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Lily's Dilemma: Opposing Principles in *The House of Mirth*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is Lily Bart and how she maneuvers in the cold, competitive world of upper class New York. To create a framework for my investigation, I draw upon naturalistic readings of the story which portray Lily as an outsider or "other" in her society. Lily's ethical principles lead to her destruction. Her marriage problem is just an example of her rejection of the life that her society expects her to lead. As she becomes more aware of a different philosophy of life--characterized by Selden's "republic of the spirit"--she finds it impossible to abide by the rules and customs of her society.

Ultimately she is unable to live in either world successfully. My research suggests that Lily's moral integrity prevents her from marrying only for money, but she is unable to see other choices available to her that will satisfy her need for luxury and wealth. In my study of Lily I examine the reasons why she could not reconcile the two opposing principles that lead to her downfall. My work analyzes Lily's inner struggles between her values and her ambition.

Lily's Dilemma: Opposing Principles in *The House of Mirth*

“I have tried hard—but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole?” (296)

Not enough significance has been placed on the role of naturalism in *The House of Mirth* (1905). Edith Wharton's work was largely ignored in early studies of naturalism. The critic Donald Pizer brought attention to the novels *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) in the past decade, but his work is often criticized for being too traditional. As this thesis argues, understanding naturalism is essential to a critical analysis of Lily.

From the beginning of the novel, Lily feels conflicted about the role that her society has written for her. She wants to rebel against this position and seems to sabotage herself sometimes by doing things that are not approved of by her society. Lily wants to live by the morality of Selden's "republic of the spirit" which would allow her to have personal freedom and marry a man that she truly loves. During her meetings with Selden, she displays the inner tension she feels between who she should be (a high society wife) and who she could be (a "free" woman like Gerty). When Lily is with Selden she catches glimpses of who she might have been if she was raised differently. However, Lily is morally conflicted because she loves luxury and wealth, but she despises the way she must achieve it through marriage to anyone with enough money.

Her upbringing and training have taught her that she must work towards the goal of marrying a wealthy man and performing the social activities that are expected of a woman in her station in society. My work identifies the central dilemma of the novel between Lily's morals and her goal, which directly oppose each other.

In the first section of my thesis, I establish a definition of naturalism, which serves as basis for my reading of the novel. Throughout the second and third sections, my main focus is on Lily Bart as a victim and product of her society. I analyze how Lily's upbringing and conditioning causes her to feel that she could not make choices that go against her society. Her training was for the purpose of becoming a wife and after she is ostracized from her society she has no skills to help her survive. As a product of her heredity and environment, she is useless for any other way of life, yet she is too fragile to survive in the harsh world of the upper class where people are driven by their lust for power and money.

Naturalism and *The House of Mirth*

The world of wealth and opulence in *The House of Mirth* may seem far removed from the gritty, commonplace settings of most naturalistic novels, but below its gilded surface of high fashion and manners lies a dark environment ruled by money, greed, and lust for power. Many readings of the novel cast Lily Bart as a woman who is controlled by the outside forces of society, while others argue that there is a compromised form of naturalism that undermines the idea that the forces are totally inescapable.¹ Despite the subtle differences among critics, the naturalistic readings of the novel point out the underlying forces that at least partially determine Lily's fate in her upper-class society.

What is naturalism? In *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (1984), Donald Pizer describes naturalism as the expression of the age's perception of the restrictions created by a person's "biological past" and "social present."² There is a "tension between actuality and hope" in naturalistic novels; this is apparent in the story of Lily's conflict between her goal of wealth and her own morals.³ However, despite Pizer's seemingly clear explanation, the study of naturalism is sufficiently problematic to require a common definition that will serve as the foundation for this reading. Traditionally, naturalism is viewed as an extension of realism in the sense that both strive to present everyday life truthfully and objectively. Pizer characterizes this traditional view of naturalism as "realism infused with a pessimistic determinism" (9). This traditional view of naturalism is limited, though. It simplifies

and complicates the movement at the same time. By relating the two terms, certain components of naturalism become more accessible, but as a whole, the comparison makes the definition too rigid.

