

A Lily on Display: Compromised Privacy in
The House of Mirth

by

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Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the English Honors Program in the Department of English
at Brown University

April 9, 2020

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Introduction

-Privacy and the Private in Wharton's Fiction-

“Privacy would seem to be one of the first requisites of civilized life.” This grand claim appears in the first book published by Edith Wharton, a guide to interior design titled *The Decoration of Houses* that Wharton co-wrote with Ogden Codman Jr. Considering the layout of rooms within a house, Wharton laments the “indifference to privacy” that is apparent in the work of contemporary designers. Specifically, she notes that each room should be a “small world” in and of itself to protect the privacy of its occupants, an effect undermined by architects who allow rooms to bleed into one another (Wharton and Codman 22). Throughout the book, Wharton’s model of an ideal home seems to be one that is defined as much by its privacy as it is by its aesthetic appeal. When it comes to windows, for example, she stresses the importance of ensuring that they are, “placed about three feet from the floor, so that persons approaching the house may not be able to look in” (66). Privacy then emerges as an important component of everyday life for Wharton, something to be safeguarded.

Just what is privacy? The term is remarkably elusive. As Harriet Lerner points out, the word “privacy” itself “invites us *not* to pay attention” (Lerner 121). Although it conjures up images of secluded spaces and notions of guarded secrets, it resists a clear and concise definition. In her work on female writers in nineteenth-century America, Katherine Adams notices that privacy is often considered “in terms of violation and loss.” That is, it is discussed in relation to its absence, thereby creating a kind of “negative” definition (Adams 5-6). Although this tactic sidesteps the difficulty of defining privacy, it perpetuates it as well, getting us no closer to an understanding of

the concept. Michael Warner, in his analysis dissecting the related terms of “public” and “private,” suggests an explanation for why privacy is so tricky to pin down. Warner compellingly argues that public and private, “seem to be preconceptual, almost instinctual, rooted in the orientations of the body and common speech” (Warner 23). As Warner presents them, public and private are so central to human life that they cannot possibly be simply delineated. He asserts that, as a result, there is no single understanding of the two concepts that truly captures the meaning behind them: “attempts to frame public and private as a sharp distinction or antinomy have invariably come to grief, while attempts to collapse or do without them have proven equally unsatisfying” (29).

Inherent in Warner’s claims is a sense that the task of defining public and private is challenging because the terms encompass a great deal of meaning. I would argue that the difficulty in establishing a definition of privacy has a similar source. In other words, privacy can be applied to such a diverse set of circumstances that one explanation of it cannot represent the entirety of its meaning. To actually define privacy, we may then take a cue from Warner, whose solution with respect to public and private is to list numerous definitions that represent “the range of the often conflicting meanings” of the terms (29). In the following discussion of privacy, I do not claim to provide a comprehensive account. As I have already suggested, such an account may not, in fact, be possible. Instead, with the help of Warner, I indicate several dimensions of privacy that are especially relevant to Wharton’s work.

The first of these dimensions is taken up by Warner when he notes that “private” is sometimes understood to mean “domestic” (29). This description evokes

the theory of separate spheres, in which the public sphere is understood as the political realm of men and the private sphere as the domestic space inhabited by women. I will have more to say about this framework below, but it is relevant here in that it locates the “private” spatially, within the domestic sphere. Privacy can be understood similarly. A space or room may have attached to it a sense of privacy, and this is particularly true with respect to the home. Domestic space is thought of as “a private haven,” a sanctuary in which one can retreat from the public world (Kaplan 93). Her comments in *The Decoration of Houses* make clear that Wharton conceived of privacy in just this way. Indeed, this formulation will be important throughout this thesis.

Private can also mean “concealed” or “known [only] to initiates” (Warner 29). Warner does not explicitly invoke the idea of secrets, but his definitions nonetheless circle around a conception of information that is kept private. That is, he alludes to a notion of an individual’s personal business that is unknown to others. I would then claim that the degree to which these private affairs are respected as private constitutes another dimension of privacy. In other words, privacy can be configured as the protection of one’s personal information from transmission among other people. This understanding of privacy applies to Wharton’s work, as she often constructs plots that are shaped by characters’ use of gossip. As I will discuss in greater depth in my first chapter, gossip, at its core, takes that which is private and distributes it socially.

The last definition of “private” provided by Warner that I will foreground here is the following: “related to the individual, especially to inwardness, subjective experience, and the incommunicable” (30). Warner’s reference to “inwardness” calls to mind the interior space that exists within an individual. One’s inner life is invisible and

impenetrable to all others and can therefore be understood as the ultimate private existence, the space that affords one the most complete experience of privacy. I will take up this conception of privacy in relation to Wharton's depiction of social roles and identity. Warner's analysis is also important in that it establishes a key fact about privacy. Privacy is, above all else, the "subjective experience" of an individual. It is this experience that ultimately and solely determines whether something is private or not. Being alone in a room is not sufficient for privacy to exist; the individual must *feel* that the room is private. Along with the three specific dimensions of privacy that I have extracted from Warner's work, this understanding of privacy as something that is experienced will inform my analysis of Wharton.

Before turning to Wharton herself, I consider it important to first address the relationship between my project and the theory of separate spheres to which I referred earlier. This framework has long been influential in studies of public and private, encouraging revision as well as expansion of its premise. An understanding of private space that is separate from the public realm is of self-evident significance to an examination of privacy. Nevertheless, subscribing to the specific details of this model's conception of "public" and "private" would constrain my analysis of Wharton. As I previously noted, the model, at its most basic level, conflates "private" with "domestic." It is already clear that I, alongside Warner, believe that "private" can mean much more than the domestic sphere. Although domestic space will figure prominently in my analysis, an examination of Wharton's work limited to this one dimension of privacy would be incomplete. The other aforementioned meanings of privacy will be equally important to my project.

While a consideration of the various definitions of “private” is thus central to this thesis, “public,” in its classic political formulation, is of little relevance.¹ Wharton rarely turns to consider the political domain, with the “public” in her work being the social realm. As a result, the framework I employ in this project conceptualizes privacy and the “private” in relation to the social world of New York society. I use “public” and “social” interchangeably, as they are more or less equivalent in the world of Wharton’s novels. I stress again, however, the importance of not reading my use of the word “public” as an invocation of its strict meaning under the theory of separate spheres. Instead, I will be referring to the larger social world, to that which is not private.

With this background established, we can now focus on Wharton a bit more directly. An exceptionally brilliant writer, Wharton is known for her portrayals of the leisure-class society of New York around the turn of the century. Gender is central to her work, and this topic is also at the core of my analysis. My project in many ways uses privacy as a lens through which to examine some of the larger implications of Wharton’s work with respect to gender. Specifically, I focus on *The House of Mirth*, Wharton’s first majorly successful novel and the one that offers perhaps her strongest critique of the gender inequality foundational to the leisure class. The novel unfolds in the final two years of the life of Lily Bart, a young woman struggling to secure her position in the New York elite by finding a suitably wealthy husband. Lily is the heart of the story, and Wharton uses her downfall to attack the callous and selfish society to

¹ “Public” is a particularly complicated and unwieldy term, even more so than “private” in my view. Due to the widespread influence of the model of separate spheres, “public and political...are often thought to be synonymous.” Yet, as Warner argues, “there are publics...that do not correspond to any kind of polity” (Warner 45). Warner points toward the limitations imposed by an understanding of “public” that merely equates it with “political.” To my mind, this definition fails to capture the capaciousness underlying “public,” excluding interpretations that may broaden and expand this field of study.

which both author and protagonist belong. Lily is truly a compelling character, as richly drawn as any of literature's finest creations. Wharton, at one point in the novel, seems to speak through the character of Mrs. Fisher to offer her own view of her protagonist. Mrs. Fisher reflects on how Lily's actions are often difficult to interpret, as she seems to foil her own plans for success, but notes that this complexity is what, "makes her such an interesting study" (Wharton 189).

In this project, I accept Wharton's invitation to closely "study" Lily, as well as the novel as a whole. In my first chapter, I focus on the structure of leisure-class society, the social bylaws that dictate and regulate how this society operates. Central to the social code are strictures specifically concerned with gender, and I analyze how these norms limit the availability of privacy to leisure-class women. That is, I contend that the social fabric denies women any meaningful experience of privacy and places their private lives under the control of men. In order to advance this argument, I invoke the dimensions of privacy I put forth earlier, examining domestic space, gossip, and the social role of women. Having established this understanding of how leisure-class society functions, my second chapter looks more closely at Lily herself. I explore her "subjective experience" of privacy, what privacy actually looks like for her in a society that affords her very little opportunity to enjoy it. The chapter first looks at the potential for privacy that appears to exist in Lily's moments alone and in her relationship with Lawrence Selden. I ultimately argue, however, that the pervasive influence of societal norms extends into these spaces as well, thwarting the potential for privacy through their hold on both Lily and Selden. To close this project, I consider Lily's "subjective experience" of privacy after she becomes a member of the working class.

Chapter One

-Gender and Privacy in Leisure-Class Society-

Early in *The House of Mirth*, it becomes clear that Lily resembles Wharton in her appreciation of privacy as a desirable, yet compromised component of daily life. After accepting an invitation from Selden to have tea in his apartment, Lily boldly opens their conversation by declaring, “How delicious to have a place like this all to one’s self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman” (Wharton 7). Lily immediately implies that her gender bars her from occupying a private space such as Selden’s apartment, presenting privacy as a gendered concept. Given the challenging nature of any attempt to define privacy, it is meaningful to consider how Lily herself understands it. Aside from invoking its ties to gender, Lily also claims, “It must be pure bliss to arrange the furniture just as one likes,” thereby connecting privacy to power, to the freedom to do as one wishes (8).

Lily’s depiction of privacy as a concept linked to both gender and power is an appropriate beginning for an investigation into the status of privacy for leisure-class women in the novel. To frame this analysis, I will employ the definitions of privacy discussed in my introduction. In her conversation with Selden, Lily situates privacy within the domestic sphere, focusing on how Selden’s apartment offers him a private existence. This chapter will begin by considering in greater detail the relationship between domestic space and privacy. While the leisure-class home is marked by an absence of privacy in general, the issue is more acute for women due to the social nature of their role within the domestic sphere. Unlike men, women do not have access to a private room in the home in which they can withdraw from the social scene. This

distinction stems in part from men's power over domestic space, which at times makes privacy within the home dangerous to women.

Following this discussion, I will analyze the role of gossip in the novel. As a discourse that distributes an individual's personal business among other people, gossip, at its most basic level, represents an invasion of privacy. While it is strongly associated with women, Wharton shows that men also take part in gossip and portrays their participation in it as especially vicious. Indeed, gossip emerges in the novel as a social network that gives men access to and allows them to control women's private affairs.

