she is about to commit demands its surrender.

There is someone I must say goodbye to. Oh, not you--we are sure to see each other again--but the Lily Bart you knew. 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. (309)

But when Lily appears to have successfully renounced her spiritual self, it makes a sudden, miraculous resurgence:

Something in truth lay dead between them--the love she had killed in him and could no longer call to life. But something lived between them also, and leaped up in her like an imperishable flame: it was the love his love had kindled, the passion of her soul for his. In its light everything else dwindled and fell away from her. She understood now that she could not go forth and leave her old self with him: that self must indeed live on in his presence, but it must still continue to be hers. (309)

Throughout the entire scene, Lily has been struggling to penetrate Selden’s aloof reserve and reestablish the intimate connection they shared earlier in the novel by making him see her "wholly for once before they parted" (307). Finally, with the reawakening of her "real self," she is successful. "The external aspect of the situation" (309) vanishes, the "veil"
is lifted "from their faces" (310), and the two lovers share their last moment of spiritual union in life. The overripe solemnity of these passages, their total lack of irony, make it difficult to believe that Wharton wishes the reader to regard Selden and Lily’s moment of spiritual kinship with suspicion or believe that Selden has at last coerced Lily into accepting a fraudulent transcendental creed. Nor does she appear to censure Selden for his initial resistance to Lily’s overtures, since his hesitancy is similar to Lily’s own unreceptiveness to Selden’s counsels earlier in the novel. Rather, we are encouraged to view Lily’s acceptance of the burden of her "real self" as a moral positive, and to admire the devotion to the ideals of the "republic of the spirit" that she demonstrates in her destruction of the letters.

Once Lily has understood that she cannot renounce her real self, she must shed her worldly self, since the novel’s Manichean character does not permit the two to be synthesized or coexist. The burning of the letters is the symbolic act by which Lily repudiates this self, representing as they do her one opportunity to secure wealth and social status, as well as the corrupt sexuality of her dark double, Bertha Dorset, that might have become hers if she used the letters and married. But Lily’s noble act affects others besides herself. By destroying the letters, which of course are also a record of Selden’s illicit liaison with Bertha, she in effect cleanses him of his own worldly sins, and the secretiveness of her act
ensures that the dark specter of sexuality, Bertha Dorset, never casts her defiling shadow on their pure, spiritual union. Lily has thus proved herself a worthy, even saintly convert to Selden's spiritual doctrine. She has renounced her worldly ambitions, as he had counselled her to do, and she has committed an act of selfless generosity that reveals her to be a far more faithful adherent to his creed that he himself. But it is unfortunately martyrdom and death, rather than a continued life of good works in this world, to which this noble act condemns her.

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Having renounced all her worldly power by burning the letters, Lily can do little but complete the slow process of withering away that began when Bertha Dorset ejected her from the top-most tier of society. Such a process does not promise an especially riveting ending to Lily's story, but the novel has ruled out more dramatic denouements. Suicide is not an option, since Lily's destruction of the letters suggests a rejection of all assertive energies; nor can she embark on a life of active virtue like Gerty, since the novel has suggested that this would lead to a loss of distinctive character attributes and unthinkable compromises with the world she has already rejected. To live in the world, the novel perversely counsels, is to become dirtied, defiled; to die, to passively fade away is to remain untainted, pristine, pure. This at any rate seems to be the assumption behind
Wharton's presentation of the conclusion of Lily's situation. The romanticizing of death that Wharton seems to take part in, the astonishingly negative view of the value of human effort in the world that Lily's last moments leave with the reader, are profoundly, even overwhelmingly saddening, as Wharton herself seems to have recognized. For she appears to have been hesitant to end the novel without attempting to attenuate the bleakness of her conclusion with some meager assurance that there are worthy reasons not to lose faith in human effort--reasons, in short, to act virtuously in this world rather than to leave it.