In general, naturalistic novels examine the controlling forces of heredity and environment and the functions that chance and freedom perform in a character's attempt to endure in a modern, urban, capitalistic setting. In *Twisted from the Ordinary* (2003), Mary Papke resists trying to define the term but instead explains what sets naturalism apart from other forms of literature.⁴ Naturalist texts break down boundaries and challenge the unquestioned values that humans base their lives on. This scrutiny of the controlling forces in society is essential to naturalism. Naturalistic novels delve into dark worlds that are often violent and immoral and contain conflicts that make the reader uncomfortable. Two core tensions are found in this genre. One tension occurs between the poor, common characters and the heroic and passionate qualities they possess. Characters from the lowest levels of society experience powerful emotions. The other tension is in the theme, which involves the conflict between the controlling deterministic forces of society and the optimistic hope of humankind. Pizer calls these contrasts a mixture of "controlling force" and "individual worth" (28). Although it seems contradictory, the goal of these superficially pessimistic novels is actually to call on the romantic hope inherent in the reader that will not tolerate such a world of pain and indifference. As Papke asserts, naturalism summons the reader to reject the forces working against us and redefine the rules of the game.

If a naturalistic character is one who is “conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct or chance” (Pizer 13), then Lily is certainly naturalistic; she is a poor, orphaned, single woman, who finds it difficult to succeed in a world ruled by wealth, family ties, and marriage. She is trained by her mother to use her beauty to get what she wants and she is taught that she needs wealth and marriage to have a happy life. This training is reinforced by her upper-class society, which values money and luxury and scorns anything dingy or common. Lily feels ensnared by the bonds of her society. Naturalistic characters are bound by absolute rules of conduct that dictate the way they must act, and this controlling force destroys their ability to see beyond the social matrix of their world. The routines and customs that society imposes on them make it difficult for them to break free.

To Lily the world appears to be a malevolent force actively working against her. Due to her upbringing and conditioning, she feels that she cannot make choices that go against her society. In “The Naturalism of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*” (1995), Pizer describes Lily as someone who is “fully aware of her condition as one bound by her social matrix” (242). Early in life, her father’s troubles with money cause “grey interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense” (27). These situations of economic extremes cause Lily to see both sides of the social spectrum. She finds that she cannot bear to be poor and dingy. Her positive view of the universe was radically changed when her family was financially ruined shortly after her “dazzling debut” at nineteen. She suffered again when her parents died, leaving her an orphan at the mercy

of her unsympathetic aunt. Despite her efforts to please her aunt and the others around her, she finds herself unmarried at twenty-nine.

Lily turns to people like Gerty and Nettie for help as she starts her downward social spiral. Although these women are not from the upper-class circle that Lily usually associated with, they find success within their own spheres. Nettie, in particular, is problematic for some critics who find her situation contradictory to the naturalistic theme of the novel. This is partially why Pizer argues for a compromised form of naturalism in the novel.⁵ Although he admits that Lily's fate is "shaped by the capitalistic exchange values of her society or by its patriarchal power structure" (242), he also sees another character in the story who is not a victim to these forces.⁶ Nettie Struther overcomes serious illness and betrayal. When Lily meets her again near the end of the novel, Nettie is happily married and has a baby. Lily is very aware of the difference between Nettie's situation and hers. She understands that "It had taken two to build the nest; the man's faith as well as the woman's courage" (307). According to Pizer, Nettie's success at rebuilding her life is connected to her ability to find a man who was willing to link his fate with hers.

In Nettie's case, she is able to have a second chance through her marriage, but she still remains in her social class. She is not able to escape to a higher class, but she does maintain her position and she is able to have a happy life with her husband and child. Lily, on the other hand, is not only unable to maintain her place on the fringe of the upper class society, but she plummets to the bottom of the social ladder. Pizer argues that she lacks two things that gave Nettie the ability to succeed in life (Pizer, "Naturalism" 244).

Nettie possesses a strong will to overcome her hardships, but Lily does not. Most important to Pizer's argument is the fact that Lily does not have a man to help her remake her life the way she would like. However, Pizer's argument raises more issues than it resolves. The presumption that Lily might have a better chance of success if she linked her life to a man's is another aspect of the social barriers that Lily faced.

A different way of looking at Nettie's experience is to view her as Wharton's representation of an ideal that is not possible for Lily. Lily sees her as someone who has "reached the truth of existence" (307). As Wai-Chee Dimock points out in "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*" (1994), it is never fully explained how Nettie is able to succeed. Finding a husband who was willing to trust her can be seen as just an act of good luck. Wharton does not closely examine Nettie's ability to escape the snares and pitfalls of society that others are not able to avoid. Dimock suggests that this lack of depth is most likely due to the fact that Nettie is the personification of Wharton's ideal rather than an actual representative of the working class. In order to function as the romantic "redemptive figure" that Wharton wanted her to be she has to be separate from the social realm (Dimock 389). Wharton portrays her as a character with the determination and endurance to transcend the established controlling social forces, but she does not explain the secret to Nettie's victory. Ultimately, the ideal of Nettie is eroded when she conveys her dream that her daughter will be like Lily when she grows up. Rather than reading Nettie's experience as a triumph over the forces that crushed other characters like Lily, it is more likely that Nettie is Wharton's attempt to provide a positive alternative to the upper-class society she was criticizing.

