
Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects

Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects

1997

Between "Word-Play and Evasion": Reading and Writing Lily Bart in "The House of Mirth"

Atisaya Vimuktanon
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vimuktanon, Atisaya, "Between "Word-Play and Evasion": Reading and Writing Lily Bart in "The House of Mirth"" (1997). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. William & Mary. Paper 1539626113.
<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-kzv7-bn23>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

BETWEEN "WORD-PLAY AND EVASION":
READING AND WRITING LILY BART IN THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by


Atisaya Vimuktanon

1997

APPROVAL SHEET


This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

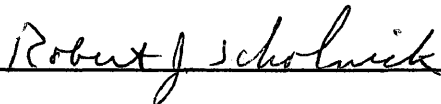


Atisaya Vimuktanon

Approved, July 1997



Elsa Nettels



Robert Scholnick



Kenneth Price

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer wishes to express her indebtedness to Professor Elsa Nettels, without whose guidance and patience this thesis would not be possible. The author is deeply appreciative of Professor Nettels' commitment and of the careful reading and criticism of the manuscript by Professors Robert Scholnick and Kenneth Price.

ABSTRACT

The frequent references to reading and writing in The House of Mirth offer an interpretative framework for both Edith Wharton's novel and for its protagonist, Lily Bart. Throughout the novel, Lily's actions are read by the other characters who create their own versions of Lily's story as she attempts to author her life. This constant shifting between text and writer is emblematic of Lily's search for an identity, her vacillation between life as a member of high society or as a citizen of the "republic of the spirit." Although she eventually chooses, constructing her story or identity, Lily does not articulate her moral dilemma or her moral achievement. Because of her silence, Lily ultimately fails as a writer and forfeits her story to others.

BETWEEN "WORD-PLAY AND EVASION":
READING AND WRITING LILY BART IN THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

The heart of Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth has always been the significance of Lily Bart's story. From its very conception, as Wharton recounts in A Backward Glance, the novel has wrestled with that significance and what it is meant to convey. In her retelling of the birth of the novel, Wharton acknowledged that her initial idea of writing about fashionable New York did not have much weight. For it to have any import or power, the novel had to offer something more significant than a tale of manners. Struggling to find a moral center for a novel about an amoral society, Wharton concluded that her story of "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys" (207). The House of Mirth's "tragic implication lies in...[society's] power of debasing people and ideals. The answer...was my heroine, Lily Bart" (207). However, Lily is an ambiguous answer at best; she can be considered equally as the novel's question. The novel alternately presents Lily as victim of society and circumstance and as would-be participant or rebel who fails at either objective. Is her story truly a tragedy in which, as much as society debases people and ideals, Lily also participates in the cheapening? Or does the novel preclude any kind of control for her, casting her as perpetual victim as Wharton sometimes implies in A Backward Glance? Lily's story and how it is read is the crux of meaning in the novel.

This emphasis on reading Lily's story occurs throughout The House of Mirth. Lily's motives, her plans, her success and failure are debated by the other characters in the novel. Her story, malleable and supple, is open to

alternative narratives and readings. The other characters in the novel attempt to puzzle out Lily's choices and actions. She is sign and text, embodying often contradictory meanings.

This metaphor of Lily as text extends further into the idea of Lily as author. Reading and writing represent power and control over one's fate. Although Lily often attempts to go beyond her usual role of beautiful object and tries to make a place and an identity for herself, she just as often does nothing. Vacillating between two modes of being -- author or text -- Lily sometimes misreads characters and situations or remains silent rather than tell her story. Because of these missteps in crucial situations, she cedes power over her fate. She remains in the margins, failing as author of her own destiny.

Although Wharton implies that some of Lily's shortcomings are the result of her upbringing and her society, Lily's quest for an identity, for a "real" Lily Bart, is hampered as much by her failings as reader and writer as by her situation. Several critics, including Barbara Hochman, Frances Restuccia, Elaine Showalter, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, and particularly Candace Waid, have addressed the notion of Lily as reader, writer, or object/text, but have done so mostly from the perspective of Lily as a victim of her society. The House of Mirth, however, is as much about Lily's construction of her self as about her destruction. Wharton, by portraying Lily as easily swayed by the values of the company she keeps, seems to endorse the notion of Lily as a victim systematically destroyed by her society. I would argue, however, that Lily's fate is her own; over the course of the novel, she makes mistakes which end in failure and death, but which also shape her identity.

Throughout much of the novel, Lily cultivates a fluidity in her social

interactions and in her plans for her future that, while seeming to make her adaptable to every contingency, sometimes strips her of direction. Although she eventually and irrevocably chooses how she will be defined, relinquishing life in the society she has tried to join, Lily still loses control over her own story. Caught between "word-play and evasion," (Mirth 238) she ultimately relinquishes the role of author and accepts her status as text.

The puzzle that Lily represents is emphasized from the outset of the novel, which opens with Lawrence Selden's speculation about Lily. The first chapter sets up Lily to be read as it sets up the novel to be read: we see her alone at the train station and, along with Selden, wonder why she is there. We do not really know her thoughts yet -- rather, she is revealed through Selden's observations and his interpretation of her words. It is Selden who first articulates the idea of Lily as victim: "She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (8).

As Elaine Showalter and other critics have noted, the other characters in the novel often view Lily as a beautiful object. Indeed, she often presents herself as one, dressing or posing for effect as she does in the tableau vivant scene. Lily is meant to be observed: her "conspicuous" beauty makes her a spectacle (5). She is literally arresting, causing Selden to "pause in surprise" in the very first sentence of the novel (5). This presentation of Lily as spectacular, both surprising and interesting, is deliberate, designed by Wharton to provoke a reading of Lily and a reading of the reading of Lily. It is only in the last section of the chapter that Lily's

consciousness takes over the narrative. Significantly, this change in narrative occurs after Lily has left Selden, her most critical -- and to her the most important and most demanding -- reader.

In the opening scenes Selden's observations seem objective. His perspective seems to mesh with that of the omniscient narrator's as he observes Lily critically:

Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room, and under her dark hat and veil she regained the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing...[H]ad she indeed reached the nine-and-twentieth birthday with which her rivals credited her? (5-6)

He is interested but detached, admiring but wary of Lily's charms. However, his objectivity and ability as a reader are suspect, especially because he assumes that he knows Lily thoroughly. His assurance of his knowledge is a red flag, signaling his very lack of knowledge even as he proclaims it: "There was nothing new about Lily Bart, yet he could never see her without a faint movement of interest" (5). He is interested in her precisely because he does not quite know her or what she is doing. In this first scene, he is intrigued by Lily, certain that she is not catching a train because she does not seem to be hurrying, and so concludes that she is waiting for someone. Although this conclusion seems logical enough, he is wrong: when she speaks to him, she tells him that she has missed a train and does not know what to do as she waits for the next one. This error in interpretation, although slight, indicates that he may be mistaken about her in other ways, that he sometimes reads too much into her actions.