Concluding this chapter is a discussion of leisure-class women's social role. Gender norms present the ideal woman as a beautiful work of art who attracts the gaze of others. Tied to this model of womanhood is a notion of subjectivity that portrays the inner lives of women as shallow and superficial to the point of being recognized as nonexistent. Women's identities are consequently defined solely in relation to their physical beauty and their ties to other people, especially the men in their lives.

Domestic Space

Before gender even enters the equation, domestic privacy appears to be compromised for the leisure class. In the third chapter of the novel, Wharton provides an extended flashback to Lily's childhood, reconstructing the events leading up to her present status as an unmarried woman living with her aunt. One of the key scenes in Lily's younger years is the revelation of her once-wealthy father's financial ruin. Sensing something is amiss, Lily's mother first reacts by dismissing the butler, who "withdrew with an air of silent disapproval" (Wharton 32). The phrase "silent disapproval"

constructs a representation of servants as observers and critics, albeit seemingly invisible ones, of the family's domestic life. Privacy is then not an innate feature of the domestic sphere but instead needs to be explicitly created in the way Mrs. Bart does by sending away the butler. This moment is also significant for its suggestion of class antagonism between the wealthy family and their lower-class attendants, who respond to the family's affairs with "disapproval." The inclusion of this detail signals the importance of class to Wharton's novel, a topic that is relevant to the issue of privacy. While I will examine this matter more closely in my second chapter, it is important to note here that the characterization of domestic space as lacking privacy is specific to the leisure class. This point is somewhat self-evident since members of the working class cannot afford servants, but it is nonetheless important to keep in mind the fact that the two classes are distinct in this regard. The contrast between working-class and leisure-class life will emerge as central to the conclusion of both the novel and this project.

Within the leisure class, the deprivation of domestic privacy does not impact men and women equally. A perfect example of a private space cultivated within the domestic sphere is the man's study. It is within Selden's own study that he and Lily have tea, over which Lily expresses her desire for an existence such as Selden's. The structure of the first chapter draws attention to the privacy that marks this space. The chapter begins in Grand Central Station, where Lily and Selden are surrounded by "the afternoon rush" of travelers (3). When Selden suggests he and Lily visit a restaurant for a cup of tea, Lily responds, "I'm dying for tea-but is n't there a quieter place?" (5). The word "quieter" indicates a private space, one with fewer distractions where Lily and Selden can focus on their conversation. In short order, the two arrive at Selden's apartment, where Selden's

first words are, “There ’s no one here” (6). Juxtaposed with the crowd of people in the train station, the apartment emerges as the “quieter” and more private space that Lily requested. Upon entering, “[Selden] ushered her into a slip of a hall hung with old prints...then she found herself in a small library” (6). Wharton communicates that Selden is in control here, guiding Lily’s movement into his apartment. Striking, in this context, is the fact that Lily simply “found herself” in Selden’s library, a description that omits her act of actually entering the space and thereby makes it seem as if she simply appears there.

This portrayal of Lily’s relationship to the study gestures toward its status as an exclusively male space. Kerstin Shands places the study within a larger historical context: “During centuries heralding a privatization of the body, of sexuality, and of the family,” the study “appeared as a new and especially private place...a locked room with a locked desk” (Shands 69). As Shands presents them, the physical features of the study, notably its locks, represent a cultural privileging of privacy. However, she is also emphatic that these cultural ideals bestow this kind of privacy solely on men, noting that it is specifically “the man’s study” (69). From this perspective, it appears as if the study serves as a solution to the compromised privacy within the domestic sphere, offering men a room to which only they have access. Of course, the study does not function in this way for women. As seen above, it appears as if Lily arrives there by almost mystical means, as if the study exists in a world entirely separate from her own.

Indeed, it becomes apparent that there is no space within the home that offers women the degree of privacy that the study affords to men. Amy Kaplan picks up on this issue: “For the lady of leisure, domesticity was subordinated to publicity as the home

became a stage setting for the gala social events orchestrated and acted out by women. The upper-class home functioned less as a private haven from the competition of the marketplace than as the public stage for that competition.” The “competition” to which Kaplan alludes anticipates my discussion of women’s social role, where I will examine how women acquire value by serving as a “display [of] the wealth and social power of their husbands” (Kaplan 93). Kaplan makes it clear that for women like Lily domestic space does not function as the refuge from the larger world that it is typically represented as. Instead, the domestic is merely an arena in which they jockey for status, an extension of their social lives. The drawing-room, the space for receiving guests, would have played a prominent role in the hosting of these social events. In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton describes the drawing-room as a space, “from which the inmates of the house instinctively flee as soon as their social duties are discharged” (Wharton and Codman 125). Wharton presents the drawing-room as serving no function outside of the “social duties” performed there. It is, in other words, an entirely social space.

It is therefore critical that Lily appears trapped within the drawing-room, symbolizing publicity’s invasion of the domestic space for women. At one point in the novel, Lily tries to envision herself in a new existence, “but the utmost reach of her imagination did not go beyond picturing her usual life in a new setting. She could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing-room” (Wharton 100). The words “picturing” and “setting” both have connotations suggestive of a work of art, something to which Lily is compared throughout the novel. In this particular moment, this association contributes to the sense that Lily’s existence is limited to the drawing-room. Just as a frame encloses a painting within itself, so too does a drawing-room, as the “setting” of

Lily's life, mark the boundaries of it. In contrast to the secluded space of a study, Lily is thus confined entirely to a social space, signifying how the domestic is for her decidedly not private.

Underlying the absence of domestic privacy for leisure-class women is the control that men have over the home, which comes into focus most clearly in light of Wharton's depiction of marriage. As part of her plan to woo and marry a wealthy man, Lily attempts to charm Percy Gryce early in the novel. Although his wealth is attractive, Lily's vision of married life detracts from her desire to become Gryce's wife. Specifically, she considers the obligations marriage would impose upon her: "She would have to go to church with Percy Gryce every Sunday. They would have a front pew in the most expensive church in New York, and his name would figure handsomely in the list of parish charities...Once in the winter the rector would come to dine, and her husband would beg her to go over the list and see that no *divorcées* were included" (57). This moment stages a comparison between the public and private aspects of marriage. Gryce is connected to the public realm more than once; the prominent position of the couple's "front pew" signifies his status, as does the public recognition of his financial support of the church. Gryce, in this way, attains the success in the public sphere expected of men under the classic model of separate spheres.

The picture becomes more complicated when considering Lily's role in the marriage. With the domestic sphere considered the female domain, nineteenth-century women were expected to embody the feminine ideals expressed in what is known as "The Cult of True Womanhood." This concept is closely tied to the theory of separate spheres because it assigns women the task of presiding over the domestic (the "private") sphere.

Some interpretations of this model of femininity suggest that women wielded control over the home, despite their identity as individuals being subsumed beneath their relational status to the men in their life.² At first glance, this characterization seems to correspond to the above quote, as Lily oversees the guest list for the dinner party.

Wharton, however, rejects the notion that Lily has access to real power within the domestic sphere. Rather than acting as an autonomous agent, Lily appears to be under the supervision of her husband. Her actions within the home are meant to comply with his directives, as it is at his request that she ensures “no *divorcées*” have been invited. Additionally, it seems to be Gryce who has the power to determine who enters the couple’s domestic space, with his connection to the church implying it was his wish to invite the rector in the first place. The domestic sphere is, in this light, under the dominion of men, not women. This power dynamic has implications for Lily’s private life. She is not religious, but the quote above makes it clear that her private actions “have to” align with her husband’s. In this regard, Lily’s vision of married life reflects Jessica Bulman’s analysis of the intersection of privacy with marriage in this era. With respect to the domestic sphere, Bulman argues that, “Within this space [women] did not exercise a meaningful right to privacy, for their homes were their husbands’ castles” (Bulman 55). As a man’s “castle,” the home becomes “a sheltered space in which he controlled not only his own privacy but also that of his wife and children” (53). This kind of control is evident in the considerable power Lily’s husband would possess over their home. Indeed,

² See, for example, Barbara Welter’s iconic essay from 1966, in which Welter originally put forth the model of “The Cult of True Womanhood.”

his domestic power would extend to the point where he could even control Lily's private life.

Wharton demonstrates that this power dynamic renders domestic privacy not the empowering experience Lily imagines it to be in her conversation with Selden, but rather a threat to the safety and well-being of women. After destroying her reputation with Gryce, Lily becomes concerned again about her precarious financial situation. To alleviate these worries, she asks Gus Trenor, the husband of her closest friend Judy, to invest some money on her behalf. Trenor believes that, as a result, he is "owed" a debt by Lily (Wharton 116). On two occasions, first at a wedding and then at the opera, Trenor approaches Miss Bart and insists that he has earned the right to share a private moment with her. When Lily suggests he come visit her at her aunt's house, he refuses on the basis that he does not want to be part of "a crowd" of people among whom Lily would have to divide her attention. Instead, he asks, "why can't we go off somewhere on a little lark together-a nice quiet little expedition" (117). Mirroring Lily's request to Selden in the first chapter, Trenor's use of the word "quiet" is suggestive of a private space, as is his idea of going "off" away from other people. Trenor then "leaned unpleasantly close," indicating an invasion of Lily's personal space (117). This moment, along with several others where Trenor situates himself physically close to Lily, hints at an attraction to her, thereby producing the impression he is seeking compensation for his financial assistance through sexual favors. Significantly, his encroachment on Lily's personal space ties privacy to an assertion of sexual power over her.³

³ In these scenes, Trenor exhibits the misogynistic view of women as "spaces to be invaded, colonized, or confined" (Shands 47).

Lily herself seems apprehensive of Trenor's intentions, as she deliberately avoids the kind of private encounter he desires. She comes to realize that, "the presence of a large party would protect her from too great assiduity on Trenor's part" (129). Accordingly, the social nature of both the opera and the wedding allows Lily to escape from Trenor without committing to plans with him, as their conversations are interrupted by the arrival of other people. The word "protect" is important here, as it portrays Trenor, more than being a mere annoyance to Lily, as a threat to her. This sense of menace depends upon the privacy Trenor creates by cornering Lily. Their seclusion allows him to demand Lily's attention and enables his physical advances, which would be seen as inappropriate by onlookers. When other people do arrive, the privacy is disrupted and the threat posed by Trenor is thereby neutralized. His previous attempts having been thwarted in this way, Trenor then schemes to get Lily alone. In one of the novel's most powerful chapters, Judy invites Lily to their house in New York but later decides to stay in the country, a development that Trenor purposefully withholds from Lily. Renée Somers argues that characters in Wharton's novel "who possess power manipulate the built environment to retain that power" (Somers 135). As Lily has up until now defied him, Trenor seeks to affirm his power over her by demanding she pay him back sexually. He is able to do so only because he can "manipulate the built environment." It is precisely through his use of domestic space that he can at last obtain what he wants: a private moment with Lily.