The inclusion of scenes that do not neatly fit the traditional view of naturalism does not weaken the reader's understanding of Lily as a naturalistic character. The form of naturalism that Wharton employs allows for distinction in the responses and reactions of characters who come from different social classes. Pizer compares Wharton to Theodore Dreiser in their shared interest of showing the "powerful effect of environment and heredity on various specific kinds of temperament and experience" (245). Rather than presenting all human beings suffering from the social forces in the same ways, both writers make distinctions about the way that people from different classes are affected. At some levels of society, the social forces seem more easy to escape, and as Pizer points out, people like Nettie "not only survive but even triumph" (245). However, at the top of the social classes, women like Lily must battle against more complex forces over which they have little or no control. They become victims who are imprisoned and eventually destroyed by their environment. By showing that some characters like Lily are victims but others, such as Nettie can escape, Wharton adds a different dimension to the naturalistic principle of social and environmental conditioning.⁷

Another "alternative form of belief and value" that Pizer examines is the final scene in the book between Selden and the dead Lily; that final connection between them is viewed as a "transcendent faith, [which] holds that some values exist despite their seeming defeat in life" (Pizer, "Naturalism" 243). As Lily drifts off to sleep under the influence of the chloral, she thinks about Selden and feels that there is some word that she must say to him that will "make life clear between them" (310). The overdose of chloral represents her powerlessness to prevail over a fate that was already determined by

social forces. Lily's thoughts of love for Selden signify a "transcendent" faith in humanity and a belief in values that are "unachievable by some or even all of humankind" (Pizer, "Naturalism" 245). When Selden visits her deathbed he recognizes that love did exist between them despite the fact that the "conditions of life" were working against them; as he kneels beside her a word passes between them that makes it all clear. Although it was never uttered in real life, the "word" of love passes between them. This moment is a transcendence of human love over death and the social forces that destroyed Lily. This reading supports a modified form of naturalism that requires the reader to "have faith in a truth despite its lack of concrete supporting evidence and its frequent denial or defeat by life itself" (Pizer, "Naturalism" 246).

The examples of Nettie's escape and Selden and Lily's transcendent love do not negate the basic principles of naturalism. Wharton still shows her characters as being socially conditioned. However, Wharton's use of naturalism is slightly different from that of her contemporaries. Wharton's portrayal of Lily illustrates the tensions that a typical naturalistic character faces due to her circumstances. Lily is clearly a naturalistic character who is conditioned and trapped by the environment of wealth and by the end of the novel it seems that the only way she is able to truly escape is through death.

Lily as Victim

Lily is not equipped with the necessary skills to survive in her environment. She regularly becomes the victim and everything she does seems to turn against her, especially when she tries to work within the “rules” of her society. The social system is so defective that no woman can survive it unharmed unless she has her own economic power (Wagner-Martin 50). Every woman is victimized by the controlling forces of the society.

Lily is powerless in her society because she is constantly required to *react* rather than *act*.⁸ She is always on the defensive and must guard her reputation. Linda Wagner-Martin identifies Lily as the outsider or “maverick loner” who will be destroyed by the social constructs she rejects. She tries to be the maverick and act for herself, but she frequently submits to the standards and principles of her society. Within her social structure, her function is to respond to the codes and customs that form and support the recognized power base.

The real story that supersedes the marriage subtext is Lily’s rejection of the traditional female role that the women around her perform.⁹ She is an “unconventional” woman who takes a risk whenever she attempts to act for herself. The other women in the novel do not recognize or care that they are being controlled by social forces. Lily has no female advisors to turn to so she confides in Selden. As a male he is part of the “mainstream ideology” that does not pertain to marginal characters like Lily (Wagner-

Martin 54). Selden talks to Lily about a freedom that she cannot have individually. As Selden's wife she could have experienced his "republic of the spirit" but on her own she is not capable of such independence. The first scene in Selden's apartment establishes her powerlessness. He shapes Lily's story and by doing so he takes away her authority. When Lily is with Selden she feels like she is able to "escape from routine" and it feels "natural" to her because it makes her happy but later she must cover it up when she is spotted by Rosedale (14). By having tea in Selden's apartment, she drifts from her routine of a marriageable lady and she has to "pay so dearly" for this escape (14). The truth is she cannot escape from the restrictions of her society, and keeping up this appearance and playing the game is getting old to Lily. She feels trapped and sees that there is no real way out. As Wagner-Martin suggests, Lily is unlike the typical protagonist and it is her failure in the "social game" that actually makes her heroic.¹⁰ She lacks the financial stability to compete and she is too moral to prosper in the social role assigned to her.