In his reading, Selden is suspicious of Lily, questioning her motives. He thinks that she is always calculating: her "air of irresolution...might...be the mask of a very definite purpose" (5). In this case, however, she was not masking her intent. She has no definite plan until Selden provides her with one. First, as a reader, a producer of meaning from the text, he creates a purpose for her wait at the station, and then, as a participant in the scene, he gives her the opportunity to react to his presence and thus decide upon a course of action. In this particular scene, the only person with a "definite purpose" is Selden, who wishes to "[put] her skill to the test" by strolling past her and seeing if she would try to elude him, yet he always seems to credit her with more deliberation and calculation than she actually uses (5). He attributes his interest in her to her ability to control situations, to use whatever comes to hand for her own advantage: "it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation, that her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions" (5). However, it is characteristic of him, and of the other characters in the novel, to always "speculate" and suspect her. He conceives of her as the ultimate narrator/author/producer even as he is, by always seeking to interpret her, making her into the ultimate object/text.

Because Lily embodies contradiction -- irresolute yet purposeful, prudent but impulsive -- she seems to invite definition, to be written as well as read. During their first intimate talk, Selden struggles to find the perfect analogy for Lily:

He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay.

Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape? (7)

This quest for the perfect analogy reinforces the notion of Lily as beautiful object, exquisite yet impractical. His interpretation influences our vision of Lily and, as Lily acknowledges, it also influences the way in which she views herself and her society. He has the “secret of...readjusting her vision” (45). Indeed, Selden often tries to readjust Lily to his way of living, but, because she inevitably cannot make that final leap and so fails him, he often finds that he has to readjust to her. This constant re-envisioning and re-defining makes Selden a compulsive reader, and often misreader, of Lily: “he could never be long with her without trying to find a reason for what she was doing” (11). However, “[t]he worst of it was that, in interpreting Miss Bart’s state of mind, so many alternative readings were possible” (165).

This inscrutability of purpose and lack of fixity make her both interesting and perplexing to the other characters in the novel. For the pragmatic Carry Fisher, Lily seems to sabotage herself:

she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic....Sometimes...I think it’s just flightiness -- and sometimes I think it’s because, at heart, she despises the things she’s trying for. And it’s the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study. (147-48)

Sympathetic to Lily -- indeed a role model for Lily in her quest for money without marriage -- Carry Fisher understands the reason for Lily’s vacillation but judges her hesitations by the values of their set.

Indeed, her set is composed of astute readers of situation and nuance who know exactly what value or interpretation to give to certain actions and how much praise or blame to give to the actors. At Bellomont, when she is in pursuit of Percy Gryce, "Lily found herself the centre of that feminine solicitude which envelops a young woman in the mating season. A solitude was tacitly created for her in the crowded existence of Bellomont...In Lily's set this conduct implied a sympathetic comprehension of her motives" (39). These knowing women understand that she has quit smoking and playing bridge in order to catch the rich, conservative Gryce -- they understand and applaud a little manipulation or deceit in the pursuit of money. However, when Selden's visit to Bellomont distracts Lily and infuriates Bertha, Judy Trenor questions Lily's judgment, analyzing the situation as Lily should have done:

If you had n't [sic] told me you were going in for him seriously...I don't suppose you did it because he amused you; we could none of us imagine you putting up with him for a moment unless you meant to marry him....Even Bertha kept her hands off...till Lawrence came down and you dragged him away from her. After that she had a right to retaliate...If you had a grudge against Bertha it was a stupid time to show it -- you could have paid her back just as well after you were married...Oh, Lily, you'll never do anything if you're not serious! (60)

In reading Lily's actions, Judy and the other characters write Lily's story as much as she does. When Mrs. Peniston remarks upon Evie Van Osburgh's engagement to Percy Gryce, which Bertha is credited with arranging, Lily imagines Bertha as "smiling, flattered, victorious, holding her up to ridicule by insinuations intelligible to every member of their little group. The thought of the ridicule struck deeper than any other

sensation: Lily knew every turn of **the allusive jargon** which could flay its victims without the shedding of blood" (86-87 my emphasis).

All the members of this group know how to read the actions of others within the framework of their particular values. They cast Lily as a failure; in their estimation, she deserves ridicule because she has let her opportunity get away from her, and Lily is a good enough reader to know exactly what her so-called friends are thinking about her. They attempt to create meaning from what they can read of Lily's motives and actions: they are her interpreters -- translating her actions into something understandable within their particular world of murky transactions and the smooth surface of social mechanisms that disguises the furtive or vulgar exchanges.

Barbara Hochman has linked the idea of this interpretive audience to Wharton's own theories about the active reader. Hochman notes that Wharton's essay, "The Vice of Reading," presages Barthes' theory of the producing reader and the writerly text. As the reader engages with the text, it expands and becomes "the gateway into some paysage choisi of the spirit" (qtd in Hochman 152). This chosen landscape, Hochman argues, is akin to the "republic of the spirit," and Lily is both gateway and traveler in this enchanted realm. However, as text, Lily does not expand in the mind of her readers; rather they wish to fix or limit her. As one of Selden's signposts in the republic, Lily's role is clear. However, because she does not always fulfill this role, Selden is always trying to interpret what Lily does, creating meanings and intentions for all her actions. He is always trying to place her, either within that murky social world which he sometimes disdains but visits often or within his own questionable realm in which neither he nor Lily can really live.

Although Selden's estimation of Lily may be the most important to her, the way in which the other characters see Lily and interpret her actions has a greater effect on Lily's success in the social world. In the first chapter, her actions are read by three observers who over the course of the novel present her with alternate choices and possible narratives for the direction of her life. Selden, Mrs. Haffen, and Simon Rosedale represent notions of truth and identity for Lily -- Selden represents the pure, ethereal, and ultimately unobtainable "republic of the spirit" in which Lily is imperfect muse. Mrs. Haffen, who assumes that Lily is Selden's lover and later attempts to blackmail Lily with the incriminating letters that she finds, represents the lurid underworld of Lily's elegant social set, where gossip is truth. Rosedale inhabits the netherworld between these two realms, believing in Lily's innocence but aware of the power of gossip and the necessity of controlling it. Over the course of the novel, Lily briefly flirts with each possibility for action, keeping all of these options open and never fully committing herself to one of these paths till the very end of the novel. However, although she thinks that she has the ability to choose, she is limited by what the other characters think of her. Her choices dwindle, even as she seems to preserve them.