Nettie Struther, whom Lily meets in a park after her last interview with Selden and accompanies back to her apartment to rest briefly, is evidently intended to serve as a kind of counterpoise both to the corrupt society within "the house of mirth" and to Lily's own feckless, doomed existence. An industrious and spirited working woman who once seemed doomed to be "one of the superfluous fragments of life" that are "destined to be swept prematurely into [the] social-refuse heap" (313), Nettie has, unlike the inhabitants of corrupt New York high society and in fact Lily herself, managed to find a stable, lasting relationship with a mate based on trust and mutual respect instead of avarice and lust; and, in contrast to the moribund Lily, Nettie's "frail envelope [is] alive with hope and energy" (313). Moreover, motherhood for Nettie seems to have had the power of "broadening and deepening the
individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving" (319), whereas Lily, cut off from this magical human chain of being and belonging, is a rootless outcast doomed to perpetual exile. The implication of this scene is that, although Lily may have failed miserably in her attempts to find a meaningful, honorable existence apart from society, others have been successful, and this fact may provide some hope to the reader, like a little votive candle that dimly flickers in the tomb that has been prepared for the dying saint, Lily.

Yet Nettie Struther is a deeply unsatisfactory character and her presence in The House of Mirth does nothing to temper the bleakness of the novel’s fierce, militant pessimism. The scene in which Lily visits Nettie and her infant child is, as Joan Lidoff has written, "a stock sentimental piece" (522) that seems totally incongruous with the novel’s acid, scorching portraits of its other characters. Wai Chee Dimock admirably summarizes the shortcomings of this character when she says that "as an ideal, Nettie remains curiously unsubstantiated, curiously unexamined: Wharton seems to have suspended her ironic incisiveness, her withering sense of all that entraps and compromises the human spirit" (790). It is difficult to see this saccharine, O’Henryesque vignette as an integral, or necessary part of the novel; one has, reading it, the sense of something loosely basted onto the novel’s fabric as an afterthought rather than a section carefully stitched
in. Moreover, the miraculous suddenness with which Nettie is introduced into the narrative, the lack of information about how Nettie has reached "the central truth of existence" (319), how she has managed to build a trusting relationship with her husband—how, in short, she has managed to escape the pitfalls that have claimed Lily—do little to bolster the idea that positive, real alternatives to Lily’s fate do exist. Nettie has achieved her "victory" (315) seemingly by magic, and the reader does not know what special dispensation from the brutal laws of Wharton’s fictional world has prevented her enchanted hovel from being overtaken from the darkness that pervades virtually all other places in the novel.

Nettie does, however, serve an important function when she hands her baby to Lily, who feels penetrated "with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became a part of herself" (316). For Nettie’s baby becomes the symbolic embodiment of the infantilism to which Lily is gradually succumbing. Elizabeth Ammons regards Lily’s intimate moment with Nettie’s infant—continued in the next scene when Lily, succumbing to a fatal dose of chloral, feels its phantom presence beside her—as a union of the leisure-class woman and the "working-class infant female" (43) that will mysteriously yield the "New Woman" who is the protagonist of Wharton’s later novels. But Joan Lidoff’s and Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s contention that Lily’s bond with the baby signifies a "regression to infancy and death" (Lidoff 538)
seems more accurate. Lily has renounced, through her destruction of the letters (and later through her payment of her debt to Trenor), all adult autonomy, all ties to the dirty world, all sexuality, ambition, needs and wants; the absence of these things cannot but reduce her to a state of infantile passivity. Although the novel does not of course celebrate the regression to death to which Lily's rejection of adult identity inevitably leads, it does suggest that a pure, beautiful death is preferable to continued existence in a dirty, fallen world.

After she returns to her apartment, Lily reaches the last stage of her gradual regression to an infantile state. When she has carefully folded away her handsome gowns--the worldly, adult attire of the life she has forsworn--Lily vacillates between primitive feelings of total isolation and rootlessness and an equally regressive sense of orgasmic "kinship with all the loving and foregoing in the world" (321). What characterizes all her chaotic meditations on life is a passive sense of being helplessly manipulated by cosmic forces that deny her any power of controlling her own destiny. She either considers herself to be "something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them" (319), or, in an abrupt, childlike transition to a totally opposite state of emotion, she experiences a momentary "exaltation of her
spirit" (321) that proceeds from her mysterious sense of solidarity with suffering, striving humanity. This cosmic union may be preferable to a desolating sense of isolation, but it still denies her the autonomy to forge actual relationships--real friendships and love affairs--that enrich and sustain individual existences.