Many readers assume that Lily is a "free agent" who has the power to make her own decisions, but Wharton shows time after time that Lily is essentially powerless in her society (Wagner-Martin 52). The only feeble power she wields is due to her beauty and this can only get her so far. Lily's status of limited freedom makes her a "marginal" character who is restricted in her choices and actions.¹¹ Lily has a "double consciousness"¹² that permits her to be aware of the main culture even though she is a marginal character. Living in two worlds requires the marginal character to find balance. For example, Lily recognizes that Selden is capable of going against conventional society

and living out his “republic of the spirit” but she knows that she lacks the financial power and freedom to do so (Wagner-Martin 53). In order for a marginal character, especially a woman, to reach this independence she will need support.

Lily’s real problem is her status as an unconventional woman—an “other”. She wants more than the superficial things that wealth allows. She loves the luxury that wealth brings but she wants to live life by her own standards. This was not a possibility for a marginal character—a woman with no voice or power. At the turn of the nineteenth century, a woman like Lily was seen as “unfeminine, inappropriate, and unseemly” and her death was inevitable if she didn’t play by society’s rules (Wagner-Martin 57). Regardless of what she did, Lily’s end would have been disappointing because of her marginal status in society. She saw herself as a “useless” person with no “independent existence”; she tells Selden that she is like a cog in the machine of life and when she dropped out she is of no use (296). Lily tries but is ultimately unsuccessful as an independent woman.

When she tries to use the social game to her advantage, she fails and her scheme backfires on her. At the beginning of the novel, Lily relentlessly tries to fit in with her friends and keep up with the demands of her upper-class society. She is encouraged by her friends to gamble at parties. She must oblige in order to remain in the favor of those who help and support her with “dresses and trinkets which occasionally replenish her insufficient wardrobe” (25). As luck would have it, Lily loses a considerable sum of money during the games at Bellomont. She thinks about how unfair it is that she should lose money when women like Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor win but do not need the

money. She admits that she has “never been able to understand the laws of a universe which was so ready to leave her out of its calculations” (26). When Lily tries to use Mr. Trenor to regain some of her losses through investments, the scheme explodes on her. Lily underestimates Trenor and the price she will be forced to pay for his help. Naively she thinks that “to a clever girl, it would be easy to hold him by his vanity, and so keep the obligation on his side” (81). Her innocence and lack of knowledge about men and money make her unaware of her dangerous position. She becomes a victim of Trenor’s lewd plans.

Lily’s understanding of the system of exchange used in her society is different than Trenor’s concept. She enters the financial arrangement with Trenor with the idea that she will be expected to repay the money that he invested for her. Dimock identifies Trenor’s demand for sex as a means of exchange; Trenor uses the “language of the marketplace” to assert his belief that certain payments are owed to him for the investments he made on Lily’s behalf (Dimock 375). Lily’s comprehension of expected forms of payment differs from Trenor’s. While men like Trenor and Simon Rosedale participate within this system of marketplace exchange, Lily functions as “merchandise” that is marketed in order to attract the highest buyer.¹³ She is a victim of this system of exchange but she also attempts to subvert it at times. For example, she successfully markets herself to Percy Gryce at the beginning of the novel, but purposely sabotages her victory.

In the social marketplace, money is not necessarily the only form of exchange. An invitation to a dinner party or trip on a yacht are often worth more. Dimock calls this

the “commodification of social intercourse” which essentially “reduc[es] human experience to abstract equivalents for exchange” (376-377).¹⁴ Although the power in the story most often belongs to the men, women like Bertha Dorset also control the system of exchange at times, as on the yacht. When Lily is torn between accepting Rosedale’s marriage proposal and the invitation to cruise with the Dorsets she unwisely chooses to flee from her problems and leave the country. Lily must pay a steep price for her passage. She falls back into her old habits of trying to fit in with her group of high society friends and agrees to keep Mr. Dorset busy while his wife has an affair with Ned Silverton.