Although she tries to present herself in particular contexts and settings and thereby control her valuation by the other members in the society, her plans are usually dependent upon others' actions: for instance, her plan to marry Percy Gryce is based upon her making the most of her "opportunities" and presenting herself in a way which attracts him, but she still must wait for him to act. Her usual strategy is to prompt others to act, either by presenting herself as an object to be admired or acquired or by placing herself at the disposal of others' whims. However, because of this

dependence upon another person, as either her audience or her director, she does not truly have control over how people interpret her actions and talk about her. Often she has to react rather than act, adapting herself and her plans as a consequence of others' actions.

Although Lily tries to read others to accommodate their preferences and control how they see her, she often does not succeed. Indeed, she sometimes chooses to ignore danger signs: attractive to and distracted by Lawrence Selden, she makes Bertha jealous. Because Lily momentarily loses her concentration on keeping up her role of demure girl, Bertha has a chance to change Percy's estimation of Lily and ruin her plan to marry him. When Judy Trenor castigates Lily, "[i]t was the voice of her own conscience which spoke to her through Mrs. Trenor's reproachful accents" (60). Lily should have known -- does know -- better. To her friends, it appears perverse that she should lay down the groundwork and let it be destroyed, only to pick it up to try to mend it again.

Although Lily may have the trick of recovery, of making her "simplest acts...[seem] the result of far-reaching intentions," it is others who often have the real intentions, whose actions stem from careful planning or close observation (5). Those who watch and gain information have power which they can use or trade in some way: for instance, Grace Stepney trades her knowledge of gossip for Mrs. Peniston's favor; Carry Fisher uses her expertise and observations to introduce others to the ways of society to support herself; Mrs. Haffen uses the letters to get money; and Bertha manipulates what everyone has seen to escape censure. Lily, however, often does not see such opportunities or, worse yet in the estimation of her circle, does not care to use them. Despite her desire to be a part of that

circle, to have her own luxuries rather than pay for those provided by others, to be a participant, Lily is more often a spectator or the spectacle, a passive reader or an open text rather than a producer of meaning and events. Moreover, her reading of situations is often mistaken or belated -- she realizes the import of events and the consequences of her reactions to them too late.

Lily's flaw is not simply that she is a spectator. Rather, Lily's mistake is in not caring to observe what she deems as not concerning her. Lily's perspicacity is haphazard; she sometimes misreads -- to her misfortune. Mistaken in her perception of Grace Stepney, her miscalculation costs her Mrs. Peniston's favor. If Lily had treated Grace more kindly, if she had paid more attention to the other woman, Grace might not have been so eager to report unfavorable rumors about Lily to Mrs. Peniston: "Even such scant civilities as Lily accorded to Mr. Rosedale would have made Miss Stepney her friend for life; but how could she foresee that such a friend was worth cultivating? How, moreover, can a young woman who has never been ignored measure the pang which this injury inflicts?" (97). So attuned to the nuances in the interrelationships of her own circle, Lily is inattentive to those who she thinks do not affect that circle. Oblivious, she believes that Grace admires her when the other woman, in fact, first envies and then hates her. Because Lily does not pay attention enough, generalizes too much, and thinks that Grace is like Gerty, she unknowingly makes Grace into an adversary and loses the bulk of her inheritance to the other woman. In depicting Lily's inattention and ignorance as understandable, part of her make-up, Wharton's narrator creates a paradoxical view of Lily's situation that is at once avoidable and yet somehow inevitable.

This characterization of Lily as myopic reader is further reinforced by her penchant for avoiding thinking about unpleasant possibilities. Like her underestimation of the importance of Mrs. Haffen's or Rosedale's observations of her, Lily dismisses the importance of many situations that she finds unpleasant; however, it is these very situations which affect her most critically. If she were a better reader of situations, or a better translator in the sense of understanding what her actions or others' actions mean in the language of her social world, she may have had a better chance of succeeding in that world. However, she underestimates the danger of her involvement with Trenor, she does not see how much she is alienating her aunt (and how much Grace Stepney has aided in that alienation), and she does not see what Bertha is planning. Although she seems an astute enough reader at times, she often overestimates her abilities, overlooking important differences between what she sees and what she wants to believe.

When she dutifully meets Trenor at the station as part of the tax for taking part in her friends' world, Lily knows that she has been sent by Judy as a substitute for Carry Fisher, who has "bled him rather severely" (63). Intrigued by the thought of financial independence and comfortably ignorant of the particular details, Lily still knows that "it was not by appealing to the fraternal instinct that she was likely to move Gus Trenor [to help her with tips and deals]; but this way of explaining the situation helped to drape its crudity" (65). Although she feels a "momentary shiver of reluctance" when Trenor leans near her and puts his hand over hers, she lulls herself by thinking that she can easily control the man and "so keep the obligation on his side" (68). Her diminishing ability to control the situation and her increasing need to make concessions first become

apparent when Trenor encounters her at Gwen Van Osburgh's wedding after she has heard the news that Evie Van Osburgh and Percy Gryce were expected to become engaged. Trenor's familiarity, on the heels of her loss of Gryce's millions, underscores her dependence on Trenor. Although she placates him with an invitation to visit her at her aunt's house and consoles herself with the cheque he presents her, each encounter becomes more unsettling.

Trying to apply the art of reading people and situations to the business of controlling them, Lily attempts to manipulate her exchanges with Gus Trenor. However, at each new meeting, she finds that her usual practice of listening and responding while leading men in the direction she wishes for them fails to keep Trenor enthralled but safely at bay. The method she had used to appeal to him at Bellomont, the implicit courtship behavior, leads him to want more:

Trenor had married young, and since his marriage his intercourse with women had not taken the form of the sentimental small-talk which doubles upon itself like the paths in a maze. He was first puzzled and then irritated to find himself always led back to the same starting-point, and Lily felt that she was gradually losing control of the situation. (101)

She begins to understand the extent of her obligation to him, but she continues to think she can evade such obligations and that, although he is unpleasant and demanding, he will not exceed the bounds of public conduct. This naiveté compounded with her voluntary myopia makes Lily vulnerable. Because she cannot fathom the situation, she can neither direct it nor steer clear of it.