The relationship between Trenor's power and the "built environment" is evident as soon as Lily arrives. When she first sees Trenor, he is "on the threshold of the drawing-room" (Wharton 141). Whereas Lily is depicted as limited to the drawing-room,

Trenor's placement on its "threshold" reflects his ability to step out of this social space and withdraw to a private one, such as his study, if he so chooses. His position on the threshold also portrays him as seemingly able to monitor and control the flow of people into and out of the room. It soon becomes clear, however, that Trenor has power over the entire house, not just this one space. Offering her a drink, he leads Lily "through the house to the large room at the back" (141). The characters' movement "through" the home communicates how they are progressing deeper into Trenor's domain, while the phrase "at the back" signifies the room's seclusion from the street. When Trenor tells her that Judy will not be joining them, Lily signals that she would like to leave at once, but Trenor swiftly places himself "between [Lily] and the door" (142). Trenor has again situated himself in such a way that he can control the movement of others, obstructing Lily's attempt to exit. By doing so, Trenor exhibits the power he holds over the space and, by extension, Lily herself.

Wharton proceeds to draw closer attention to the fact that the domestic space is the source of Trenor's authority. Lily soon realizes that, "Trenor had pushed a chair between herself and the door. He threw himself in it, and leaned back" (145). By linking himself physically to the room's furniture, Trenor displays his connection to the house. Although he alone was able to block Lily's exit, his use of the chair suggests he and the domestic space are united in this effort, demonstrating how his power stems from the "built environment." Indeed, the image of Trenor in the chair, with the confidence conveyed by the phrase "leaned back," resembles a king upon his throne, thereby characterizing the domestic as the kingdom over which he rules. Within this kingdom, he has the authority to regulate the actions and movements of women such as Lily.

Whereas Trenor is connected to the material dimensions of the house, Lily is associated with the emptiness of the space itself. She is described as standing “composedly in the middle of the room,” a position that not only removes her from the door but detaches her from the entire physical structure of the building (143). Beyond that, the word “composedly” indicates she has checked any impulse to flee and therefore suggests she is not moving, as if she is a fixture of the room. Trenor treats Lily as if she is such a fixture, part of the domestic space over which he has control; he dictates where she can and cannot go, just as he determines the placement of the chair in which he sits. This dynamic recalls the image of Lily confined to the drawing-room, with her appearing similarly trapped in the room with Trenor. In creating this parallel, Wharton highlights how men limit and control women’s freedom within the domestic sphere. Although it is particularly pronounced in this scene, this power dynamic is nonetheless always present, leaving women vulnerable before men like Trenor. The image of Lily in the middle of the room, isolated from the physical dimensions of the house, signals how she has to face Trenor all on her own.

Bulman examines the vulnerable status of women in this society as well, specifically indicting the law for its role in enabling domestic violence against women. She writes that, “by protecting a man’s home as his castle and refusing to intervene, the law has drawn a curtain over the home and sheltered wife beating and marital rape” (Bulman 56). Bulman articulates how legal discourse at this time recognizes a man’s domestic space as his kingdom, a construction that enables violence against women. Wharton evokes this ideology in her depiction of Trenor as a king, as well as through the threat of rape that looms over the scene with him and Lily. Within his home, a man such

as Trenor is removed from the reach of the law because domestic affairs are considered his private business. To “intervene” in them would be to violate his privacy. Of course, there is no concern for a woman’s privacy nor her safety. As Bulman asserts, the legal code recognizes privacy as “a distinctly male” construct (54). Wharton shows how the social code similarly attaches little importance to female privacy. Within the home, women experience privacy, to the degree it exists at all for them, as an instrument of control wielded by men, who also use their claim to privacy to obscure their oppression and abuse of women. While Lily envisions domestic privacy as an empowering experience that will endow her with agency, Wharton reveals that it is quite the opposite: a site of male power and female vulnerability.

Gossip

As Trenor advances closer and closer, Lily becomes increasingly terrified until she remembered, “that help was in call. Yes, but scandal with it” (Wharton 147). Despite the physical threat Trenor represents, the prospect of “scandal” seems even more menacing to Lily, as she ultimately refrains from alerting others to the danger she is facing. This scene thus puts the power dynamics underlying the domestic sphere alongside the discourse of gossip, which is prominent throughout the novel. As with privacy, it is somewhat difficult to establish a single and definitive understanding of gossip, something that Patricia Meyer Spacks attends to in her influential account on the subject. Spacks writes that gossip, “means many things to many people and even, at different times and in different contexts, to a single person.” Nevertheless, she extracts some common features of gossip and concludes that, “Always it involves talk about one or more absent figures; always such talk occurs in a relatively small group” (Spacks 4).

Confined to the seclusion of a “small group,” gossip appears to depend on privacy for its very existence.

The link between gossip and privacy comes into focus more clearly when we consider how gossip can be understood as a point of contact between private and social dimensions of life: it circulates socially that which is considered private. Spacks accounts for this function of gossip when she lists its negative consequences: “its circulation of slander, its betrayal of secrets, *its penetration of privacy*” (33; emphasis mine). Spacks points out how gossip, by its very nature, constitutes an invasion of one’s privacy, as it distributes knowledge of their personal affairs socially. As a result, Spacks argues that instances of gossip represent, “threats to those made the objects of gossip’s discourse...Even ‘innocent’ forms of gossip objectify the person considered; those talking communicate at the cost of another, whom they reduce to a kind of fiction (33-34).” Gossip strips away its victim’s status as an individual, presenting them as an object to be judged by others. As Lily’s arc will ultimately make clear, gossip becomes especially damaging when its “fiction” is accepted as truth, replacing reality. Spacks then concludes that gossip is always inherently harmful: “the idea of being talked about implies threat, regardless of what specifically is said” (33).

Wharton appears to agree with Spacks in this regard, describing gossip as, “the allusive jargon which could flay its victims without the shedding of blood” (Wharton 110). Wharton’s invocation of a flaying, which denotes a disfigurement of one’s skin, symbolizes gossip’s distortion and destruction of its victims’ public image. Significantly, this depiction of gossip presents it as so destructive in its attack on an individual’s reputation that its words enact and are experienced as a physical violence. Wharton does

not compare gossip to a flaying but explicitly defines it *as* a flaying, just one that is unusual in the lack of blood it spills. In this way, she expresses the severity of the pain inflicted by gossip, comparable as it is to a bodily injury.

In addition to its invasion of individuals' privacy, gossip is marked by its status as a concept that is automatically understood to be gendered. Paula Kent addresses this issue in her examination "of the pernicious effects of gossip" in women's literature. She writes that, "In American culture especially, gossip is mere hearsay that generally involves conversations *by women about other women*" (Kent 41; emphasis mine). Kent clarifies that she does not wish to insinuate "that men do not gossip" and cites a book titled *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay*. In this book, Kent explains, Ralph L. Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine study male gossip: "They label it as possible 'shop talk' or 'shooting the breeze'" (41). Although Kent seemingly glosses over this detail, it is noteworthy that male gossip is not even called gossip. It is so firmly associated with women that it loses its identity as gossip when men engage in it. As Spacks argues, although few "writers have asserted that *only* women gossip," the association between women and gossip is nonetheless understood to be a "natural" one (Spacks 38). Women are simply perceived as being innately more prone to gossip.

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton complicates and undermines this gendered characterization of gossip. It is certainly true that female characters in the novel engage in it. Lily herself does, and one of the novel's pivotal scenes is driven by the character Bertha Dorset's use of gossip. Nevertheless, Wharton's male characters also frequently take part in the social discourse of rumors and "hearsay." The most obvious example is perhaps Dabham, a character who briefly enters the story when Lily is abroad in Europe.

Dabham writes for gossip columns, and his role in the novel is almost exclusively to disperse rumors among the company of travelers with whom Lily is exploring Europe. Wharton makes his connection to gossip especially evident through an arresting portrayal of Dabham at a dinner party: “His little eyes were like tentacles thrown out to catch the floating intimations” circulating among the other guests (Wharton 216). Wharton calls back to her earlier presentation of gossip, again rendering it a physical process in which Dabham appears to snatch pieces of information out of the air. With such a striking image, Wharton makes Dabham’s engagement in gossip difficult to forget.

Dabham represents somewhat of an extreme example of a man who takes part in gossip, as his occupation requires him to do so. However, there are also many male characters in the novel who are not so directly tied to gossip but nonetheless engage in it. An illuminating example occurs when Selden dines at a friend’s house and the discussion turns to “*Town Talk*” (157). Although its name alone is suggestive, an endnote discloses that *Town Talk* was a newspaper “specializing in social gossip and rumor” (336). The mention of the paper prompts the following response: “‘Yes: lively reading that was,’ said Mr. Ned Van Alstyne, stroking his moustache to hide the smile behind it. ‘Buy the dirty sheet? No, of course not; some fellow showed it to me’” (157). The characterization of gossip as a female pursuit is evident in this moment, as Van Alstyne indicates it is beneath him through his description of it as “dirty.” Nevertheless, Wharton strongly insinuates he himself participates in the discourse. Van Alstyne strives to obscure this detail by displacing the responsibility onto someone else and covering the smile that points toward the entertainment he derives from gossip. Crucially, to accomplish the latter of these acts of concealment, Van Alstyne makes use of his moustache, a signifier

of his masculinity. It appears then as if he is seeking to reaffirm his manhood in light of his engagement in gossip and its association with women. Wharton ironically aids him in his effort, doubly reinforcing his gender by referring to him as “Mr. Ned Van Alstyne.” Although Wharton thus grants Van Alstyne his masculine status, she simultaneously makes apparent his involvement in gossip. In doing so, she dislocates gossip from its status as an exclusively female pursuit, demonstrating how both men and women are active in its diffusion.

However, Wharton does differentiate male and female gossip in terms of the violence they enact upon individuals. Lily herself realizes that men do, in fact, gossip in the scene where she is almost assaulted by Trenor. At one point, she attempts to escape by insisting it is not proper for the two of them to be alone. Trenor counters by implying he knows she has been alone with Selden in his apartment. Lily connects this accusation to her being spotted leaving Selden’s apartment by Rosedale, the presumed source of Trenor’s information. As Lily receives Trenor’s words, “The brutality of the thrust gave her the sense of dizziness that follows on a physical blow. Rosedale had spoken then-this was the way men talked of her” (145). This quote continues the pattern of representing gossip materially; Trenor’s words strike Lily in a manner comparable to a “physical blow.” Wharton, however, classifies the violence of Trenor’s assertion as specifically a sexual one. “The brutality of the thrust” combines a sense of violence with a sexual overtone, evoking a sense of rape. Wharton thus connects Trenor’s intrusive words to his violation of Lily’s personal space, as well as the foreboding threat of sexual assault hanging over this scene.