Lily’s experience on the yacht signifies the breaking point in the tension between who she thinks she wants to be as a rich, upper-class wife and who she thinks she could have been with Selden. When Selden runs into her in Monte Carlo, he observes a difference in her and notes that “she was on the edge of something . . . he seemed to see her poised on the brink of a chasm, with one graceful foot advanced to assert her unconsciousness that the ground was failing her” (183). Lily thinks that by ignoring her problems and changing her location they will all go away. She views the trip as “not merely a postponement, but a solution of her troubles. Moral complications existed for her only in the environment that had produced them. . . . [T]hey lost their reality when they changed their background” (186). In reality, Lily’s problems follow her wherever she goes. By changing locations she just delays her inevitable downfall. Her attempt to run away from her troubles rebounds on her when the Dorset affair scandal is turned against her. The ultimate price Lily must pay is her reputation. She becomes a victim of Bertha

Dorset's manipulations and is kicked off the ship, and to a larger extent, ostracized from their society as a whole.

As Dimock suggests, the people who really benefit from this system of exchange are those who break the rules. Although Lily wants to rebel against the system, she plays by the rules and pays her debts. People like Bertha Dorset get what they want without paying for anything at all. Ironically, by settling her debt to Trenor with the money she obtains from her aunt, Lily revolts against the system through her conformity to it.

Trenor did not anticipate that she would repay him with money. By paying him back the precise monetary amount, Lily defies the power of the system of exchange (Dimock 383).

Although Lily's choice to only use money as a currency for exchange is consistent with her moral principles, her act of rebellion does not gain her any rewards in the social system. In her world those who succeed know how to work the system in order to take more than they offer in return (Dimock 385). She refuses to do business with Rosedale because she knows that she will have no money left after paying her debt to Trenor. She also rejects Rosedale's suggestion to use revenge as a currency of exchange with Bertha. Lily chooses not to use the letters to make Bertha pay because Selden's reputation would have to be part of the deal. When she burns the letters, Lily makes a silent protest against the ethics of exchange (Dimock 386). Lily's acts of defiance are not a threat to the system though; she remains the only one who truly "pays" and sadly Selden does not even value her sacrifice. Lily's morality is no match for the exchange system that turns everything into a commodity.

As Selden observes early in the novel, 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” (6). From an early age she was taught that she must follow the rules of society, which dictate that she must always be well dressed, attend parties, participate in the activities of her group, travel, and above all else marry. Her mother instilled the belief in her that she had no other choices. She was not encouraged to develop any other skills in life other than being a beautiful object. However, she slowly begins to question her role as a passive victim of society. Wharton uses the event of Jack Stepney’s wedding to make an important realization clear to Lily. First, it is apparent that Percy Gryce is no longer a possibility in her marriage plan since it is announced that he is engaged to another woman. Next, Gus Trenor makes her financial relationship with him known to all through his loud discussion of her investments. Finally, Trenor pushes her to socialize with Rosedale and she makes a scene when she slights him. These situations make Lily realize the loss of her marital possibilities (Wagner-Martin 26). She is no longer confident that her plan of being married within the year is possible.

Lily is naïve about her concept of the marriageable woman. She participates in the *tableaux vivants* at the Brys’s party thinking only of the romantic aspect of her display of beauty. She fails to see herself as a sexual commodity that men will willingly purchase rather than marry. The negative impact her error in judgement has on her reputation is not clear to Lily. The men in the story control the perception of her reputation. The reader knows that Lily is honest, but her society’s view of her is colored by Trenor’s boastings about the investments, Rosedale’s accusations of lying, and

Percy's exposure of her gambling (Wagner-Martin 28). As Wagner-Martin suggests, the connection between economics and Lily's powerlessness is even echoed in her last name—Bart (29). Lily's life is controlled by the powerful men in her society, and to a larger extent, by the system of exchange.

Society's Perception of Lily

Appearances and beauty play a significant role in the novel. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell suggests in "The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart," everyone in the novel is a "looker-on" and appearances count the most (36). At all levels of society, people are watching Lily.

The most significant of these observers is Lawrence Selden. As the novel opens, he studies Lily at the train station. Selden notes that she draws attention even in a crowd. Wai-Chee Dimock identifies Selden as a spectator of life; he is business-minded in his attraction to Lily. He sees value in Lily as a collectible object.¹⁵ Unfortunately, Selden does not have the money to invest to marry Lily so he remains a spectator. However, Selden does not invest in Lily just because he thinks he has nothing to offer. He is more worried about what he has to lose. During their discussion at Bellomont, Lily asks him if he wants to marry her. He laughs and replies, "No, I don't want to—but perhaps I should if you did!" (69). This is an example of how Selden only wishes to love Lily if he is certain that she will love him back. In the language of exchange, he will not take a risk with his emotions. As Dimock points out, Selden calculates his love like a balance sheet with expenditures and projected returns (381). Ultimately, Lily is not a reliable enough investment; he lacks confidence in her after her dealings with Trenor.