One might posit that Lily's passive, elegiac sense of the futility and inadequacy of human effort, and of the incapacity of the individual will to exert itself in a positive way, is the result of a patriarchal culture that denies women the opportunity to control their own lives; but Wharton's own romantic vision, which has controlled the action of the novel that has brought Lily to this state of infantile passivity, is certainly responsible as well. For though turn-of-the-century American society placed severe restrictions on women's freedom, it cannot be said to be totally responsible for the extreme paucity of real opportunities for a viable existence and fruitful human relationships that the novel offers Lily, nor for the base, corrupt aspect of those few that are available to her. It is, after all, Wharton who has presented Gerty Farish, the one female representative of an independent female life, as dingy, unappetizing and pathetic; it is Wharton who suggests, through the witch-like figure of Bertha Dorset, that adult female sexuality is perverted and disgusting; it is Wharton who has made nearly all men with whom Lily might have a relationship grotesque personifications
of lust and avarice; it is Wharton who fails to credibly suggest that there exist other possibilities for an upright, respectable existence outside of Lily’s society; it is Wharton who has decreed that Lily cannot form a viable relationship with the sole acceptable male figure in the novel, but only an amorphous spiritual kinship that cannot be realized except in some vague transcendent region outside the boundaries of real life. Lily’s passivity and helplessness are the inevitable products of Wharton’s romantic, Manichean moral vision, and so is her death.

Lily goes to her death after rejecting the very last opportunity that is thrown in her way to save herself, her legacy of ten thousand dollars from her Aunt Peniston. Lily briefly considers not paying her debt to Gus Trenor and using the money instead to prolong her existence; but such a course of action would drag "her back into some fresh compromise with fate" (321) and furthermore eject her from the ethereal "height of her last moment with Lawrence Selden" (321) when she renounced all worldly things. It is far better to sever all corrupting ties with the dirty world by discharging this debt to Trenor, and thwart his hopes to collect it in the form of sexual favors. Having paid her debt, succumbing to a deadly dose of sleeping potion but comforted by the ghostly presence of Nettie Struther’s infant daughter, Lily’s thoughts turn from the carnal Trenor to his opposite, Selden, the ethereal lover whose influence has guided her to this moment
of sublime renunciation. Even in her last moments, Lily still hopes to push aside the worldly obstacles that have separated them and permanently reestablish the spiritual connection that they once shared together by means of "some word she had found that should make life clear between them" (323). Unbeknownst to her, she will be successful. For although their love is too ethereal to survive in the fallen social world, this mysterious, undisclosed spiritual communication—a token of her faith in their love—will succeed in cementing their relationship in some transcendent region after death. Or at least this is what the novel encourages us to believe, however troubling and unsatisfactory we may find such an idea.

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For critics who contend that Selden is the victimizing representative of a patriarchal power structure, none of his purported offenses is more reprehensible than those he commits in the final chapter, when he visits Lily's deathbed and "savor[s] the resonances of [her] death" (Wolff 132). The virtually unanimous view of these critics is that Selden complacently exculpates himself from any part in driving Lily to her death; that he totally misinterprets, as he has done throughout the novel, the facts of Lily's life, substituting instead "a narrative which he finds more palatable" (Wagner Martin 84) in which he and Lily are doomed romantic lovers who against all odds achieve a "fleeting victory over themselves" (House of Mirth 329); and that, consequently, there is no
victory at all at the novel's conclusion but only the tragedy of a helpless woman hounded to death by a patriarchal oppressor who has coerced her into fatal attempts to live up to impossible male ideals.\textsuperscript{12} More importantly, they contend that Wharton shares and encourages the reader to accept this view of Selden.