Similarly, when she wishes to help Bertha out of a sense of gender

solidarity, Lily cannot imagine that Bertha would use her as a scapegoat. Enlarging upon the "feminine solicitude which envelops a young woman in the mating season," Lily, perhaps rather foolishly, works to help Bertha keep her mate (60). Another of her social set such as Carry Fisher would have either used the situation to catch George Dorset or slip away to escape disaster. However, having done as Carry Fisher might have done with Gus Trenor and failed, Lily chooses to try to contain the situation. She attempts to master it with her usual blend of avoiding the subject and maintaining the fiction of order. Lily's sense of propriety, of being what Elaine Showalter has termed the Perfect Lady who lives according to a "decorum of self-restraint," stems in part from her habitual role as art object; she strives to maintain an unruffled exterior despite whatever inner turmoil she feels (361). However, although her society values such smooth illusions, its members often violate such rules of conduct in self-interest or self-preservation. A Gus Trenor or a Bertha Dorset who is willing to cause a scene goes unmarked, but Lily, who cannot seem to imagine such displays, clings to her ladylike silence and suffers the consequences of their impropriety. It is not society's dictate that she must suffer in silence but her own fastidiousness.

Lily brings to her society's code of conduct a deeper level of morality and responsibility that hampers her. Bertha Dorset, however, is not so inhibited. An astute reader of people who does not shy away from contemplating unpleasant circumstances and who pays attention to events that do not seem to affect her directly, Bertha is willing to use what she knows and thus can write successfully. Bertha knows how to take advantage of a situation and of a person's weakness. Where Lily often tries to gently prod events in the direction she wishes and waits to see

what develops, Bertha's manipulations are concentrated and swift, designed to get the results she desires immediately. In rewriting the scenario on the yacht, turning a potentially disastrous situation to her own benefit, Bertha demonstrates the kind of control over situations and perceptions that Lily lacks. Although Lily manages to react quickly to Bertha's ploy and tries to cover the other woman's insult with a possible explanation for not going back to the yacht, the witnesses to the scene know what has happened. Lily's image of the triumphant Bertha, who had once wrecked her chance to marry Percy Gryce, reappears: "the allusive jargon which could flay its victims without the shedding of blood" has been used on its favorite victim again (87). And it is Lily who allows herself to be Bertha's victim. By misreading Bertha's desperation and misplacing her sympathy, disregarding her own "instinctive recoil," she makes herself vulnerable (162). Lily errs by "not...[thinking] of her own situation at all" (164).

Bertha's success comes from taking the initiative, from acting rather than reacting, from dictating the scene rather than adapting to it. As Judy Trenor observes to Lily, "Every one knows you're a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants in the long run, commend me to a nasty woman" (37). Willing to be nasty, to be aggressive rather than passive, Bertha succeeds where Lily does not. Unlike Lily, once Bertha has set a plan in motion, she actively pursues its end rather than risk, as Lily did in the pursuit of Percy Gryce, inattention that may lead to its failure. According to Candace Waid, Bertha and Lily are doubles and nemeses: "From the moment Bertha Dorset first appears...walking into a railway car and wondering aloud whether she can have Lily Bart's place, questions

concerning place, displacement, poses, and positions are at issue between the two women" (Waid 21). Having arranged Lily's expulsion from the yacht and thus her casting out from the upper echelon of their society, Bertha, her "social credit" and the specter of Bertha's accusations systematically displace Lily from whatever niche she has found for herself -- from Aunt Peniston's will to the "easy promiscuity" of the Gormers to the "dimly lit region" of Mrs. Hatch's hotel (204, 182, 213). If Lily's story is one of the fall from grace, Bertha is there to push her down each step.

A comparison of Bertha's and Lily's successes hinges upon Lawrence Selden and the letters: Bertha's writing could have betrayed her but does not; Lily could have used that writing and saved herself but does not. Bertha is suspicious of Lily having taken her place in Selden's affections while Mrs. Haffen mistakes Lily for Bertha as the writer of Selden's torn love letters. This doubling and displacement is to Bertha's advantage, however: in the eyes of others, Lily assumes Bertha's adulterous/adulteress role with Selden and with George Dorset and allows Bertha to escape criticism. Bertha's writing, rather than incriminating her, compromises Lily, and her most recent infidelity, rather than besmirching her own reputation, ruins Lily's. In being a re-actor to situations rather than an actor, Lily, as Linda Wagner-Martin argues, is not in charge of her own narrative; rather she is forced into roles that others, particularly Bertha, have fashioned for her (22-23). Bertha, however, directs her own roles. Although she puts herself in the position of adulteress, she finesses the truth, creating a new narrative for herself as wronged wife. Aggressive and tenacious, Bertha succeeds where Lily does not.

It is interesting to note that neither succeeds with Selden. Bertha's written words, the letters that cost Lily so dearly, apparently had no effect

on him. Much as Lily's note beckoning Selden "Beyond" fails, Bertha's letters cannot summon his past feelings. In this novel, written words rarely have the meaning or effect intended or interpreted. Bertha's letters which do not entice Selden but both tempt and repel Lily, the note from Judy Trenor beckoning Lily into her disastrous encounter with Gus, and Lily's repayment to Trenor which arouses the last of Selden's suspicions -- the words in these missives are misdirected or misapplied. The success of words lies in their power in the public realm. In the private realm, Bertha's plans to resume her relationship with Selden have no effect since he is not a willing audience. He cannot be manipulated into doing what she wants since her plans can have no public consequences. In the public realm, her words have power since "feminine discourse controls the realm of social exclusivity represented by Fifth Avenue" (Barnett 136). In preserving her marriage by displacing gossip onto Lily through her dramatic exclusion of Lily from the dinner party's return trip to the yacht, Bertha does not appeal privately but commands publicly. It is her social credit along with her adherence to "society's implicit dictum to expose or be exposed" that lend her plans power (Kaplan 84).

It is this use of the threat of public exposure which makes Mrs. Haffen another example of a successful narrator. In a sense, Mrs. Haffen is Lily's double and opposite as well -- she does what Lily might have done to succeed: used the letters. Just as Mrs. Haffen helps her husband with the money she gets for the letters, Lily might have got a husband and ended some of her financial troubles by using the letters in some way. She could have married George Dorset by using the letters as proof of Bertha's infidelities; she could have married Rosedale if she had used the letters to gain Bertha's cooperation; she might even have married Selden if she had

shown him the sacrifice she had made for him. However, she does none of these things. Mrs. Haffen, in using the letters, represents the crass commerciality and vulgarity of being conscious of costs, paying one's way and calling on debts that Lily wants to avoid, but in the estimation of the commercial society, Mrs. Haffen is successful -- she gets what she wants and appearances are kept up -- and Lily is not.