Wharton does not portray female gossip in the same manner. While they are in Europe, Bertha begins spreading rumors that Lily has been having an affair with her husband in order to direct attention away from her own extramarital liaison. When Lily learns what Bertha has been doing, she experiences a feeling of “treachery that was like the gleam of a knife in the dusk” (208). Yet again, Wharton highlights the danger of gossip through a comparison to bodily violence, with the “knife” here being the perfect instrument for the kind of flaying she has depicted gossip as. However, the imagery does not evoke the same sense of personal violation that “the thrust” of Trenor’s words does. In this light, although she condemns gossip as altogether an inherently violent and invasive discourse, Wharton distinguishes female gossip from male gossip. In fact, despite gossip being typically gendered female, she presents male gossip as the more harmful of the two, as it appears to violate a woman’s privacy in a more personal and ruthless way. By connecting it to the danger that lurks within the domestic sphere for women, Wharton suggests that male gossip is distinct in this regard because it is tied to an already-existing power dynamic.

Gossip is thus configured differently depending on the gender of the individual spreading information, with male gossip appearing more invasive and holding more power than its female equivalent. The discourse is also inflected by the gender of the person whose private affairs are being discussed. That is, men are not vulnerable to the destructive effects of gossip in the way women are. Wharton plainly articulates this distinction; with respect to rumors concerning extramarital affairs, she claims that, “Men do not, at worst, suffer much from such exposure” (105). Spacks offers an explanation for why this might be: “For men, the unearned reputation of sexual activity sometimes

aggrandizes social position; for women, before very recent times, it would prove devastating to status in respectable society” (Spacks 32). While Wharton does not reject Spacks’ account, she suggests there is another contributing cause; she indicates that in contrast to its treatment of its female victims, gossip respects and leaves unscathed men’s privacy. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Bertha and Selden had once been engaged in an affair, something that comes up tacitly in a conversation between Lily and Judy. Lily says, “I thought that was all over,” and Judy responds, “So it is, on his side. And of course Bertha has n’t been idle since” (Wharton 43). The two women obscure the details of the affair and even refrain from explicitly labelling it as such, referring to it only as “that” and “it.” Likewise, their use of pronouns allows Selden to remain anonymous. Bertha, on the other hand, is named directly, and it is mentioned, albeit through insinuation, that she has since moved on to other lovers, who are also unnamed. While Bertha’s connection to the affair is thus openly recognized, Selden’s is shielded. Lily and Judy are both aware of his involvement but do not explicitly discuss it. They leave his privacy intact, a protection not afforded to Bertha.

The scene where Trenor lures Lily to his house conveys how gossip’s differential treatment of men and women threatens the safety of women. Trenor himself is aware of the fact that his gender insulates him from the harmful effects of gossip. He acknowledges multiple times that society would deem it inappropriate that he and Lily are alone together late at night. As he demands sexual compensation from Lily, he also confesses, “I know I’m not talking the way a man is supposed to talk to a girl” (146). With the phrase “supposed to,” Trenor invokes the social code, which he admits he has transgressed. Nevertheless, he remains undaunted by this knowledge and tells Lily, “if

you think I'm ashamed you 're mistaken" (144). Trenor's lack of shame reflects in part his determination to collect on what he perceives as the debt Lily owes him, as he is willing to violate social norms to do so. However, it is also clear that Trenor's status as a man endows him with the security to be unconcerned with the societal reception of his actions. Society, in effect, gives him no reason to feel "ashamed." As Spacks points out, any rumors that circulate regarding Trenor's encounter with Lily will, if anything, benefit him, boosting his status. Additionally, the example with Bertha and Selden indicates that any ensuing gossip will focus largely on Lily, respecting Trenor's privacy.

Of course, that leaves Lily to be burdened by concerns with gossip, and it is these worries that prevent her from calling for help. I briefly referenced this moment at the beginning of this section, but it is worth taking a closer look at it here. As she tries to locate a means to escape, Lily suddenly takes notice of "the bell, and she remembered that help was in call. Yes, but scandal with it-a hideous mustering of tongues. No, she must fight her way out alone" (147). The word "mustering" has a military connotation and suggests that if Lily were to call for the intervention of an outside party, she would be setting herself up for another battle, this one against the "tongues" spreading rumors at her expense. Lily is thus left "alone" to face the danger Trenor represents. Gossip, in this regard, resembles the law, as both fail to offer any assistance to women in need.⁴

⁴ This discussion reflects Wharton's knack for appearing almost prescient, for being ahead of her times. Lily's plight in this scene has an eerie resonance with contemporary discussions revolving around the tendency to blame victims of abuse and assault rather than the perpetrators. Relevant here is the following quote from Lily's aunt, which again holds women responsible for the actions of others: "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" (Wharton 127).

If the danger Lily faces of being assaulted by Trenor is the clearest example of this failure on the part of the law, the corresponding portrayal of gossip would unquestionably be the scene where Bertha publicly dismisses Lily. This moment represents the culmination of Bertha's efforts to save herself from gossip by offering up Lily instead, insinuating that she has been sleeping with her husband. While at a restaurant, Bertha signals that Lily is no longer welcome among their party. Following this declaration, Lily "remained in admirable erectness, slightly isolated from the embarrassed group about her" (218). This image of Lily seemingly motionless as she stands removed from others recalls the description of her in the scene with Trenor, where she similarly remains alone "in the middle of the room" (143). As I discussed earlier, this latter scene expresses Lily's detachment from the physical structure of the domestic space, signifying her lack of power within it. The moment in the restaurant shows how gossip can likewise render her powerless by disconnecting her from other people. Through their emphasis on Lily's state of being "isolated," both scenes depict her as vulnerable. Kent goes so far as to attribute Lily's downfall to this snubbing by Bertha, due to the division it creates between Lily and her one-time friends. She argues that as a result of this scene, "Lily has nowhere to turn to for security. She is *alone*, and she will remain that way until her death" (Kent 45; emphasis mine). Lily's isolation in the restaurant, as Kent presents it, represents a fracturing of her ties to other people that will never be mended. Although I think Kent's view is a little simplistic, in that it ignores other factors leading to Lily's ultimate tragic end, she is correct in pointing toward the fact that gossip leaves Lily "alone" to face these struggles.

To clarify the gendered power dynamic underlying gossip and its connection to privacy, it is useful to close this section by analyzing gossip's relationship to marriage in the novel. In representing this relationship, Wharton often employs a legal register of diction. An important instance of this pattern comes as George Dorset (Bertha's husband) attempts to deny the rumors of Bertha's infidelity. At one point, Dorset repeats to Lily the excuses that Bertha has given him for her late-night absences, making it appear "as though he were putting the case for his wife" (Wharton 202). The word "case" indicates a legal trial, with Dorset acting as the lawyer defending his wife against the gossip that labels her unfaithful. Yet, Wharton also communicates how a husband may hold another position in this situation: "The code of Lily's world decreed that a woman's husband should be the only judge of her conduct: she was technically above suspicion while she had the shelter of his approval, or even of his indifference" (104). A husband who regards his wife's affairs with "indifference" is one who is not bothered by them and therefore not compelled to intervene. As long as this is the case, a woman will remain "above suspicion," protected as she is by her husband's defense of her. In other words, gossip will have little impact on a woman's reputation and social standing until her husband's "indifference" fades. Then, he becomes the "judge," the one who determines whether or not she is guilty and decides what her punishment shall be.

A man's ability to assume this role underscores the power he has over his wife, specifically the control he wields over her private matters. Jessica Bulman argues that a man in this society has the "right to determine not only the bounds of his own privacy but also those of his family members." As a result, "the man who does not dine with his wife" is allowed "to keep this a secret." Conversely, "A woman's dining habits would be

her husband's private information, not her own" (Bulman 54-55). Under this system, a woman's private life is folded in under her husband's privacy. Bertha's affairs are discussed only in obscured conversations such as the one between Lily and Judy, which occurs in the seclusion of Judy's sitting-room. A discussion of Bertha's infidelity could occur in a social context only after Dorset has sanctioned such a conversation by endorsing the gossip about his wife. Until then, until he has broached the subject himself, an open exchange on the topic would violate Dorset's privacy, as Bertha's private matters are considered *his* private matters. This consideration reflects in part the greater respect afforded to men's privacy than women's. Yet, the issue also extends beyond that, as gossip then becomes another mechanism that allows men to invade and control women's privacy.

Social Role

Embedded in the earlier discussion of domestic space is a window into the social role of leisure-class women in the novel. In analyzing the link between privacy and the domestic sphere, I described how the home is an entirely social space for these women, something Wharton communicates through Lily's vision of herself as trapped within the drawing-room. Returning to this moment affords the opportunity to begin to tease out in greater detail the nuances of the social role that women such as Lily are expected to occupy. In this scene, Wharton writes that Lily "could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing-room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume" (Wharton 100). Just as a flower's perfume is appealing to other beings, so too is Lily's "elegance" intended to attract the admiration of others. That is, Lily's purpose in the drawing-room is to appear beautiful and alluring. Beyond that, her "elegance" is formulated as "diffusing" out of her

in a manner comparable to the emanation of perfume from a flower. In other words, her embodiment of beauty and charm appears to occur naturally, requiring no exertion on her part.

Wharton, however, undermines the notion that Lily's being innately corresponds to this idealized image of women. In *The Decoration of Houses*, she asserts that Americans seem to share a belief "that no drawing-room is worthy of the name unless it is uninhabitable" (Wharton and Codman 124). On one level, Wharton is simply criticizing the lack of refinement in the decoration of leisure-class homes. Yet, her language also conveys an important point, one relevant to Lily's plight. As an "uninhabitable" space, the drawing-room is not a site in which it is appropriate for living to occur. It is striking then that Lily's fate is to seemingly spend her entire existence within the drawing-room, indicating the full range of human life is inaccessible to her. Wharton's critique thus extends beyond the decorating skills of her contemporaries, as she exposes the oppressive nature of leisure-class society. She expresses how women's potential for living a full life is thwarted by the restrictions this society places on them, restrictions such as the one confining Lily to the drawing-room.

Even Selden notices the deployment of these forces. He conceives of Lily as, "a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing-room" (Wharton 13). Dryads reside in the expansive, open spaces of nature. The comparison of Lily to a dryad indicates a similarly unfettered life may be the one for which she is naturally suited. However, Lily is trapped within the limited space of the drawing-room. She has, in fact, been "subdued to the conventions of the drawing-room," signaling how societal "conventions" have repressed her innate tendencies and inclinations. In this way,

Wharton calls attention to the fact that the beautiful and gracious figure of the leisure-class woman is a societal standard that is forced upon women such as Lily, not their inherited way of being.

The model of the ideal woman that is most prominent and influential in leisure-class society is one that presents her as a work of art, which, like a flower, is meant to be gazed upon and admired by others. Lily encounters this representation of female being throughout the novel, beginning in its very first scene. When Selden spots Lily among the mass of people in Grand Central Station, he reflects that he “had never seen her more radiant. Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room” (4). It is precisely Lily’s resemblance to a painting that makes her appealing to Selden in this moment. As Amy Kaplan shrewdly observes, the “crowd” serves as “a background that outlines [Lily’s] brilliance” (Kaplan 88). The “dull tints” of other travelers foreground her own beauty, just as an artist employs contrast to achieve similar effects in a painting. Selden, in this way, immediately understands Lily in terms of artwork.