Selden remains a spectator through much of the novel, but at the end he decides to try to invest in Lily. He is too late, but he feels no sense of responsibility for Lily's

demise. He only has the feeling of a lost opportunity for the speculator in him. Selden's "republic of the spirit" is nothing more than a copy of the social marketplace. His republic does not allow him or Lily to have personal freedom. If he had lived his life according to the concept that he described to Lily at Bellomont, Selden would have asked Lily to marry him. Instead, he can be seen as a "negative hero" who participates in the social system of exchange that destroys Lily (Dimock 382). He is stingy and unwilling to move forward in his relationship with Lily because he does not want to risk the cost of failure.

Selden is like the other nonpayers, Mrs. Peniston and Bertha Dorset, who want to take without giving anything in return. Selden doesn't challenge the rules of the marketplace like Lily does. He is not willing to pay for what he wants. Lily does not give in and marry someone rich, and she pays the consequences of her actions. Selden is not willing to invest in Lily and risk paying the consequences if it does not turn out the way he wants. The nonpayers are the powerful ones who establish the rate of exchange. Bertha Dorset escapes paying by forcing others to pay the price instead. Mrs. Peniston doesn't feel obligated to help Lily beyond the minimal financial support of room and board and infrequent money for clothing. Selden refuses to invest in Lily at all because the deal is too risky.

Even people who are not part of her social circle shape the way that Lily is portrayed. Women like Nettie Struther and the girls who work at Mme. Regina's follow Lily's life when she is part of the rich and famous class. They read about her in the papers and marvel over the descriptions of her beautiful dresses. However, once she

becomes a worker like them she is no longer fascinating. Lily learns that they are “awed only by success” and now that she is a fallen star they have little interest in her (275).

Blanche Gelfant discusses how a woman character can be both a consumer and consumed in a naturalistic novel.¹⁶ Lily is driven by her desire for the satisfaction of her needs and this is a determining force in the novel. Determinism portrays humans as animals who are subject to inescapable drives that are experienced as desire (Gelfant 179). This longing is a strong force in the novel and Lily is controlled by her need for wealth and luxury. She is also an object of desire, a “socially constructed artifact.”¹⁷ In the *tableaux vivants* scene she is literally a representation of art through her portrayal of the character in the painting. Yeazell calls this Lily’s “most triumphant performance” because she displays her “superior refinement” and presents a portrait of her true self through the character that she depicts (27-28).

There is a tension between the binary of individualism versus determinism and the interaction of gender in the treatment of Lily’s beauty.¹⁸ This tension is a component of the naturalistic forces at work in the novel. Many of the men are charmed by her “cuteness,” which Charles Harmon identifies as a “normalized yet resentment-laden quality of ‘powerful helplessness.’” In the *tableaux vivants* scene, Lily’s performance is similar to Carrie’s experience as an actress in *Sister Carrie*. Through their performances, both women create an inversion of gender roles. The powerful men who watch them briefly leave behind the “anxieties associated with freewheeling capitalistic endeavor” and take on emotions that are normally connected to powerless women (Harmon 132). The reversal of gender roles caused by Lily’s performance explains why some of the men

were impressed with Lily's portrayal of the painting and others were not. Those who were not pleased with her did not appreciate the power that her performance took away from them. Harmon argues that men of Lily's time granted power to women in "gestures of masochistic wallowing whose very extravagance saved them from having a lasting effect upon the everyday practices of gender relations" (133).

Lily's display of power was fleeting and it garnered her much criticism from some of the powerful men in her society. Her beauty has a quality of "cuteness" that is attractive to the men. Daniel Harris asserts that labeling someone as cute is an "act of sadism" because the admirer unconsciously tries to "maim, humble, and embarrass the thing he seeks to idolize" (Harmon 133). The powerful men (and women) in Lily's society are brutal and cruel to her. They admire her beauty but they want to control her and force her to fit into the role that society demands of her as a married woman.

This concept of cuteness also deals with the desire for power of the woman who is labeled. Like the actress in *Sister Carrie*, Lily is able to portray the character in the painting during the *tableaux vivants*, but also retain a sense of her own identity. As Selden, Gerty, and the other guests observe, Lily's choice of character was "so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself" (129). They are able to see the "real" Lily for a moment. Amy Blair argues that Lily not only imitates the painting, but also takes it over through her ability to make the character so similar to herself.¹⁹

Through her display of beauty, Lily manipulates the audience and temporarily seizes power. At that moment she is both free and determined. Through the inversion of

gender roles that is created by her performance, her audience also sees themselves as both powerful and powerless. Even though some of the guests are impressed with what they see (some men comment on Lily's "outline" which they had never noticed before in her usual dress), Trenor is angry at the attention she receives after her performance. Also, Jack Stepney criticizes her performance as "a girl standing there as if she was up at auction" and remarks that gossip was written about her in *Town Talk* (151). Clearly, the powerful men in her social circle do not like the uncomfortable feeling of Lily's power.²⁰ There is no tolerance in their society for the "young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations" (152).