The feelings of these critics are understandable, for there is something deeply dissatisfying, even fraudulent about the last scene, with its stock romantic picture of the man at his dead lady's bier. The miraculous ease with which Selden sees "deep into the hidden things of love" (326), passes into Lily's "confidence through the gate which death had left unbarred" (327) and receives "the word which made all clear" (329) is suspicious to our jaded, modern eyes, so wary of "transcendent moments," so distrustful of sudden escapes from the ambiguities of earthly life into sublime regions of abstract truth. And yet Wolff's and Wagner Martin's attempts to account for our discomfort with this scene are inadequate; the novel simply does not support their contention that Wharton intends the last chapter as a satirical expose of Selden's deluded romantic viewpoint. Rather, the novel encourages us to accept the closing scene at face value, to believe in Selden and Lily's "fleeting victory over themselves" (329), to share Selden's regret that he did not pursue Lily more ardently, but to recognize that "all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart" (329) and
that the supernatural understanding they reach after Lily’s
death is the only consummation their relationship could ever
have.

It would seem that if it were Wharton’s intention to
expose Selden’s hypocrisy and self-absorption in the last
scene, the satirical bite of Wharton’s prose that has been put
to such devastating effect in other chapters would show its
teeth in the novel’s concluding pages at well. One would
expect the scene at least to be heavily laced with a vinegary
irony that would leave a lasting impression of Selden’s
perfidiousness on the reader. But there is in fact no irony,
no satire here, unless one considers the yeasty, saccharine
prose that is used to communicate Selden’s perspective as a
kind of irony or satire. Yet it is difficult to believe that
this novel, so direct and straightforward, so disinclined to
indulge in self-reflexive verbal play and rhetorical trickery,
would suddenly become oblique and oversubtle at the moment
when forcefulness and clarity are most in order. If Wharton
wished the reader to "condemn" Selden, as Cynthia Griffin
Wolff believes we must (132), then surely she would have given
us a stronger indication of her intentions at the novel’s
conclusion.

It is difficult to accept the conclusion if one has seen
the novel solely as a social satire or as the chronicle of an
oppressive patriarchal culture’s offenses against women, but
it is much easier if one acknowledges the presence of the
romantic fable that underlies these other narratives. It is an old, old story, perhaps even a hackneyed one, and one with which we may not any longer have any patience. It is the story of a spiritually refined man and woman who are drawn to each other in a dark, fallen world that has thwarted their desire to achieve a purer, morally upright existence. It is the story of their failure to realize their spiritual love on earth, and yet of the deep, abiding connection that endures between them despite the efforts of the world to separate them. It is the story, most of all, of the woman's heroic renunciation of the world and her valorous willingness to live by their otherworldly ideals, even though her intense spiritual zeal must ultimately cause her death. And it is, finally, the story of how she absolves the man of his worldly offenses and permits him a spiritual union with her in a region beyond space and time. The beautiful death, the deathbed vigil, the supernatural communication, the grieving, yet spiritually cleansed lover--these are fitting conclusions to this old story, although they may not seem fitting to our modern sensibilities.

Perhaps it is true that the ending of the novel is problematic; perhaps it is not even one that Wharton wished to write. It may be that, confused about how to conclude Lily's story, Wharton conveniently selected a ready-prepared ending from fiction's stock. Or it might be said that once the lovers have achieved their "victory" and all the societal
forces that have conspired to defeat them have been vanquished, the ideals to which Selden and Lily are devoted suddenly seem—in the absence of any antagonists that might lend them a kind of contrasting grandeur—hollow and unsubstantial. Irving Howe has observed that Wharton, while brilliant at portraying the forces that conspire to destroy and diminish moral positives, is rarely accomplished at clearly articulating what these moral positives actually are, and that consequently they tend to survive "only in terms of their violation" (128). Whatever the cause of our dissatisfaction with the closing scene may be, the romantic fable and the romantic conclusion remain integral parts of the novel, and contemporary attempts to ignore them, deny them, or devise more palatable substitutes for them have done nothing to change this.