Lily's lack of control over events, her lack of success over narrative, extends to the traditional notion of writing as well: when she writes a note to Selden after her success in the tableau vivant, telling him when to come to see her, he does not come. Before her terrifying evening with Trenor, she is confident of her ability both to elicit Selden's response and to restrain it if she needs to: "she had read in his eyes that no philosophy was proof against her power....She took up her pen and wrote hastily: 'Tomorrow at four;' murmuring to herself, as she slipped the sheet into its envelope: 'I can easily put him off when tomorrow comes'" (110). When he does not come at the appointed hour, however, her confidence in her writing slips: she worries that her writing has not been clear enough, that her handwriting has misled him. After that evening alone with Trenor, when he shatters her illusion of control over how others see and treat her, she feels as if she has lost control over everything. She had thought that she was on the way to solving her financial problem without having to get married. She was finally acting rather than reacting, moving directly instead of relying upon the kindnesses of her women friends. Using Trenor's sympathy and admiration for her own gain, she was finally playing by the rules of her set. Lily fails abysmally, however, because she does not know all the rules and all the consequences. No longer confident in her power, she seeks Selden's help to "gather up her broken life, and

put it together in some new semblance in which no trace of the past should remain" (138). Lily wants Selden to create a new narrative for her, to help her author a new life. But he does not come. Although she writes another note to Selden, she never sends it because she sees a notice in the newspaper that he has gone away. He is beyond the power and reach of her words. Intriguingly, we never know what the note says.

In a novel in which words are so important, Lily's words have little effect, and when she tries to write to Rosedale, turning to him after Selden has sailed "Beyond!" her reach, "the words refused to shape themselves" (142). Her inability to write demonstrates her reluctance to accept Rosedale's proposal despite her intention. However, since she intends to accept the proposal, her inability to write may also indicate her inability to dictate both her words and her life. Caught in this impasse, she does not author a new life for herself either as a new Lily or as Mrs. Rosedale. It is a moment of reckoning, of trying to decide the course of her life, similar to her nighttime inventory at Bellomont. Shaken by the encounter with Trenor and the truth about his investments for her, unsure of what to do and unable to communicate with either of the men who represent her possible courses of action, Lily sits in a posture of defeat. She is saved from this helpless moment by Bertha's telegram -- the invitation has the power to briefly transport her "Beyond!" her troubles as her note to Selden, despite its evocative seal, ultimately did not. Adrift, since she cannot rely on Selden and cannot bring herself to accept Rosedale, she lets Bertha chart her course for her. It is Bertha and not Selden or Rosedale or Lily herself, who gives Lily's life a new shape. However, it is a shape as disfiguring as the image of herself that Lily tries to escape after the horror of her encounter with Trenor.

This sense of Lily's choices and decisions being dependent upon someone else is underscored by multiple references to Lily as a character in a story. She recognizes how much the perceptions of her depend upon the narrative she is in: "people were tired of her. They would welcome her in a new character, but as Miss Bart they knew her by heart. She knew herself by heart too, and was sick of the old story" (79). With a new narrator, a husband, she would assume a different character, taking on a new shape. However, Lily cannot imagine that this new shape could be significantly different from the old; rather she could only "pictur[e] her usual life in a new setting" (79). As in the tableau vivant where "she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself," Lily wants a new story, a new setting, in which she remains herself but also obtains all that she wants (106). However, her setting and her story are largely determined by the perceptions of the other characters; in reading her, they determine the kind of character she appears to be.

The power of the story in which she is often the most powerless and most vulnerable character is most apparent when Lily returns to New York after Mrs. Peniston's death. As Mrs. Peniston had recognized when Grace Stepney first told her that Lily had been linked to Trenor: "It was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made" (100). Aware of the stories circulating about her and Trenor but unaware of her aunt's knowledge of them, Lily had dismissed their importance to her chances: "In her set such gossip was not unusual" (101). After Mrs. Peniston's death, however, Lily learns the truth of her aunt's maxim; the horror of being talked about has cost her the inheritance. Snubbed by her relatives and society friends, Lily recognizes that the truth is not as

important as the tales people believe. Although Gerty encourages her to tell others what really happened, Lily feels that without money to lend her power, her story cannot be as convincing as the stories that the others are telling about her. However, her acceptance of the situation borders on defiance. Out of "a feeling that was half pride and half humiliation," (177) she rejects the value of the truth:

"The whole truth?" Miss Bart laughed. "What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe. In this case it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her."

Miss Farish still fixed her with an anxious gaze. "But what is your story, Lily? I don't believe any one knows it yet."

"My story? I don't believe I know it myself. You see I never thought of preparing a version in advance as Bertha did -- and if I had, I don't think I should take the trouble to use it now."
(176)

Lily's refusal to tell her own story is self-defeating: why not tell someone the truth? If she told Selden, or even George Dorset, what she has done and all that has happened, could not one of them help her somehow? Selden might have married her because, although she may have made mistakes, she would have shown him that she was not made of the same vulgar clay that the others in their set are. George Dorset would certainly beg her for release from their respective prisons. Yet Lily remains silent; it seems that she does not want to barter the truth for gain. Even Gerty, who asks for the truth and can give nothing tangible in return, is rebuffed in Lily's retreat into silence. Because she recognizes that she has compromised herself -- "she had been perfectly aware from the outset that her part in the affair was...to distract Dorset's attention from his

wife...[T]he part was not a handsome one at best, and she saw it now in all the ugliness of failure" (177) -- her mix of pride and shame causes her to again reject the values of the society which she has worked hard to join. Having toiled and lost, she no longer wishes to "take the trouble" (176). As with the letters, she wants to hold onto the words but does not wish to use them.

Lily seems to be both affirming and renouncing the authorial role. By keeping the truth a secret, she seems to set herself as its ultimate authority, yet she cedes the very truth even as she tries to hold onto it. She may choose what she says and does not say about herself, but she cannot control what others say about her. Her story is affected by the stories that others will tell to take its place. Her truth then becomes irrelevant. Yet she still maintains her silence, arguing that "the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks" (176-77).

