

THE ART OF BEING LILY BART

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“The unanimous ‘Oh!’ of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brush-work of Reynolds’ ‘Mrs. Lloyd’ but to the flesh-and-blood loveliness of Lily Bart.” In the novel *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, Lily Bart’s entire being is depicted as both an art form and artistic in nature; every time a character describes Lily, she is depicted using artistic language, yet she also portrays an artistic demeanor. From her physical beauty to her mannerisms, Lily Bart is a manifestation of artistic endeavor--but how often does one see society supporting the artistic individual? And does not society use art for its own means? The artist is constantly alienated from society, which leads him or her to use art as a means to fit into society, or comment upon society. The artist and the artwork must perform within societal standards or risk being shunned. The individual versus society complex, as seen particularly through Lily Bart, is completely intertwined with art and the artist throughout the novel; each item is unable to exist without the other. The struggle of the individual versus society for Lily Bart can be seen through an artistic lens.

Lily is seen as an individual who “could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background of her own sensations.” Wharton goes on to emphasize that Lily has a strong inclination for the visual, which “gratified her sense of beauty and her craving for the external finish of life.” The reader can observe this in Lily Bart’s most triumphant performance, in the form of the *tableaux vivants*. The Bry’s domestic interior serves as a stage. “At once a kind of dramatic performance and a sequence of static, museum-like displays, the *tableaux vivants* merely exaggerate the ordinary forms of leisure-class life; and Lily, as we might expect, ‘Was in her element on such occasions’” (Bernard Yeazell 723). The narrator of the novel states:

She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds’ canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace . . . [she] had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture . . . Its suggestion of her soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty. (Wharton 141)

Lily is so accustomed to performing on a daily basis, that the scene is just an extension of her normal life.

Lily successfully directs visual elements to create her unique work of art. Wharton emphasizes Lily’s ability to exercise artistic gifts which have otherwise been repressed due to gender and class constraints. In the *tableaux vivants* scene, Lily can be seen as an actress who manages to represent a character while reminding the viewer of her own identity (Bernard Yeazell 724). Lily gives the audience “a picture which was simply and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart . . . here there could be no mistaking the predominance of personality . . . She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type

so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself” (Wharton 141). This instance is Lily’s attempt to fit the standards of society, while still maintaining her individualism. The narrator states that Lily “found eager expression in the . . . study of attitudes, the shifting of lights and shadows,” and that her “dramatic instinct was aroused” and “stirred an imagination that only visual impressions can reach.” These exact words echo the sentiment of artists. Lily has a continual quest for autonomy throughout the novel, yet also has an awareness of societal expectations of her, which forces her to put on a mask. This is unmistakably like the role of an artist.

Lily is able to anticipate the reactions of others and use it to her advantage in other places in the novel in much of the same way that she does in the *tableaux vivants* scene. Throughout the novel, Wharton gives evidence that Lily’s special skill in the representation of herself lies in the “uncanny ability to experience herself as others must see her” (Griffin Wolff 34). This, in turn, allows Lily to manipulate those whom she wishes to control. This skill is purely artistic in its nature, as it has been and forever will be used by artists everywhere. Artists continually anticipate the reactions of onlookers to their work, and manipulate their emotions or sensations. The scene in which Lily portrays a sort of “ceremony” of pouring tea for Gryce shows the way in which Lily is able to manipulate (Griffin Wolff 34). Lily’s every move is a deliberate piece of acting she implements for her audience. This has come as a result of Lily’s experience as an object, instead of a human being. Lily is slowly depersonalized throughout the novel.

Lily’s attempt to find a prominent and satisfying place for herself in society is seen through the commodification of self. The social conventions placed upon Lily were the result of a patriarchal society. Lily understands the importance that her looks play in society, and she capitalizes on her natural beauty. “There is a tension between the binary of individualism versus determinism and the interaction of gender in the treatment of Lily’s beauty” (Lelekis 20). Particularly, in the *tableaux vivants* scene, there is an inversion of gender roles. Through her display of beauty, Lily manipulates the audience and temporarily seizes power. Although men admire her beauty, they want to control her and force her to fit the role that society demands for her as a married woman. The *tableaux vivants* provide an acceptable way for women to perform in public, translating high art into a vehicle for participation in the marriage market (Backer 34). Once again, art and social conventions are directly intertwined in the novel.

When Lily participates in the *tableaux vivants*, she can only see the romantic aspect of her display of beauty. Lily cannot see that she displays herself as a sexual commodity rather than a woman a man might want to marry. One author states:

Lily, who had nothing more to offer than a superb capacity to render [herself] agreeably, [was] lured by the seductive confusion between representation and reality. Should this confusion occur, the woman would view herself not as a person but as an object--to be admired, to be sustained in her beauty. The men around her would have significance principally as connoisseurs or collectors. It is this exquisite, empty image of self that has contaminated Lily’s life. (Griffin Wolff 21)

Lily struggles between fitting into societal standards and her desire to break free from these restraints. Lily states, “If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like” (Wharton 10). The pose of the “woman on the pedestal” that Lily is so accustomed to perform is indeed a response to societal expectations, as

one can see directly from this quotation. Lily is quite obviously an intelligent, forward and liberated woman who truly desires not to be aligned with the patriarchal construct of her time, but she also understands that she cannot survive outside of these standards. Lily cultivates her beauty in order to use it as an artistic survival mechanism. Lily's beauty and aesthetic aura are not only her fortune in a capitalistic society, but also the only thing which makes her interesting to others.