What is significant about this formulation is that it does not recognize a private self within Lily. Instead, it defines her in relation to those looking at her. Artwork is, after all, created for others to behold. Accordingly, Kaplan argues that Wharton frequently positions Lily in front of “an audience of spectators” (88). Even in the train station, Selden is not the only person taking note of her beauty: “One or two persons, in brushing past them, lingered to look; for Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveler rushing to his last train” (Wharton 3-4). Lily’s status as a work of art invites, even depends upon, this kind of admiration from others. Social norms thus inextricably

tie her identity to other people, denying the possibility of an inner life existing within her that is removed from the larger social world.

In this context, it is also important that a painting's beauty resides entirely on its surface. There are no secret depths hidden from onlookers, as the value of a painting lies completely in its artistry that is visible to others. Similarly, leisure-class society attaches value only to Lily's exterior appearance, something that becomes clear when considering what it is that makes Lily attractive on the marriage market. Rosedale pursues Lily throughout much of the novel and seems drawn primarily, if not exclusively, to her beauty. A telling moment occurs after Lily has taken part in a *tableau vivant* (a scene I examine below), and Rosedale excitedly proclaims, "if I could get Paul Morpeth to paint her like that, the picture 'd appreciate a hundred per cent in ten years" (158). Lily herself has only a small presence in Rosedale's assertion, appearing only in the form of the diminutive "her." Rosedale's focus seems to be fixed fully on the "picture" of her, which will capture her beauty but, of course, can make no claim to represent her internal existence. It appears, however, that Rosedale conceives of Lily's beauty as her sole source of value in the first place, as he fixates on the financial worth of the painting and thereby converts Miss Bart's beauty into economic terms.⁵ Just as the inner life of a

⁵ While a painting of Lily would provide Rosedale with financial capital, marrying her would endow him with social capital. He indicates many times in the novel that he considers Lily a suitable wife because her social graces and status would boost his own standing. His view of her reflects Kaplan's analysis of marriage in this society: "the lady of leisure must work hard to adorn herself as the 'chief ornament' to 'beautify the household' (or in Lily Bart's case, as a commodity on the marriage market that will win her this privileged place)." Critically, "this self-display is self-effacing because it functions as a sign of her husband's wealth and status" (Kaplan 69). This configuration of a woman's domestic role then becomes another way in which she is denied a private self, as her individual identity is subsumed beneath her function as an object that is meant to bolster her husband's status.

painting's subject is absent from the artwork, Lily's private self is excluded from Rosedale's analysis of her worth.

The connection between Lily's social role and artwork is on display, both literally and figuratively, most prominently in what is perhaps the most iconic moment in the first half of the novel: Lily's aforementioned enactment of a *tableau vivant*. No analysis of *The House of Mirth* would be complete without examining this scene, and it is particularly crucial when considering the social norms that position Lily as a work of art. After all, a *tableau vivant* is an occasion where an individual seemingly steps into a painting, physically embodying the artist's creation. In making concrete the association between Lily and artwork, Wharton makes it impossible not to ask the question: what exactly *is* the relationship between the two? Selden, for his part, believes he has arrived at the answer to this question. From his seat in the audience, he feels that, "for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart." Gerty echoes Selden's musing, as she asks him after the curtain falls, "Don't you like her best in that simple dress? It makes her look like the real Lily-the Lily I know" (Wharton 135). Most simply then, Lily's *tableau* suggests that her "real" self is nothing more than her social role as a work of art.

There are, however, more subtle features of this moment that deserve to be drawn out. Kaplan writes that the very premise of a *tableau vivant* "turn[s] art into performance" (Kaplan 94). As the expression of "the real Lily Bart," this scene thus highlights again Lily's dependence on an audience. Indeed, Kaplan argues that, "At the moment that [Lily] is most fully transformed into art, she is also most fully exposed" (83). The "real" Lily is, in this light, not merely a work of art, but specifically the "performance" of it. Jessica Bulman notes the importance of this distinction as well: "Self-objectification is so

central to her malleable character that the ‘real Lily Bart’ *is*, in many ways, the performance of beauty” (Bulman 66). Bulman’s astute description of Lily as “malleable” is reflected in Gerty’s remark to Selden. Her assertion that the image of Lily on the stage before them corresponds to “the Lily I know” implicitly acknowledges that there is more than one “Lily” that exists. To be precise, it suggests that who Lily is shifts depending on who is viewing her. “The real Lily Bart” therefore exists outside of Lily herself, formed as it is in the thoughts and words of people such as Gerty and Selden. Importantly, this construction indicates that Lily’s private self (to the degree it is recognized as existing) is transparent and accessible to others. To Kaplan and Bulman’s analysis, I would then add that “the real Lily Bart” is not only a performance; it is also a public possession.

That is not to say, though, that Lily has no role in shaping what others perceive “the real Lily Bart” to be. William Modellmog draws attention to “the control [Lily] exerts over her own public image,” at least in the beginning of the novel. He describes Lily as “a kind of artist” with the “ability to manipulate conventions and appearances” (Modellmog 345). To bring in Bulman’s perspective, Lily is “malleable,” capable of adapting herself to best suit her current surroundings. A powerful example of her skills in adjusting her social persona occurs when she and Selden are at a dinner party in Europe. Selden observes how:

She was “perfect” to every one: subservient to Bertha’s anxious predominance, good-naturedly watchful of Dorset’s moods, brightly companionable to Silverton and Dacey, the latter of whom met her on an evident footing of old admiration, while young Silverton, portentously self-absorbed, seemed conscious of her only as of something vaguely obstructive. And suddenly, as Selden noted the fine

shades of manner by which she harmonized herself with her surroundings, it flashed on him that, to need such adroit handling, the situation must indeed be desperate...He seemed to see her poised on the brink of a chasm. (Wharton 192)

The visual register connoted by the phrase “fine shades of manner” supports Modellmog’s characterization of Lily as an artist, one who alters her disposition to meet the different needs of multiple people. Most striking is Wharton’s suggestion that Lily is able to account for these varying needs all at the same time; she simultaneously appears both “subservient” and on equal “footing” to her cohorts. While displaying Lily’s incisive social expertise, this moment also appears almost paradoxical, something the use of asyndeton gestures toward. The numerous commas separating her various interactions with the other guests portray her identity as fractured, denying a sense of cohesion uniting Lily’s abundant features into one being. In light of the *tableau vivant*, I would argue that there is, in fact, no cohesion, no single “Lily.” Instead, there are multiple, competing versions of her. To each of those present at the dinner party (Selden included), “the real Lily Bart” is something quite distinct.

The spatial imagery of Lily “poised on the brink of a chasm” is also significant, symbolizing her precarious social status at this point in the novel. Despite this vulnerable position, the scene reveals that Lily’s charms allow her (for the moment) to maintain her standing among the leisure class. By keeping others, especially Bertha, happy, she can remain in their good graces and, by extension, their social circle. However, when her usefulness to Bertha expires, Lily’s ability to manage society’s impression of her is impaired. After Bertha publicly banishes Miss Bart from her yacht, Lily asks Gerty to apprise her of the ensuing gossip. When Gerty claims that she refuses to listen to such

rumors, Lily responds, “I *must* listen to them-I must know where I stand” (224). Lily’s reputation has moved beyond her sphere of influence and is now under the control of her adversaries, to the point where it is only through the words of others that Lily herself can determine the condition of her social standing. Modellmog argues that this outcome is the result of Lily’s “inability to possess herself fully” (Modellmog 346). His assertion draws on the social residence of “the real Lily Bart.” While Lily’s social dexterity enables her to manipulate others’ perception of this being, its position outside of her renders it, in the end, in the hands of society at large.

Lily herself is aware that “the real Lily Bart” is under the control of others. She says to Gerty, “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” (Wharton 226). While the previous section of this chapter examined the gendered dynamics underlying gossip, Lily here articulates how there is also a class dimension to it. Bertha’s story is “easier to believe” than Lily’s because the rewards she can offer (presumably invitations to her house and opera box) are more enticing. This configuration indicates a kind of exchange, where Bertha offers other members of the leisure class material benefits to compel them to accept her version of events. Yet, the need for such a transaction in the first place indicates that society does not necessarily believe her rumors are true. Indeed, Paula Kent points out that “most [people] are likely aware of Bertha’s authentic affair” (Kent 44-45). They are, in other words, conscious of the fact that Bertha may have an ulterior motivation for disgracing Lily. Despite this general awareness, the rumors Bertha diffuses through society are accepted as the “truth.”

Wharton, in this way, depicts social discourse as endorsing something as true without actually believing it *is* true. By utilizing this discourse, Bertha can wrest control of Lily's reputation from Lily herself, a consequence that reflects the separation between the social concept of "the real Lily Bart" and who Lily truly is. As a social entity, "the real Lily Bart" exists in and is shaped by the perceptions of others. It is, in other words, detached from Lily's interior.

This configuration of Lily's being stems from an underlying construction of female subjectivity that permeates leisure-class society. Modellmog uses domestic space to analyze this society's divergent understandings of male and female being: "the home served as a model for the inner self in nineteenth-century America by figuring a private space in which a 'masculine selfhood' ...could exist removed from the public pressures of the marketplace." Crucially, he adds that this configuration of male subjectivity was made possible "only by denying that women possessed inner lives comparable to those possessed by men" (Modellmog 338).⁶ Modellmog echoes the earlier discussion of leisure-class women as artwork, where I noted how this social configuration of women emphasizes their external beauty while disregarding their internal being. Indeed, Modellmog makes it clear that this construction of female being extends to the point where women's "inner lives" are considered nonexistent. It is because of this notion of

⁶ Modellmog's presentation of a link between domestic space and constructions of subjectivity sheds further light on my discussion of domestic space earlier in this chapter. Just as Modellmog identifies the home at large as a, "private space in which a 'masculine selfhood' ...could exist removed from the public pressures of the marketplace," so too can a man's study be understood this way. As a site for intellectual pursuits and reflection, the study enables men to explore their inner lives. Women, however, are denied such a private room of their own, with their domestic lives unfolding primarily in social spaces such as the drawing-room. Modellmog's analysis indicates that leisure-class society would not consider it appropriate or necessary for a woman to have a study, as the model of female being depicts her as having no inner life to cultivate.

female subjectivity that Lily “loses control over the terms of her self-exposure and thereby faces the possibility of *being* her reputation rather than *owning* it” (345). The understanding of women held by leisure-class society indicates that there is, in fact, nothing that distinguishes a woman’s reputation from her identity; in denying that she possesses an inner life, social norms leave her to be defined by nothing but her relationship to others. There is, in other words, no conception of a private life for women. Society classifies their existences as entirely relational and external, devoid of any internal being.