Having made a mistake, Lily refuses to find excuses for herself and thus bears the responsibility of all the consequences. This reticence, although meant to protect the integrity of the truth, serves to enhance the credibility of the tales. According to Elaine Showalter, "Lily's inability to speak for herself is a muteness that Wharton associated with her own social background, a decorum of self-restraint she had to overcome in order to become a novelist." (361). However, Lily is not unable to speak; rather, she refuses to do so. Just as she has it within her power to marry at several points in the novel but does not, Lily has it within her power to present her version of the story and does not. It is not society which urges her to keep silent -- she has the very best (truth) and the very worst (expediency) reasons to speak -- but her own strange mix of pride and self-

blame which silences her. She creates a barrier between the truth and the tales. But it is a self-defeating gesture since her silence and her refusal to act only increase the power of those other tales.

Ironically, the man who knows the truth about Lily is not Selden but Rosedale. Rosedale, however, does not care what the truth is: "I won't go into what's happened. I don't believe the stories about you -- I don't want to believe them. But they're there, and my not believing them ain't going to alter the situation" (199). Rosedale is as much of a realist about the power of interpretative speculation as he is about the power of financial speculation. The important thing, the thing which has the most effect, is not what is true but what is believed. The stock market works this way -- some people determine the value of a stock by how others talk about it and react to it -- and so does their social world. Although she knows the truth of his words, Lily, because of "the extremity of her need," wishes that Rosedale would see the world as Gerty does, that the truth is more important than the tales: "If they are not true...doesn't that alter the situation?" (199). Rosedale replies: "I believe it does in novels; but I'm certain it don't in real life" (200). Ironically, it does not in novels either, not in this one. The truth does not alter Lily's situation because she will not let it. Lily is adamant about not speaking, about not using her words, or even Bertha's, to barter with: although Rosedale knows about the letters, she tells him he is mistaken and rejects his plan.

When she finally tells her story, it is to Rosedale. With an "eager communicativeness," she finally makes her "statement clearly, deliberately, with pauses between the sentences, so that each should have time to sink deeply into her hearer's mind" (228). In a sense, her succinct articulation of her story is for her own benefit -- she finally knows what

her story is. After being so hesitant and reticent for so long about her difficulties, her candidness is surprising and yet her confession is still selective: she is finally “relieving herself of her detested secret” but still she does not divulge Bertha’s (228). Notably, although she is being direct and deliberate in outlining her story to Rosedale, she does so in order to convey her intention to repay Trenor to Judy. The “truth about this transaction” is transformed into “rumour” (228). She tries to use the very method that had brought about her failure to achieve her rehabilitation. In relying upon Rosedale to “transmit her version of the facts,” Lily again relinquishes the power of narration (228).

Lily’s surrender of narrative control is linked to her need for spectators, for an audience, to assure herself of her beauty and value. Throughout the novel she has had a need to put herself on display and to appease and attract others, especially Selden. Without others around, Lily seems at a loss, as if she is not sure of her sense of purpose or her sense of self. When she is alone, she often becomes her own spectator, looking at herself in a mirror as if trying to read, find, or reassure herself of her self. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff has observed, Lily “can see herself only as a reflection -- in others’ judgments of her or literally in the series of mirror images that stalk her through the novel. Whenever she wants to know how she feels, she looks into a mirror to find out” (35).

To extend Wolff’s observation further, looking in the mirror is also associated with writing, with taking inventory, and particularly with establishing a sense of purpose. After the bridge game at Bellomont, Lily tries to reckon what she has lost and then looks into the mirror to see what she still has and can use. Looking in the mirror and seeing the tiny

lines reflected in it, she feels that it was “an added injustice that petty cares should leave a trace on the beauty which was her only defence against them” (25). Trying to read her own face and fate, Lily asks to be interpreted, asks the central question of the novel: “But why had she failed? Was it her own fault or that of destiny?” (25). The nighttime inventory makes the pursuit of Percy Gryce increasingly necessary though still unpalatable. She cannot remain Lily Bart and live as her friends do; she must become a “new character,” a society matron rather than a debutante (79). Similarly, when Selden does not come to her after her disastrous night with Trenor and she sees the notice of his departure, Lily walks over to the mirror as if to steady herself, to fix herself into a shape, before she sits down to write to Rosedale. Again, the practical inventory-taker has determined that she must marry to preserve her status. Her mirror serves as reminder of the identity she has tried to construct.

More reassuring, however, is the mirror of others’ perceptions. Although willful, Lily often needs the impetus of others for direction. She frequently looks to others’ admiration in order to regain a sense of self and of self-importance: “Mrs. Bry’s admiration was a mirror in which Lily’s self-complacency recovered its lost outline” (88). Her biggest triumph in creating herself is at the tableaux vivants, and the pleasure that Lily derives from her portrayal of Mrs. Lloyd is not from her own artistry but from others’ appreciation. She “cared less for the quality of the admiration received than for its quantity. Differences of personality were merged in a warm atmosphere of praise, in which her beauty expanded like a flower in sunlight” (108). These admirers reflect back her sense of triumph, confirming her status.

Lily’s dependence upon the reassuring mirror is shaken after the

Trenor disaster. She feels as if the internal marks the external. As with the petty cares that marked her face at Bellomont, the ugliness and sordidness she feels because of her involvement with Trenor make her feel disfigured so that she no longer wishes to see herself. "Can you imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement -- some hideous change that has come to you while you slept? Well, I seem to myself like that -- I can't bear to see myself in my own thoughts" (131). The sense of obligation and impropriety she had long evaded has caught up with her, and the truth reflected in the mirror of her mind is unsettling rather than steadying. Unaccustomed to "go[ing] alone," she has relied on others' perceptions to buffer her sense of dissatisfaction or failure (75). Shocked by the extent to which she has compromised herself, Lily goes to the other extreme, magnifying her faults. Unable to bear the rigorous truth of her conscience, she takes refuge with Gerty, who has always reflected back Lily's best self.