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There seems to be a kind of consensus among critics about what place The House of Mirth occupies in Wharton’s oeuvre and what stage of artistic growth it represents. It is generally assumed that Wharton, with the death of Lily Bart, was bidding farewell to an obsolescent model of female selfhood, one that passively acquiesced to society’s demands that women be beautiful, accommodating, solicitous, unfailingly pure, without desires or the power to satisfy them. This model of selfhood was, according to these critics, embodied not only by most fictional female protagonists of the nineteenth century
but also by Wharton herself, who had great difficulty reconciling her ambition to be a novelist with her own society’s rigid prescriptions for female conduct. And so in deciding to "kill" Lily Bart, Wharton was not only making way for more complex, more liberated female protagonists in her own fiction, but also liberating herself from a highly restrictive female identity. This view seems to have originated in Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s *Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, but it is expressed with admirable clarity at the end of Elaine Showalter’s essay, "The Death of the Lady Novelist."

In deciding that a Lily cannot survive, that the lady must die to make way for the modern woman who will work, love, and give birth, Wharton was also signaling her own rebirth as the artist who would describe the sensual worlds of *The Reef*, *Summer*, and *The Age of Innocence* and who would create the language of feminine growth and mastery in her own work. (136)

Or as Linda Wagner Martin has written, *The House of Mirth* "becomes the first step out of what [Wharton] had in 1902 called her 'bloodless existence.' Edith Wharton, writer, was to become a compelling woman, as well as a great American modern novelist" (88).

There is much to recommend this thesis, and little to suggest that it is in need of large-scale revision. The female protagonists of Wharton’s later novels--many of them, at any rate--do seem to be more full-blooded, multifaceted characters, able, unlike Lily Bart, to freely give and receive love, although this capacity does not often ensure them a
happy fate. And in the years after completing *The House of Mirth*, Wharton does appear to have lived life largely on her own terms, as is evidenced by her affair with Morton Fullerton, her divorce from Teddy Wharton, her move to France, and the charity work she performed during World War I. The only apparent flaw in the thesis is the heavy-handedness with which it has been applied to Wharton’s work by its more ardent expositors, and the unwillingness of some critics to recognize any aspect of her work or life that diverges in some respects from some of its conclusions, such as Wharton’s apparent sympathy with Selden’s transcendental ethos or the romantic elements of the novel in which he appears. For it is simply not to be expected that a complex woman of such wide-ranging interests, talents and imagination like Edith Wharton would consent, in her life and in her work, to faithfully embody all of our contemporary ideas about her, or to become an early representative of our present day ideals. Our great novelists are rarely so obliging; they seldom tell us exactly what we want to hear. There is always some stray piece of the puzzle of their books and lives that fails to fit into the prearranged patterns we have devised for them. And of course the distance that the years place between us and these writers has the inevitable effect of making them strangers who have the curious capacity to seem briskly contemporary at one moment but, at others, completely alien.

To acknowledge the romantic character of *The House of*
Mirth does not, fortunately, require one to violently disarrange the puzzle pieces set in place by Wolff, Showalter, Wagner Martin and others, although to do so may perhaps require some small readjustments. One has only to recognize that Wharton writes not only in the tradition of the social novelist who is primarily interested in the destinies that individuals forge for themselves within conventional social arrangements, but also in the tradition of those American poets and novelists who believe that salvation lies somewhere outside of them. Unlike some of these writers, Wharton has less confidence in the capacity of the individuals to secure this salvation; her romanticism was tempered by a pessimistic conviction that the ideal states of being she and her characters long for are often unattainable, or can be achieved only in death. Perhaps her experience as a woman gave her a wary understanding of how difficult escape from the strictures of society is. But the romantic impulse--the yearning to pass beyond the limits society places on our lives--is unquestionably hers, and in The House of Mirth it manifests itself in the form of the romantic fable of star-crossed lovers as well as in the stark, Manichean divisions the novel draws between good and evil, the ideal and the real, the false and the true.