In considering what constitutes “the real Lily Bart,” I have drawn on all three dimensions of privacy that I analyzed in this chapter. I described how it is a social entity, shaped and transmitted by the discourse of gossip. Yet, Lily’s being is so strongly tied to the social realm only because the configuration of women as artwork does not recognize a complex and deep inner life within her, a process in which domestic space is also implicated. As Wharton depicts them in *The House of Mirth*, these forces, all of which are related to privacy, cannot be separated. Instead, they intersect, appearing to influence and reinforce one another. That is, they work together, not as distinct phenomena but rather as different yet related inflections of the same phenomenon: the gendered disparity of privacy in leisure-class society.

Chapter Two

-The “Subjective Experience” of Privacy-

My first chapter illustrates how leisure-class society limits and controls women’s privacy in more ways than one. Women are denied a private space within the home, their personal affairs are circulated and regulated through the discourse of gossip, and the configuration of women as artwork does not acknowledge the existence of their private, internal lives. While these social norms are powerful and widespread, that does not mean a woman like Lily never has a private moment. It is, in fact, hard to imagine how that could be the case. For example, society may portray women as lacking the deep interiority of men, but that does not mean Lily’s inner life truly is shallow and simplistic. To the contrary, much of the novel is rooted in Lily’s mind and communicates quite plainly that she leads as profound an internal existence as anyone.⁷

In short, Lily does have the capacity to experience privacy and does so many times in the novel. Yet, in this chapter, I examine how Lily’s “subjective experience” of privacy is often compromised in some way. That is, Wharton characterizes Lily’s potential for privacy as largely unfulfilled, failing to live up to Lily’s positive conception of it. This is true even in Lily’s moments alone, where one might reasonably expect her to have the best chance of attaining a degree of privacy. Instead, it becomes clear that Lily’s inner self cannot be disentangled from her public persona as a work of art. Consequently,

⁷ William Modellmog advances a compelling argument related to this conception of Lily’s interior. He contends that Wharton “refrains from exposing the full measure of Lily’s inner life to the eyes of her readers, choosing instead to represent its unrepresentability.” Critically, Modellmog claims, “It is through this unwillingness to speak that Wharton seeks to intervene in the legal constructions of ‘privacy’ and ‘personality,’ to disrupt the form of ‘knowledge’ that is gendered male and *rests upon the utter transparency of female consciousness*” (Modellmog 355-356; emphasis mine).

she continues to present herself as an object for display even when she is alone, as she imagines herself performing before an audience that is always present in her mind. Nevertheless, there are brief moments where Lily does encounter something like a private self, but it is never a liberating experience. By contrast, such moments come only in the midst of severe emotional distress.

While privacy thus fails to emerge in her moments alone, Lily herself comes to believe that there *is* privacy elsewhere in her life. Specifically, she conceives of an intimate privacy existing between her and Selden, one that she thinks enables the two of them to enter a world entirely their own. Although Lily's "subjective experience" indicates she has achieved a private existence with Selden, Wharton undermines her vision by showing how their supposedly private relationship is still contaminated by leisure-class ideology. In this light, Lily's feeling of privacy ends up being no more than an illusion.

In the final section of this chapter and this project, I discuss the relationship between privacy and class in the novel. Wharton portrays Lily's working-class life as offering her a greater potential for privacy than her existence among the affluent ever did. Nevertheless, Lily's experience of this life is one dominated by feelings of loneliness and insignificance instead of privacy.

Solitude

In the introduction to this project, I drew on the work of Katherine Adams to help illuminate the challenges one encounters when trying to define privacy. Specifically, I noted Adams's attention to the tendency of writers and thinkers to construct a "negative"

definition of privacy (Adams 6). Adams herself attempts to intervene in this dilemma by sketching out the beginnings of an understanding of the concept. As part of this effort, she invokes the American journalist Edwin Lawrence Godkin's conception of privacy: the "kingdom of the mind, that inner world of personal thought and feeling in which every man passes some time" (4).⁸ Godkin's "inner world" echoes Michael Warner's definition of privacy as meaning "inwardness," the interior existence of an individual (Warner 30). Adams expands on this notion of a private self put forth by Godkin and Warner when she writes that privacy can be conceived of as "inhabiting a self-relation that occurs in separation from public culture" (Adams 19). Adams explicitly articulates the "separation" between one's "inner world" and the larger "public culture." Privacy, in these terms, refers to a self that is removed from the social world.

Lily herself appears to support this construction of a private self. As she begins her social descent in the latter half of the novel, Lily briefly takes refuge in the house of Mrs. Fisher. When Lily arrives, Wharton immediately marks the house as a private space, describing the "firelit quiet of the small silent house" (Wharton 249). The alliteration of the soft "s" sound contributes to the sense of "quiet" and seclusion permeating the house, which is bolstered by the intimacy of the "firelit" atmosphere. Within this space, Lily encounters "Rosedale kneeling domestically on the drawing-room hearth before his hostess's little girl." She notices something uncharacteristically tender in Rosedale's interaction with the child and decides this could not be "the premeditated and perfunctory endearments of the guest under his hostess's eye, for he and the little girl had the room to

⁸ By this point, it is perhaps not surprising that Godkin immediately connects privacy to gender, indicating it applies to "every *man*" while excluding any reference to female privacy.

themselves” (249). Like the house as a whole, this room is characterized by a feeling of intimacy, signified by the presence of a “hearth” around which the few people present can gather.

As an outsider trying to rise in leisure-class society, Rosedale appears in many of the novel’s scenes to adopt a kind of public persona not unlike Lily’s. He frequently puts himself on display, staging performances to highlight his wealth and success. Accordingly, when there is nobody for whom Rosedale could be performing, Lily imagines she is seeing an entirely different person: “She had but a moment in which to consider...this glimpse of the fireside man...for at sight of her he was immediately on his feet again, the florid and dominant Rosedale of Mattie Gormer’s drawing-room” (249). Lily does not even recognize the figure she sees before her as Rosedale, identifying him instead as “the fireside man.” Underlying this effect is the sense that “Rosedale” for her is an embodiment of his social being, comparable to that elusive entity of “the real Lily Bart.” Lily’s entrance restores the motivation to perform, and with that “Rosedale” reemerges as a figure familiar to Lily. Lily’s observation of Rosedale thus endorses Adams’s delineation of a private self, as she imagines him to possess an interior being that is hidden from the public gaze, distinct as it is from the persona he assumes when in the presence of others.

Yet in Lily’s own moments of solitude, this understanding of the self seems not to apply. Instead, Wharton indicates that no clear boundary exists between Lily’s private self and her performed one. The blurring of her social and private selves becomes clear during her visit to the Trenors’ country home early in the novel. Taking a walk through the rural landscape, Miss Bart decides to sit down beside the path upon which she has

been traveling. While she admires the visual appeal of this spot and notices that it highlights her own beauty, “she was not accustomed to taste the joys of solitude except in company, and the combination of a handsome girl and a romantic scene struck her as too good to be wasted. No one, however, appeared to profit by the opportunity; and after a half hour of fruitless waiting she rose and wandered on” (61). In this moment, Lily is as physically secluded as she ever is in the novel. Not only is she alone, she is alone in the country. This detail is important because, as Lorna Brittan points out, rural settings afford much greater privacy to their occupants than the urban ones where Lily spends most of her time; in the city, “seclusion [is] impossible under the inquisitive gaze” of the many people in close proximity (Brittan 725).

Despite this isolation, Wharton suggests that Lily continues to understand herself in terms of her public persona. That is, Lily envisions herself as the work of art social norms represent her as. Considering the pastoral setting a “romantic scene,” Lily regards it as merely another background that exhibits her attractive exterior. She even visualizes herself through the eyes of an imagined observer; the phrase “a handsome girl” is one that someone passing by might use to describe her. Indeed, Lily’s goal in this moment is to have her beauty recognized by an onlooker, who would “profit” from the “opportunity” to gaze upon her “handsome” figure. With the financial connotations of “profit,” Lily translates her beauty into monetary value just as Rosedale later does in regard to a painting of her. Significantly, she simultaneously disregards her own private being; she does not identify with the “handsome girl” nor does she even seem to recognize an inner self beneath its exterior. Social norms of female subjectivity thus drive Lily’s self-appraisal, as she assigns value to her beauty but glosses over the existence of

her interior life. As a result, privacy itself has no value in Lily's eyes. She considers the time she spends sitting in the country as "wasted" or "fruitless" because the "opportunity" for her to be admired is squandered. With an inner being she deems to have no value, Lily classifies time alone as likewise lacking meaning or importance. In other words, Lily incorporates the relational view of female being held by leisure-class society into her own self-perception, attaching value to herself only when she is in the presence of other people and specifically when these people form an audience whose admiration she attracts.

In this light, Lily's private self diverges drastically from the model outlined by Adams. Even in moments where she is alone, her inner being is tied to her social existence. Jessica Bulman perhaps says it best when she argues that, "Publicity precedes Lily's sense of personality, for it is only by looking at herself from without that she can come to know herself" (Bulman 66). The sense of "looking" that Bulman articulates is both metaphorical and quite literal. In the scene considered above, Lily visualizes her physical appearance by adopting the perspective of another person. Even more profoundly, she defines herself relationally, rooting the source of her self-image not in her inner being but rather outside of her, in the social world. As Amy Kaplan puts it, Lily "depends on the mirror" constituted by other people "to maintain her identity." Kaplan goes so far as to claim that, "When [Lily] loses this mirror, she loses a self" (Kaplan 102). I would moderate Kaplan's assertion to say that Lily's sense of self *changes* over

the course of the novel.⁹ Nevertheless, I do think Kaplan is right to point to the removal of the societal “mirror” as the source of this change.

This mirror is slowly occluded as Lily’s social standing sinks lower and lower, and it is finally shattered after she returns from Europe pursued by the rumors circulated by Bertha. Shortly after her homecoming, she attends the public reading of her aunt’s will. To the shock of everyone present, it is announced that Lily has been left almost nothing and that her cousin will inherit the majority of the estate. This pronouncement produces a commotion among those gathered for the reading, but Lily herself is not directly involved in the ensuing confusion; she “stood apart from the general movement” (Wharton 223). The language here almost directly matches the novel’s very first scene. When Selden sees Lily in Grand Central Station, she is likewise standing “apart from the crowd” (3). In the analysis of this scene in my first chapter, I discussed how Lily is distinct from the mass of people in the train station. Juxtaposed with “the dull tints of the crowd,” she appears “more radiant” than ever to Selden (4). Her position “apart from the crowd” thus reflects Lily’s singular beauty, rendering her superior to the other travelers who are nothing more than “dull tints” in the background. After the reading of the will, Lily is similarly disconnected from other people, but the significance of her seclusion is notably different. She feels “for the first time utterly alone. No one looked at her, no one seemed aware of her presence; she was probing the very depths of insignificance” (223).