Elaine Showalter has observed that "[i]n one sense, Lily's search for a suitable husband is an effort to be 'spoken for,' to be suitably articulated and defined in the social arena" (361). However, the object of Lily's search is not really for a husband, since in one way or another none of her choices can suit her, but for an identity. Vacillating between the dissatisfactions and compromises of her social world and the unworkability and uncompromising nature of life in the republic of the spirit, Lily does indeed seek to be "suitably articulated and defined," to find her appropriate narrator. Because she fails to find this definition for herself, this search always leads her back to Selden. Since their talk at the Benedick, where they "exchang[ed] absurdities over his tea-table" (50), to their more intimate encounter at Bellomont, Lily has looked to Selden as

her “amphibious” guide through both the murky social world and the republic of the spirit (56). How he views the world affects how she sees it as well: during dinner at Bellomont, he transforms her vision of her friends -- “[t]hat very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way” (45). Similarly, his words affect how she acts and how she conceives of her real self. During that talk at Bellomont, she reveals to him how much he has affected her, both her plans and her very identity, but he is flippant, unaware of his effect. She asks him:

“Did you really come to Bellomont to see me?”

“Of course I did.”

Her look deepened meditatively. “Why?” she murmured, with an accent which took all tinge of coquetry from the question.

“Because you’re such a wonderful spectacle: I always like to see what you are doing.”

“How do you know what I should be doing if you were not here?”

Selden smiled. “I don’t flatter myself that my coming has deflected your course of action by a hair’s breadth.” (53)

However, his coming has derailed her course entirely, and he has always wanted to derail her, too, ever since that meeting in Grand Central station -- he has wanted to challenge and to change her into a denizen of the republic as he imagines himself to be. She disappoints him, of course, and he thinks that she is firmly entrenched in the social world.

However, his words, and his conception of her, remain with her. When she comes to see him for the second and last time at the Benedick, she tells him:

“[Your words to me at Bellomont] have helped me, and kept me from mistakes, kept me

from really becoming what many people have thought me."

Strive as she would to put some order in her thoughts, the words would not come more clearly; yet she felt that she could not leave him without trying to make him understand that she had saved herself whole from the seeming ruin of her life....**Whether he wished it or not, he must see her wholly for once before they parted.**" (239 my emphasis)

His words may have kept her from becoming what many people have thought her to be, but they have also led her to become what he has wanted her to be. Although she has become what he has wanted, he does not see the transformation. She wants Selden to see her as she truly is, not as some aesthetic creature or some habitué of their social set, long accustomed to the values of a life of appearance and speculation. However, he is one of those many people who have thought ill of her actions: he cannot see her wholly, both because he often sees what is easiest for him to believe and because, by not confiding in him, by being unable to let the words come, and by not letting him know that she is burning the letters, she does not allow him to see who she truly is. Paradoxically, although she wants to be seen wholly and be understood, she is circumspect.

By conclusively deciding on the fate of the letters, Lily seems to finally choose who she is. However, it is a choice that was, in a sense, already predicated. Although it seems as if Lily had kept her options open by keeping the letters rather than destroying or returning them after she bought them, she has resolutely rebuffed any urging to tell or use what she knows. This act of destruction -- burning the letters -- is the culmination of the construction of the "real Lily Bart" as Selden and Lily herself have conceived her. It is the admittance to Lily of both her failure to thrive in

the social world and the success that gains her entry into the republic of the spirit. However, it is an avowal that she is unable to share. Lily does not have the power to make Selden understand: the words will not come -- she still cannot articulate her own story. This inarticulateness is also apparent as she drifts into the drug-induced sleep from which she will never wake:

there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them. She tried to repeat the word, which lingered vague and luminous on the far edge of thought...if only she could remember it and say it to him, she felt that everything would be well. (251)

Lily has not been able to control the words of others, and now she cannot master this word of clarity for herself. Although Elaine Showalter describes this word as a "word of self-definition" (361), it is emblematic of Lily's struggle with identity and purpose that this word is "vague and luminous." She cannot quite grasp it, make it her own, and tell someone else about it, as she has not been able to make her story, her truth, be heard above the other tales. Rather than being her "word of self-definition," it symbolizes her very lack of definition.

Selden, however, does not experience this same inability to speak. Although he too has vacillated between "word-play and evasion" (238), Selden, having discovered the clarifying word, is confident that he can communicate it to Lily:

he had found the word he meant to say to her and it could not wait another moment to be said. It was strange that it had not come to his lips sooner -- that he had let her pass from him the evening before without being able to speak it. But what did that matter, now that a new day had come? It was not a word for twilight, but for

the morning. (252)

To Selden, this momentary inarticulateness does not matter because he knows that he will have the opportunity to speak later, because he has always had the opportunity to speak and be heard. But it does matter, very much, that he had not spoken it when Lily was at his flat, that he had let her believe that “[s]omething...lay dead between them -- the love she had killed in him and could no longer call to life” (241). By not speaking, he precluded her from speaking and so she would never be able to tell her story.

This clarifying word never does make everything clear between them. Lily is dead and the envelope addressed to Trenor stirs all Selden’s doubts again. These words -- Trenor’s address -- and Selden’s reaction to them provide another kind of clarity for him and for us: we see that Selden can never truly know Lily. Although he constructs an explanation for her that is like the story that we have read, he is still putting the stamp of his interpretation on Lily: “Did the cheque to Trenor explain the mystery or deepen it?...Then, gradually, his troubled vision cleared, old hints and rumours came back to him, and **out of the very insinuations he had feared to probe, he constructed an explanation of the mystery**” (255 my emphasis). Again Selden succumbs to his compulsive reading of Lily, finding what he wishes to find: “The mute lips on the pillow refused him more than this...Yes, **he could now read into that farewell all that his heart craved to find there**” (255 my emphasis). He focuses on himself rather than on her, easing his own pain rather than giving thought to what she had suffered. Although he can never know the truth other than what he has constructed, he is satisfied with his reading; he has created and saved his pure Lily rather than having to deal with the real one.

According to Candace Waid, "when Selden finally corrects his superficial misreading by reconstructing Lily's account, he does so through stories that he must create as well as unravel. Lily has attempted to burn letters, to hide letters away, to refuse the role of writer in which she has been cast by others and herself. She has wanted to settle accounts and have the story of her life 'end now'; but the reading and writing remain" (Waid 40). For Lily, the reading and the writing will always remain, making her story open to others' interpretations. Barbara Hochman suggests that "by excluding her most valued spectator [Selden] from the show [burning the letters], Lily effectively forestalls the risk of finding her 'real self' misinterpreted by an audience whose responses cannot be predicted" (158-159). However, in burning Bertha's letters and leaving only a few notes and settled bills on her desk, Lily prompts rather than forestalls misreading. The enigma of her actions, especially to a compulsive reader like Selden, begs to be deciphered; she cannot prevent her story, or at least somebody's version of her story, from being told. Thus, her story does not end with her death; rather it ends with Selden's interpretation of her death.