There is something ultimately a little disappointing about the sharpness of these divisions; they are the marks of a staid, conservative imagination, one disinclined to engage
in the adventurous exploration of fine moral distinctions and ambiguities that is characteristic of our greatest novelists. And one wishes that Wharton had been less complacently accepting of the hand-me-down romantic fable that is the backbone of her novel. Yet the narrowness of Wharton's moral vision is, paradoxically, one of The House of Mirth's greatest strengths. The novel's fierce, militant pessimism, its harsh, brilliant portrait of a world pervaded by an uncomplicated evil, its wistful gestures toward a transcendent, unreachable realm of romantic ideals have an intense, visceral appeal, and have more to do, one suspects, with The House of Mirth's continuing popularity than its superficial resemblances to novels that adhere more faithfully to the realist tradition.
1. Both contemporary critics and those of several decades ago tend to regard the novel as social criticism, an approach Wharton herself encourages in her memoir, *A Backward Glance*, in which she reflects on her struggle to transform turn-of-the-century New York society into viable material for fiction. Wharton writes that she solved her problem when she realized that "the dramatic significance" of such a society lay "in what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals" (207). In general, recent critics and their predecessors regard this statement as an accurate description of what Wharton intended to depict in the novel; however, the former have tended to focus much more closely on the novel’s portrayal of the debasement of women in the culture. If critics of the 1950’s and 1960’s saw the novel’s moral energy directed against "the puritanical morality and...conventionalism" (Brown 66) of New York society and its "chance distribution of wealth...and social privilege" (Trilling 106), contemporary critics feel that Wharton uses her satiric weaponry primarily against oppressive social conventions that restricted women to circumscribed roles. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for instance, argues that Wharton’s foremost intention in the novel is "to ridicule the notions of femininity purveyed [in turn-of-the-century New York society], notions that would restrict women to a limited repertoire of pleasing attitudes" (110). Linda Wagner Martin similarly asserts that "Wharton is writing about stereotypes...about the risks women run whenever they deviate from socially approved norms" (56).

Several recent critics, however, have brought attention to other objects of Wharton’s social criticism. Wai Chee Dimock, for instance, asserts that the novel documents the pernicious effects that the rabid robber-baron capitalism of the era had on the realm of private life (see Wai Chee Dimock, "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth," *PMLA* 100 (1985): 783-92). Amy Kaplan agrees that *The House of Mirth* was intended as a social critique of a wasteful, materialistic society, but differs from other critics in her sly assertion that the novel is tainted with the same societal defects it purports to criticize (see Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* [Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988] 65-103).

2. The idea that *The House of Mirth* is a romance, or might possess romantic elements, is not new. Joan Lidoff asserts that the novel is a "romance of identity" (520), although she is primarily interested in the narcissism of its heroine, Lily Bart, and indeed of its author, who in Lidoff’s view shared the same psychological malady. Maureen Howard has recently argued that *The House of Mirth* is a "modernist work" that
freely borrows elements from a number of different fictional
genres, including the romance (142). Kathy Fedorko explores
gothic elements in the novel (see Kathy Fedorko, Gender and
the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton [Tuscaloosa:
University of Alabama Press, 1995]); and Carol Singley argues
that Wharton employed a "spiritual narrative" similar to the
type Hawthorne uses in his fiction (76). Richard Chase does
not deal with Wharton in great detail in The American Novel
and Its Tradition (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company,
Inc., 1957); but he does make the illuminating and instructive
remark that "whenever it turns out to be a brilliant and
memorable book, the American novel of manners will also be a
romance; more than likely the observation of manners and the
painting of the social scene will be a by-product of the
romance that really engages the author's mind" (160).

3. Wolff's discussion of the novel in Feast of Words: The
Triumph of Edith Wharton (New York: Oxford University Press,
1977) and Wagner Martin's in The House of Mirth: A Novel of
Admonition (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990) are notable for
their vituperative animus against Lawrence Selden, their
fervent championing of the beleaguered Lily Bart, and their
impassioned account of the restrictions that early twentieth
century American society placed upon women's lives. Both
critics regard Lily Bart as a kind of emblematic victim of
patriarchal culture and also consider The House of Mirth to be
an autobiographical novel which, through the character of
Lily, chronicles Wharton's own struggle against oppressive
societal conventions. For both Wolff and Wagner Martin, then,
the novel provides an occasion not only to discuss fictional
characters and situations, but also to address larger cultural
and sociological issues in which they are obviously
passionately interested.