⁹ Kaplan’s argument that Lily “loses a self” strikes me as more of a philosophical claim than one that belongs in a literary analysis. I do not think that Kaplan is incorrect *per se*, but I am not sure how one could ever prove that Lily truly does lose her entire self. While I realize I may be overlooking certain evidence in the novel, Kaplan does not indicate specific details that may corroborate her viewpoint.

Whereas in the earlier scene Lily's distinctive beauty grants her a position above those around her, the use of the word "depths" signals she is heading in the opposite direction here. That is, she has experienced a decline in status, which is somehow tied to her feeling of "insignificance" stemming from the lack of attention she is receiving. This moment is somewhat anomalous for Lily, as all eyes are typically drawn to her. In the train station, both Selden and other passersby take note of her beauty, and she receives similar admiration at the various social events she attends in the first half of the novel. Even when she is alone, she conceives of herself as remaining the subject of an imaginary audience's gaze. Here, she is surrounded by a potential audience, and yet the anaphora emphasizes how "no one" is looking at her. This scene therefore represents a rare occasion where Lily is not on display before spectators that are present either physically or in her mind. One might conclude then that she has attained a degree of privacy thus far denied her. And yet, that is not how the scene reads at all. Instead of privacy, Lily experiences a feeling of deprivation and "insignificance." She does not feel liberated or empowered but rather "utterly alone."

Lily's "subjective experience" of privacy in this scene is clearly quite removed from the idealized conception of it that she outlines at the beginning of the novel. This tension between her vision of privacy and her experience of it is not unique to this moment but instead is an instance of a pattern, wherein Lily's most private moments are also her most tragic ones. There are several different scenes that illustrate this phenomenon, but I will focus on the one that is to my mind the most harrowing and most powerful: the aftermath of Lily's narrow escape from assault at the hands of Gus Trenor. As Lily flees Trenor's house in a carriage, "shuddering darkness closed on her" (148).

The word “closed” suggests the “darkness” engulfs Lily, enclosing her within itself and thereby sealing her off from the external world. There is also an interesting displacement that occurs, as the word “shuddering” describes the darkness instead of Lily. This dislocation makes it appear as if Lily’s fear is projected onto the darkness; the image of “shuddering darkness” surrounding Lily therefore portrays her as isolated within her fear. Lily’s isolation becomes so absolute that it is almost unnatural. She is, of course, not physically alone, as the carriage requires a driver to operate it. Wharton, however, makes it easy to forget that detail. In the extended passage rooted in Lily’s distressed interior, Wharton obscures the fact that there is somebody maneuvering the carriage. She uses phrases such as “the turn of the wheels” to depict the carriage as seemingly moving of its own accord (148). In this way, Wharton creates the impression that Lily is not aware of the driver’s presence. Both Wharton and Lily acknowledge him only once, when Miss Bart speaks to him at the very end of the passage. It appears then as if Lily is so deeply embedded in her fear that she is completely severed from the external world, to the point where she does not register the presence of another person who is separated from her by only a few feet.

Similar to the scene following the reading of the will, Lily is thus removed from other people to an unusual degree. Unlike her typical moments alone, these occasions represent instances where Lily does not continue to understand herself in relation to others. To the contrary, she feels entirely cut off from other people, as the sense of isolation invades her conscious thought: “she was alone in a place of darkness and pollution. -Alone! It was the loneliness that frightened her...there were hours and hours left of the night! And she must spend them alone, shuddering sleepless on her bed” (148).

The use of exclamations indicates the text is being filtered through the frightened recesses of Lily's mind, approaching the level of free indirect discourse. Within her consciousness, Lily is clearly fixated on her solitude, with the word "alone" appearing three times in close proximity. Earlier in the novel, Lily conceptualizes such moments alone positively. As I noted in my first chapter, she does so when she discloses her yearning for a private space such as Selden's apartment: "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self!" (7). The syntax of this quote positions "place" in the middle of the sentence, as if insulating it from any external contact. Crucially, this seclusion is "delicious" and desirable in Lily's eyes. In the carriage, Lily is indeed removed from the larger world, but she experiences this solitude as neither peaceful seclusion nor empowering agency. By contrast, she is faced with agonizing "loneliness," a cold and imperiled state of isolation.

Moments such as this one, where Lily's inner turmoil is so overwhelming that it disconnects her from the world around her, are the closest she comes to a state of true solitude for much of the novel. As I will examine in the final section of this chapter, her descent into the working class similarly isolates her toward the novel's conclusion. Important here, however, is that Lily's moments of distress enable the existence of a private self within her. Her experiences of tragedy disrupt her usual tendency to envision herself through the eyes of an observer; she feels so alone that she cannot imagine the possibility of another person existing, let alone an audience before whom she can display herself. Social norms are so entrenched in her being that a private self is available to Lily only in a state of isolation so profound and so unconditional that she does not even identify it as privacy. Instead, she appears to have only one word for it: "alone."

Selden

While in the throes of the emotional anguish she experiences after escaping from Trenor, Lily sets forth a revised vision of privacy. Specifically, she conceives of a privacy that exists not when one is alone, but rather in the company of others: “What Lily craved was the darkness made by enfolding arms, the silence which is not solitude, but compassion holding its breath” (Wharton 149). I discussed above the way in which “darkness” closes Lily off within the carriage, serving as an embodiment of her isolation. The darkness that Lily now desires is also tied to a sense of seclusion but one that is explicitly “not solitude.” Instead of being accompanied by feelings of loneliness, this darkness is “made by enfolding arms.” It is, in other words, created through contact with another person. For the moment, it is not clear if Lily has in mind the “enfolding arms” of anybody in particular; the phrase could refer to a lover’s embrace or the cradle of a mother’s arms. What is certain is that Lily is seeking protection and safety. In this way, she reconfigures darkness from a state of isolation into a symbol of intimacy. That is, she imagines a shared seclusion, a sense of privacy that encases both her and an intimate companion.

The scene above concludes with Lily in the “enfolding arms” of Gerty. This section, however, will explore Selden’s role in the novel, considering the degree to which he serves as “enfolding arms” for Lily. I focus on Selden instead of Gerty because Lily herself regards her relationship with him as the closest she comes to experiencing true intimacy. While I do not concur with Miss Bart’s assessment (for reasons that will become clear), examining Selden’s presence in her life nevertheless allows us to consider Lily’s “subjective experience” of shared privacy. Before attending to his relationship with

Lily, it is first useful to lay out some background on Selden himself. Selden appears in the novel more than any character other than Lily and therefore has received a good deal of critical scrutiny. Interestingly, a sharp division exists in the reception of his character. As Joseph Coulombe describes, some readers praise Selden as “a positive alternative to the materialistic and manipulative characters surrounding Lily Bart.” Others goes so far as to “implicate Selden directly in Lily’s decline and death” (Coulombe 3).

These disparate responses are understandable, as Selden exists as a somewhat perplexing figure in the novel. As with Lily, one wonders at times who the “real” Selden is. To my mind, this confusion stems from the fact that even Lily and Wharton disagree on the nature of Selden’s character. While Lily conceives of him as the kind of “positive alternative” outlined by Coulombe, sections of the novel that are not grounded in her thoughts reveal a different, less optimistic view of him. In this section, I hope to pull apart these two perceptions of Selden and arrive at a more nuanced understanding of his role in the novel.

The critics who praise Selden for his moral nature often claim that he gives Lily the chance to achieve a private existence outside of leisure-class society. Coulombe, for example, argues that, “Selden offers [Lily] the opportunity to escape from many of the restrictions which fashionable society dictates to its members, particularly women” (3). Coulombe’s view of Selden aligns with Lily’s, with his language calling to mind a particular moment where Miss Bart tries to account for her newfound attraction to Selden:

Not that he was notably brilliant or exceptional; in his own profession he was surpassed by more than one man who had bored Lily through many a weary

dinner. It was rather that he had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily...It was Selden's distinction that he had never forgotten the way out. (Wharton 54-55)

The “restrictions” that Coulombe refers to are here expressed through the configuration of leisure-class society as a “cage.” In my first chapter, I explored the connection between these restrictions and issues of gender and privacy, demonstrating how the social code withholds privacy from women such as Lily. Indeed, the quote above presents leisure-class society as an environment that is decidedly not private; those trapped within the cage are “huddled for the mob to gape at.”

Selden, by contrast, appears free from this intense public scrutiny. Of course, his status as a man affords him greater privacy than Lily could ever hope to attain. However, he is also capable of stepping “outside” the cage; unlike Lily, his life does not unfold exclusively among the leisure class. As Coulombe notes, Selden is a member of the group labeled “threshold men.” These figures “fit no precise classification, enjoy no special space, and *remain on the margins of society*” (Coulombe 4; emphasis mine). Existing “on the margins,” Selden is not subject to the intense surveillance and “restrictions” imposed upon the leisure class. That is, he is not stuck in the center of the “great gilt cage,” on display before others. This idea foreshadows the relationship between class and privacy, which I will consider more closely in the next section of this chapter. I will argue that Wharton presents a decrease in class status as corresponding to an increase in privacy. In

other words, those who reside apart from leisure-class society have greater access to privacy, as Selden does.

Crucially, Lily believes that her relationship with Selden will likewise enable her to attain a more private existence, one removed from the “great gilt cage.” Although Lily and Selden often discuss the possibility of such a liberated existence, they do so perhaps most explicitly during their walk through the country early in the novel. It is here that Selden sets forth his idea of a “republic of the spirit,” which he constructs as an ideal model for achieving “personal freedom.” He asserts that living within this realm allows one to be free, “from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents” (Wharton 68). The republic, as Selden lays it out in these terms, stands in sharp contrast to the materialism of the leisure class. Accordingly, Selden refers to the republic as, “a country one has to find the way to one’s self” (68). As its own “country,” the republic appears to be governed by different regulations and norms than the prevailing social code. Even more important, however, is the suggestion that the “republic of the spirit” is an independent state, one that exists outside of elite society.

This depiction of the “republic of the spirit” classifies it as a “counterpublic,” a term I borrow from Michael Warner. Warner describes counterpublics as “publics [that] are defined by their tension with a larger public,” maintaining social codes that “contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols” (Warner 56). Critically, Warner argues that a counterpublic acquires power only because it is comprised of more than one person. He points out how an embedded social order is difficult “to alter by oneself...It can only be altered through exchanges that go beyond self-expression to the making of a *collective* scene of

disclosure” (62-63; emphasis mine). As we saw in the last section, Lily is unable to transcend “the rules” of leisure-class society on her own; even in private, she understands herself as a work of art before an audience. Warner suggests that Lily would be more likely to succeed by participating in a “collective” space uncontaminated by these social norms. In other words, a counterpublic would more effectively empower her to break free from the grasp of the leisure-class social code.