The malleability of Lily's sense of self -- her dependence upon the external affirmation of others' perceptions and the scrutiny of her own image -- is contrasted to the "hard brilliant substance" of her beauty (149). Although she likes to think of herself as having acquired the "habit of adapting herself to others without suffering her own outline to be blurred," her shape, as determined by others' perceptions and their effects on her, often changes and blurs (186). The identities and courses of action she develops by viewing herself from others' perspectives soon dissipate.

Her determination falters without the support of an audience. However, the audience she chooses to adhere to often lulls her into drifting along with the situation until someone else's action shakes her out of her complacency. Like Selden, whose estimation of Lily often changes because of the ideas of the people around him, she finds herself being pulled in opposite directions, into different roles and identities, by the values of Selden, on the one hand, and of Carry Fisher and Rosedale, on the other. "Lily...is a far from stable essence. Indeed, she is visible, even to herself, almost exclusively in the context of her...interactions with Selden, brought into being through the reciprocal process of representation and 'reading'" (Hochman 152-153).

Lily's lack of fixity and her dependence upon the readings of others make the notion of "the real Lily" ambiguous, particularly for Lily herself. Because "being watched...seems to be the virtual condition, if not for Lily's existence, at least for the existence of 'that real self of hers,'" Lily's real self almost does not seem to exist except when there is a spectator, particularly if that spectator is Lawrence Selden (Hochman 157). During the tableau vivant scene, Selden wants to see/read this Lily as the real Lily: "for the first time he 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" (106). For both Selden and Lily, this is the real Lily Bart, the creature to be remarked upon and admired for her beauty. Barbara Hochman has noted that the tableaux vivants with their "vision-making influences" which "give magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination" (105) are akin to the ideal act of reading that transports the reader into the "paysage choisi of the spirit" (Hochman 152). As I have argued earlier, however, it

is a transformation that does not expand but rather reduces. Both Lily and Selden mistake this idealized moment as one signifying her freedom from social constrictions, as the expression of her essential self. However, it is a self that is limited, a three-dimensional figure made two-dimensional. Rather than being her artistic creation, it is her artistic entombment -- Galatea transformed back into a statue. This "real Lily Bart" is merely a product of his imagination and her artifice.

This motif of Lily's real self and how it is revealed -- through words and silence -- is repeated throughout the novel and, most importantly, at the end of the novel when Selden finds her dead. Carol Wershoven links the deathbed scene with the tableau vivant:

To show her own beauty [in the tableau], Lily has dispensed with a sumptuous setting and has become purely herself, the "real" Lily. Lily is thus a character who will not fit into her environment but who is, because of her difference, more admirable. The scene anticipates the second half of the novel, in which Lily, gradually stripped of the "distracting accessories" of luxurious surroundings, will become more outcast, and therefore more herself. It parallels Selden's last scene with Lily, when she is dead, and when, too late, Selden again sees the "real" Lily. (49)

Lily, who had envisioned the future version of herself as the same character in a different setting, does indeed become more herself -- but a self that she had not planned for. When she had embarked on her plan to marry Percy Gryce, "the utmost reach of her imagination did not go beyond picturing her usual life in a new setting" (79). She had hoped to live an "amphibious" life, relying upon a husband's money but using it for some sort of vague good. However, as the novel progresses and Lily descends the social ladder rung by rung, both her setting and her character

are pared down to essentials. That this essential self is still conflicted during her last interlude with Selden is often overlooked. The self that she wishes him to see and understand is also the self that she intends to shed, leaving him as its guardian as he has been its co-creator. The “real Lily Bart” that she finally authors is another example of her “converting impulses into intentions” (54).

As with the tableau, when Lily had put her self on display to be misinterpreted by many in her audience, the deathbed scene evokes questions that are resolved to Selden’s satisfaction but which can only be mere interpretation. Her real self that “had lain warm on his heart” was a figment of his imagination, the idealized Lily that he has always preferred to the one who frequently disappointed him (253). He is unaware of the culminating act of this real self: she burns the letters without his notice. Barbara Hochman sees this act as Lily’s “rejection of her need for Selden, in his familiar role as...[her] most appreciative audience” (157). But far from being a rejection of her need for Selden, it is the embracing of her need, an internalization of his conception of her. She does not need him to see her burning the letters and with them her chance to “get Bertha Dorset into line” (202) because she already sees herself from his perspective. He has readjusted her vision, and she has transformed herself one last time to fit that vision. Ironically, what becomes her statement of self-definition stems from the perception of her as ideal object.

Lily irrevocably chooses her path with, she thinks, “nothing... remain[ing] to her but the emptiness of renunciation” (249). She defines herself as she has always done -- adapting and reacting to others and keeping silent, the same proud, uncompromising silence that has always

kept her from telling her story. Because of her silence, one of the "high moments of [her] life" (242) goes unrecorded and unacknowledged while so many of her lesser moments are tallied by the social scorekeepers of her society. Her private display in a society that values public exposure is easily overwritten. Ostensibly renouncing her need for an audience and freeing herself from the "great guilt cage," (45) Lily paradoxically succumbs to reductive reading. Lily, however, is as much her own victim as society's; her scruples prevail over her ambitions, but both are written over because she refuses to tell her story. None of the other characters, particularly Selden, ever seems to see, read, or interpret the particular Lily Bart that she has finally constructed. Instead, she leaves her tale for others to construe, and often, to misconstrue; the novel ends as it begins -- with a subjective reading of Lily by Selden.

Works Cited

- Barnett, Louise K. Authority and Speech: Language, Society, and Self in the American Novel. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993.
- Hochman, Barbara. "The Rewards of Representation: Edith Wharton, Lily Bart and the Writer/Reader Exchange." Novel: A Forum on Fiction 24.2 (1991): 147-61.
- Kaplan, Amy. The Social Construction of American Realism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Showalter, Elaine. "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's House of Mirth." Representations 9 (1985): 133-49. Rpt. in The House of Mirth. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., c. 1990.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. The House of Mirth: A Novel of Admonition. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- Waid, Candace. Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.
- Wershoven, Carol. The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1982.
- Wharton, Edith. A Backward Glance. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, c. 1934.
- . The House of Mirth. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., c. 1990.
- Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death." American Literature 46.1 (1974): 16-40.

VITA

Atisaya Vimuktanon was born in Bangkok, Thailand on June 9, 1971. She received her B.A. in English from Cornell University in 1993 and enrolled in the graduate program in English at the College of William and Mary that year.