4. Carol Singley similarly views Lily as a spiritual pilgrim
seeking "ideal love" (79).

5. Wolff regards Selden as a victimizer who continues the
process of dehumanization of Lily that her society began
(129). He is not, in Wolff's view, someone who represents an
alternative ethos, but rather an oppressor who shares
society's prejudices (111); the only respect in which he
differs from the other members of society is his tendency to
regard Lily as a "moral-aesthetic object" rather than as a
purely decorative one (125). Wagner Martin argues that Selden
delusively considers himself to be superior to society but is
actually an integral part of it, and that he is in fact the
agent through which society completes its destruction of Lily
Bart (40). Elaine Orr asserts that Selden's and Rosedale's
view of Lily may be superficially different, but that both
characters agree that Lily's "chief function is to reflect
their own settled views" (62). For both Rosedale and Selden,
Orr argues, "Lily becomes the unblemished sign (of wealth or of masculine morality)" (62). Janet Gabler-Hover and Kathleen Plate similarly conclude that "Selden colludes most notoriously with patriarchy in this novel" (360).

6. A critic who does not share this view of Wharton is Mary Suzanne Schriber, who argues that "the conscious mind of Edith Wharton did not break free entirely from her culture’s ideology of woman" (182).

7. See, for instance, Wolff, who asserts that Lily’s society denies her the opportunity to "come to terms with her position as an adult" because it "restricts women to a limited repertoire of pleasing attitudes" that are "ultimately infantilizing" (110).

8. It should be noted that Sapora is less interested in other characters in the novel who might serve as Lily’s doubles as she is in the doubling within Lily’s own character, which is, Sapora asserts, composed of a public surface self and a nascent independent self within that is beginning to question society’s demands of her. Sapora’s essay is a materialist reading of the novel and she does not regard this second self—or "real self," as the novel describes it—as a spiritual entity but as an embryonic adult female identity.

9. For other similar views of Selden’s interpretation of Lily’s tableau see Wolff, who asserts that Selden has mistaken this "instantiation of ideal beauty" for the real Lily Bart (126); Virginia Blum, who also argues that Selden delusively confuses "this lifeless semblance of the other-world" with the actual Lily (19); Grace Ann and Theodore Hovet, who conclude that although Selden regards Lily less as a static object than as a "window unto a higher realm" (349), he nevertheless transforms her into an "overvalued icon" that has little to do with the real Lily (350); Carol Wershoven, who concurs with Wolff’s view that the tableaux scene is another demonstration of Selden’s tendency to see Lily "entirely in terms of externals" (34); and Gabler-Hover and Plate, who also accept Wolff’s reading, although they regard Lily’s tableau as an artistic triumph in which she "retains her own identity by mastering the subject she represents" (361).

10. See, for instance, Gabler-Hover and Plate, who argue that both Selden and Trenor "respond oppositely but complimentarily" to Lily’s tableau, since they both see her in terms of the binary conception of female identity provided by "Western Christianity": the temptress Eve (Trenor) and the chaste, pure Mary (Selden) (363).

11. Wolff believes that this scene signifies Lily’s relinquishment of "difficult pretenses to adulthood" and a
"retreat to the velvet embrace of infancy" (131).

12. For similar views of the novel's last scene see Roslyn Dixon, who argues that Selden mistakenly believes that Lily has "prove[d] her value to him, dying as an admirable example of noble self-sacrifice" (219); Grace and Theodore Hovet, who assert that Lily's death allows Selden to "transform her back into transparency" (351), a term they use to denote one of the two incarnations in which the male gaze habitually pictures women (the other is that of a desirable object); Carolyn Karcher, who believes that Wharton, in the last scene, "exposes Selden as sanctimonious and self-serving" (239) in his "self-righteous reaffirmation of moral superiority to the woman he claims to have loved" (240); and Wershoven, who agrees with Wolff that "in death Lily becomes the object Selden demanded" (38).
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