Lily suffers again from the scrutinizing glare of her upper class society in Monte Carlo. Much like the *tableaux* scenes in New York, the Monte Carlo setting has an aspect of performance. However, the outcome of this performance proves to be much more damaging. Through Bertha Dorset's manipulations Lily appears to be the star of a scandal. Bertha makes Lily look like the villain in front of everyone.

Lily tries to create a prominent, satisfying place for herself in society through commodification.²¹ She vacillates between feelings of "consumerist elation"²² and a desire to break free from the restraints of her society. Sometimes Lily is interested in being a part of the "hierarchies of wealth and prestige," but she also wants to be an individual who cannot totally be defined by her place in any "naturalized social ranking."²³ The latter sounds close to Selden's "republic of the spirit." Selden desires to live his life with a "personal freedom...from everything—from money, from poverty,

from ease and anxiety, from all material accidents” (64). This is what Lily really wants too, but her gender prevents her from being successful in this pursuit.

At the end of the novel, Lily is reduced to nothing. She has no job, no money, no fine clothing, and she has no real allies anymore. She has no exchange value, and this is a treacherous position in a market economy. Essentially, Lily loses the essence of herself when she no longer has her money or good reputation. In the social economy, consumption has a negative connotation; it implies wasting or using up something until there is nothing left (Gelfant 183). Capitalism and the culture of consumption are entangled, as Lily believes that acquiring wealth will allow her to be the person that she wants to be. This desire is culturally conditioned and it turns Lily into a consuming woman who “generates a vortex of forces that flow inexorably toward consumption and death” (Gelfant 192).

As a result of society’s perception and determination of Lily, she is both socially banished and financially cut off. The members of her society are constantly observing and making their own conclusions about her. Regardless of the innocence she displays, Lily is judged and cast out.

Conclusion

This analysis has focused on the naturalistic forces that play a role in Lily's inner battle between her values and her ambition. Throughout the novel, Lily struggles to maneuver within the spheres created by the culture of the upper class, which fuse the "interior" feminine world with the "commercial" masculine world (Anesko 89). Lily is conflicted because her ideal of personal freedom does not coincide with her goal of wealth. Her morals do not allow her to obtain her goal by marrying anyone who is wealthy. In the clash between her morals and her goal, Lily often gets caught between the two spheres of her society. Amy Kaplan argues that "the novel maps a social terrain where these realms become increasingly interconnected not only through the relations of work and marriage but through the mediation of spectatorship" (89). The observers in the novel, such as Selden, Bertha Dorset, Mrs. Peniston, and many of the powerful men in the society, exert force on the object of their gaze; Lily must make herself the desirable center of attention and gain the approval and support of her society in order to survive (Anesko 89). Ultimately, Lily is not capable of living in either world successfully.

Notes

¹ Larry Rubin surveys a variety of criticism on the naturalistic readings of *The House of Mirth* in “Aspects of Naturalism in Four Novels by Edith Wharton” (1957). He presents opposing sides from Blake Nevius who sees Lily as a product and victim of her heredity and environment and Elizabeth Monroe and Robert Morse Lovett who view Lily as partially to blame for her downfall because of her mistakes in judgment and moral attitude. Rubin concludes that Lily is molded by the determining forces of heredity and environment and ultimately crushed by her amoral and indifferent society.

² In *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Donald Pizer discusses the basic tendencies of nineteenth-century American literature which combined the ideas of freedom and the emergence of a new awareness about the limitations that social and hereditary forces inflict on humans.

³ Pizer juxtaposes these two forces of what he calls outer and inner realities: determinism (“impersonal evolutionary law”) on one side and faith or hope on the other side. He clarifies, however, that these two views are not simply pitted against each other, but “complement,” or balance each other to form a type of literature that is “awkwardly complex rather than comfortably obvious” (xiii).

⁴ Mary Papke’s *Twisted from the Ordinary* presents the current trends in the study of naturalism. She includes essays that propose new interpretations of naturalistic texts, ranging from the intersection of sentimentalism and naturalism, to readings that employ

the lens of economic, gender, and class theory, to the clash between art and consumption. Additionally, she offers a look at contemporary works that contain the thread of naturalism through investigations like Donald Pizer's essay "Is American Literary Naturalism Dead? A Further Inquiry" (2002).