Lily cannot escape becoming objectified in the novel. "Constrained by the monetary and emotional impoverishment of her life, Lily has adopted her society's images of women narrowly and literally: she has long practiced the art of making herself an exquisite decorative object" (Griffin Wolff 33). Lily is limited to and by the conventions of a society which is patriarchal in nature--she must be appealing to men in order to survive. She cannot avoid becoming an object because her parents have trained her to be so and nothing more. Lily is essentially powerless in her society; the only power she is capable of owning is a result of her beauty, which can only get her so far. When Lily Bart is first seen in the novel, the narrator states that she is "a figure to arrest even the suburban traveler rushing to his last train" (Wharton 2). Lily's power to draw attention merely as an anonymous spectacle which is made more attractive by virtue of its difference from the hurrying crowd (Bernard Yeazell 713). Lily Bart is depicted in this scene almost as a work of art, which seizes the attention of all of those who walk past. She is constantly depicted in artistic terms, but somehow, this always leads back to conventions. "Lily views herself as a kind of artist whose ability to manipulate conventions and appearances presupposes a certain distance from them . . . Lily loses control over the terms of her self-exposure and thereby faces the possibility of *being* rather than *owning* it" (Moddelmog 345). This directly leads back to how Lily is objectified. Men want to possess her much like they might want to possess a piece of art for their vast collection.

Anyone will observe from the novel that Lily is not equipped with the necessary skills to survive in the type of society she chooses to be around. Over and over again, Lily becomes the victim, especially when she tries to work within the conventions of society. Lily is an outsider, like all artists, which, in the end, is destroyed by the social construction she rejects throughout the novel. She attempts to act for herself, but habitually submits to the standards of her society (Lelekis 10). Within the social structure she has aligned herself with, her function is simply to respond to the "codes" and customs that form and support a patriarchal society. According to Moddelmog, the social order of New York within the novel is depicted as a type of legal order as well (345). The narrator states:

What debt did she owe to a social order which had condemned and banished her without trial? She had never been heard in her own defense; she was innocent of the charge on which she had been found guilty; and the irregularity of her conviction might seem to justify the use of methods as irregular in recovering her lost rights." (Wharton 318)

The language used in this quotation plays with the idea of social convention as law, which is a means to restrict society. In some instances, the law is not focused on the individual, but rather, the "pluribus." But there are social laws and judicial laws. The laws that Lily subscribes to are not particularly moral. In reply to Gerty, Lily even says, "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" (Wharton 238). This quote directly showcases how the social conventions of the time were embedded in false values.

Although she wants to fit in, she also wants to be an individual who cannot be defined by her place in this social ranking. Lily makes many attempts at self-definition, as the reader can see particularly in the *tableau vivants* scene, and can also be seen through an examination of the notions of visual art and artistic expression that pervade the novel (Griffin Wolff 16). The narrator states, “How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom” (Wharton 56). Although Lily has the ability to live as an individual outside of society, she knows she will lose all benefits of the upper class society which she surrounds herself with if she does not adhere to their “codes.”

The aspect of performance on the part of Lily Bart stretches until the very end of the novel. Lily keeps an appearance of spiritual command, throughout all of the reversals which she faces, which never correspond to her truly increasing inner desolation (Griffin Wolff 25). Although Lily part is internally struggling to remain positive and a moral individual, she is suffering immensely in her utter loneliness. Lily is described in these moments particularly eloquently; “before him like a kind of clouded majesty, like some deposed princess moving tranquilly to exile . . . She drew herself up to the full height of her slender majesty, towering like some dark angel of defiance.” These instances are merely an artistic pose, and beautiful portrayed, even in the truly sad circumstances which are being described.

Even when Lily was very young, “There was in Lily a vein of sentiment . . . Which gave an idealizing touch to her most prosaic purposes. She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good” (Wharton 35). This longing for moral significance brings with it no capacity for Lily to make choices, draw difficult distinctions, or bear hardships as she grows older (Griffin Wolff 24). Society does not expect much from a woman. Girls are taught to be subject to their fathers or husbands for morals, standards, and whatever else they may need. Although Lily surely makes it seem that she is only interested in marriage for wealth and convenience, internally, this is not what Lily truly desires. The narrator states, “She would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich: she was secretly ashamed of her mother’s crude passion for money” (Wharton 35). Unfortunately for Lily, who she truly is as a moral being and what society expects from her cannot be reconciled. The irony of the book is that Lily is only able to find moral victory in her death--in death, the true Lily wins, because she does not give in to society or compromise who she truly is as an artistic, forward and liberated individual. Lily’s death allows her to maintain her morality in a society structured by false conventions.

In the novel *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, Lily Bart is continually described in artistic terms, almost as an artist herself. Every part of Lily Bart exudes artistic tendencies, but she lives in a society which does not support her. As an artist or artwork. Lily must perform within societal standards. Lily is limited as an individual, to the point where she can no longer survive within these societal constraints. The theme of the individual versus society is one with art throughout the novel; the two items are unable to exist without the other. The struggle of the individual versus society for Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton can be seen through an artistic lens.

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