⁵ In "The Naturalism of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*" Donald Pizer argues that there is a distinction between the form of naturalism practiced by Wharton and her contemporaries such as Norris, Crane, and Dreiser. He acknowledges Lily is often seen as a product of her heredity and environment. The main goal of the article, however, is to reconcile the naturalistic view of Lily as a victim of her society and two examples in the novel that Pizer sees as undermining the idea that the forces are totally inescapable. He challenges the argument that naturalism is chiefly about social determinism.

⁶ In Pizer's reading of the novel, Wharton juxtaposes the deterministic theme with two alternative forms of belief and value. The first alternative situation presents the concept of human will and strength that allows a character like Nettie to escape the same social forces that Lily is unable to control. Pizer contrasts the two women to assert that Nettie's powerful will and her ability to find a man that was willing to take a chance with her gave her an advantage over Lily and allowed her to rebuild her life (Pizer, "Naturalism" 243-44).

⁷ Pizer acknowledges the similarities between Wharton's form of naturalism and that of her contemporaries through her use of social determinism, but he stresses the differences by pointing out instances in the novel that complicate and redefine the naturalistic mode (Pizer, "Naturalism" 244-45).

⁸ When Gerty asks Lily to tell her story she gives a “non-story,” according to Wagner-Martin. Lily was not an actor in charge of living the action of her narrative. Because she lacks power, she can only respond or react to the codes set up by those who have the power (22-23).

⁹ Lily is sometimes compared to Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899). Both women desire to live their lives according to their own terms and rules (Wagner-Martin 54).

¹⁰ In what Wagner-Martin calls “traditional novels” the protagonist is usually brave and capable of making their own decisions. Lily wavers between her desire to break free from the social games of her high society friends and her need to marry a rich man to gain wealth and luxury. Lily doesn’t always do what the reader expects her to do. She is more complex than the other beautiful elite women in her social circle.

¹¹ Ellen Moers’s *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1976) is cited by Wagner-Martin for this concept of characters of secondary status. She describes these characters as having restrictions on “travel, education, marriage choices, and adulthood.” (Wagner-Martin 53).

¹² This term describing Lily’s state of mind comes from Rachel DuPlessis’s *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985).

¹³ Lily is aware of her relation to the marketplace to a certain extent. In her conquest of Percy Bryce she talks of his “purchase” of her and compares herself to his collection of Americana, both of which he would be proud to spend money on. Lily’s mother also saw

her in terms of economics. She tries to encourage her daughter to use the “asset” of her beauty to marry into wealth.

¹⁴ Dimock applies this term not only to women, as it is commonly used in gender studies, but to all social dealings which are turned into or treated as an article of trade or commerce (376-377).

¹⁵ Dimock asserts that Selden is a “speculator” who plays two sides: the spectator and the investor. He entertains himself while he “looks on” at Lily. He becomes the investor when he is sure he has something to gain. As an investor he wants to obtain Lily as his wife, his beautiful object (379-80).

¹⁶ Although Blanche Gelfant’s “What More Can Carrie Want? Naturalistic Ways of Consuming Women” (1995) focuses on Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900), the concepts apply to Lily, who also functions as a naturalistic character.

¹⁷ Gelfant uses this term to describe objects that consist of “impossible dreams of happiness” (179). This applies to Lily since she is desired by many men; by marrying she would achieve the wealth she wants but she would not be free and happy.

¹⁸ In “Cuteness and Capitalism in *Sister Carrie*” (2000), Charles Harmon introduces this idea as a “critical crux” within the gender system of *Sister Carrie* (126).

¹⁹ In “Misreading *The House of Mirth*” (2004), Amy Blair points out that in the *tableaux vivants* scene there is an “endless regression of interpenetrating images: Lily as Mrs. Lloyd, Mrs. Lloyd as dryad, Lily as socialite, Lily as herself” (157).

²⁰ This outcome is contrary to the reaction that Harmon describes as a result of Carrie’s performance. In her case, the inversion of gender roles allowed the male-dominated

capitalist society to reflect through art on the contradictions of their social system (Harmon 136). However, I do not think the majority of the audience at Lily's performance was willing to give up any sense of power to her. As a result, many of them were very critical of her display.

²¹ Kaplan describes Carrie in this way; in the world of commodities Carrie struggles to make a place for herself that is "both prestigious and pleasurable" (145).

²² This term is borrowed from Harmon who uses it to describe Carrie's mood (130).

²³ Harmon employs these terms to discuss Hurstwood's customers in *Sister Carrie* who, like Lily, are concerned with their own worth and identity (131).

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