Lily does, in fact, indicate on numerous occasions that her interactions with Selden are not marked by the influence of this social code. For example, she articulates her belief that she, “should n’t have to pretend with [Selden]” (Wharton 9). Instead, she can be her “real self” (95). According to Lily, she does not have to “pretend” to be a work of art when she is with Selden because he can see past her exterior, to her private self. It is striking that Selden can do so, given that Lily, by contrast, seems unable to see her “real self.” As I discussed in the previous section, Lily’s tendency to look at herself through the eyes of an observer leads her to focus entirely on her beauty and overlook her inner being. It appears then that Selden has a unique ability to facilitate the emergence of Lily’s private self. His capacity to do so can be interpreted as the result of his act of guiding Lily into a counterpublic, offering her a freedom from social norms that she cannot obtain alone.

This understanding of their relationship can also be extended to the scene where Selden lays out his model of the “republic of the spirit.” Wharton’s description of this exchange is saturated with language and images suggesting that Lily and Selden have entered another world. For example: “The soft isolation of the falling day enveloped them: they seemed lifted into a finer air. All the exquisite influences of the hour trembled

in their veins, and drew them to each other as the loosened leaves were drawn to the earth" (73). The image of the two being "lifted" reflects their transcendence of the material world, which they achieve by entering the "republic of the spirit." Within this space, they encounter "isolation," but it is one that has "enveloped them" both. Additionally, the word "enveloped" indicates their shared residence in the republic insulates them from the rest of the world. Wharton, in this way, creates a sense of privacy that corresponds to Lily's vision of a protective intimacy.

Nevertheless, Wharton simultaneously undercuts the viability of the "republic of the spirit" as a legitimate counterpublic. Even in the quote above, her use of the word "seemed" emphasizes how the sense of reaching a world apart is entrenched in the characters' subjective perceptions and does not necessarily reflect reality. Likewise, she compares Lily and Selden to "adventurous children who have climbed to a forbidden height from which they discover a new world. The actual world at their feet was veiling itself in dimness" (73). On one level, the simile likening the two characters to children could be construed as an expression of the innocence that characterizes the "new world" they have discovered, differentiating it from the morally compromised nature of leisure-class society. There is, however, another way to read this comparison. Aligning Lily and Selden with children, Wharton portrays their conception of the "republic of the spirit" as a figment of their imaginations, akin to the fantastical concoctions dreamed up in the mind of a child.¹⁰ Indeed, Wharton also points toward this latter reading by identifying

¹⁰ There are many places in the novel where Lily is compared to a child in the presence of Selden, such as their conversation in the first chapter (Wharton 9). This pattern can be read as an endorsement of the "republic of the spirit" as a counterpublic, signifying Lily's vulnerability before Selden due to his ability to see her "real self." As with the discussion above, however, there is also a less optimistic interpretation, wherein connecting Lily to a child is Wharton's way of expressing her naiveté in believing Selden can offer her an alternative existence to her current one.

the “actual world” as the material one, thereby discrediting the reality of the “new world” Lily and Selden believe they have found.

In short, the novel offers conflicting representations of the “republic of the spirit.” As I alluded to earlier, I believe we can mediate these disparate accounts by recognizing that they come from two different sources: Lily and Wharton. In my view, the moments in the scene above that appear to advocate for the “republic of the spirit” reflect Lily’s “subjective experience,” as she believes she and Selden have entered a private realm. Wharton, however, detracts from Lily’s vision, underscoring how it is, in the end, only a vision. Supporting this claim is the fact that Wharton also differs from Lily in her perspective on Selden, which becomes clear in the context of scenes where the text is not infused with Lily’s perceptions. In such moments, Selden emerges as a figure distinct from Lily’s image of him as detached and removed from the “great gilt cage.” To the contrary, Wharton indicates that Selden is as steeped in the leisure-class social code as anyone.

The hold this social code has on Selden is quite plain in his identification of Lily as a work of art. This view is evident almost immediately in the novel, as Selden muses, “that [Lily] must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her. 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” (5). Selden’s thoughts mirror Rosedale’s consideration of Lily later in the novel, with the word “cost” indicating that he has similarly converted Lily’s beauty into terms of finance and economic value. Important too is Selden’s belief that Lily’s “distinguishing” features are

“chiefly external.” In his mind, that which defines Lily as a unique individual is nothing more than a “fine glaze,” a superficial coating. Selden therefore attaches no importance to Lily’s interior. His view of her is, in this light, governed by the social norms that configure women as objects endowed with great beauty but lacking a private, inner self.

Additionally, Selden frequently takes part in the discourse of gossip. On a simplistic level, his participation reflects his active engagement with the members of the leisure class, undermining Lily’s belief that “he had preserved a certain social detachment” (54). Even more critical, however, is that gossip also shapes Selden’s perception of Lily. At a dinner party one night, Selden hears a rumor that Lily and Trenor have been spending time alone together, a veiled way of suggesting they are engaged in an affair. Due to his feelings for Miss Bart, this news upsets Selden and compels him to depart from the social gathering. As he exits, Selden chides himself for listening to gossip but nonetheless admits that when it comes to Lily, “his own view of her was...coloured by any mind in which he saw her reflected” (159). One could read this scene as a positive portrayal of Selden, as he appears to acknowledge and resist the societal influences that bombard him. Yet, Wharton’s language discourages such a heroic reading. The word “reflected” indicates Lily is merely an image to Selden, signifying again how his understanding of her is defined by her appearance rather than her inner being. Tellingly, he sees this image “in” the minds of others, which presents his view of Lily as a product of social discourse. While he may not be proud of it, Selden nevertheless uses gossip to create his image of “the real Lily Bart.”

That he does so becomes particularly important given that the night when he hears the rumor about Lily and Trenor is the same night that Trenor lures Miss Bart to his

house. After leaving the party, Selden walks through the city and happens by Trenor's residence at the exact moment that Lily is exiting it. With almost no hesitation, Selden responds by "turning sharply down the side street" (161). By physically distancing himself from the scene, Selden communicates his desire to remove himself from Lily. Indeed, that is just what he does, reneging on their plans to have tea together the next day. The suggestion is that Selden's feelings for Lily make it too painful to be in her presence in light of his belief that she is sleeping with Trenor. Of course, this belief is based in nothing but rumors, emphasizing how Selden's image of Lily is not grounded in reality. From this perspective, societal discourse informs and dominates Selden's conception of "the real Lily Bart"; his perception of her is influenced by both the social norms that configure women as artwork and the rumors permeating leisure-class society.

It is also significant that the scene discussed above challenges Selden's own self-image, as he frequently regards himself as Lily's savior. Even as he leaves the party, Selden imagines that he has heard Lily "cry [out] for rescue" from her current existence. He resolves to, "lift her out of it, take her beyond...lift Lily to a freer vision of life" (158-159). The repetition of "lift" recalls the earlier scene where Lily and Selden were seemingly "lifted into a finer air." In this way, Selden imagines he will "rescue" Lily by escorting her into the "republic of the spirit." Seeing Lily leave Trenor's house, Selden has the perfect opportunity to assume the guise of this kind of romantic hero, as Lily is actually in need of rescue at this moment. That is, of course, not what he does. He leaves her alone, just as everyone else does, a fact that compels me to align with those critics who, Coulombe says, "implicate Selden directly in Lily's decline and death" (Coulombe 3). By abandoning her in her moment of need and then cutting her out of his life, Selden

leaves Lily to suffer alone. Beyond that, the basis for that abandonment is, as noted above, a rumor. While Selden is not aware, as readers are, that the rumor is entirely unfounded, he does not even give Lily the benefit of the doubt; as David Holbrook argues, he is “only too ready to believe the worst of her” (Holbrook 22).

In response to my skeptical view of Selden, I can envision a counterargument that claims I am holding him to a higher standard than the basis by which I judge Lily. After all, I have discussed how it is nigh on impossible for Lily to break free from the leisure-class social code, as even she understands herself as a work of art. How is it fair then to blame Selden for, like Lily, being influenced by entrenched social norms? It is true, as well, that Wharton repeatedly highlights the power such firmly rooted beliefs have to shape individuals’ outlooks. For example, Lily frequently blames her upbringing for the struggles she encounters: “Why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose-in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for” (Wharton 226). This issue becomes increasingly significant as the novel enters its naturalistic final chapters, where Lily struggles to survive because she was never “taught” how to fill any role other than one that equates her with artwork. In drawing on naturalism, Wharton infuses the text with a sense that individuals are nothing more than the product of the social engineering they experience at the hands of their parents and society as a whole.

With this in mind, it may seem unreasonable to criticize Selden for being molded by his upbringing, as that makes him no different or worse than any of the other characters in the novel. And yet, that is precisely the point. Selden *is* no different than anyone else. Despite Lily’s belief to the contrary, Selden is unable to see her “real self.” Like all members of the leisure class, “he relies upon a combination of rumor and

appearance to reach conclusions about ‘the real Lily Bart’” (Moddelmog 349). It is, nevertheless, especially tragic that Selden never sees “the real” Lily because that is all she herself wants. When the two meet for the final time, Lily is adamant that, “he must see her wholly for once before they parted” (Wharton 307). Lily here seems to revise her earlier declaration, admitting that Selden has indeed failed to “see her wholly.” While Lily continues to hold out hope that he will do so, the novel’s final scene makes clear that her hope will remain unfulfilled, that Selden will never see her “real self.”

Upon finding Lily dead in her boarding-house, Selden launches into a lengthy meditation as he struggles to come to terms with her death. At the end of his reflection, he recalls their parting the previous night and realizes, “he could now read into that farewell all that his heart craved to find there; he could even draw from it courage not to accuse himself for having failed to reach the height of his opportunity” (329). Selden’s understanding of Lily has changed little, if at all, since the beginning of the novel. While it is true that he no longer configures her as artwork, he appears to now view her as a book that he can “read into.” That is, he still denies her the status of a fully-formed human being, seeing her instead as an object. It is possible that Selden’s perception of Lily has evolved slightly, as a book contains depths that something like a painting does not. Perhaps then, Selden now acknowledges the existence of Lily’s inner being, her private self. If that is true, he nonetheless believes he can peer “into” this interior and scan its contents, just as one can the pages of a book. As William Moddelmog puts it, Selden “refuses to acknowledge the possibility that [Lily’s] identity may not be fully knowable, that it may, in fact, be as private as his own” (Moddelmog 348).

In other words, Selden's belief that he can fully comprehend Lily's inner being rests on an assumption that this being is superficial and lacks complexity. Accordingly, looking into Lily's interior does not enable him to discover her "real self." Instead, what he "reads" is all about him. The language of the quote above is fixated on Selden; there are five pronouns that refer to him, whereas Lily is not mentioned once. In this way, Selden constructs a narrative with him at the center. As a result, he can remain the hero of the story and read exactly what he "craved to find." That is, what he reads enables him to locate the "courage" (a word it is difficult to read as anything but sarcastic) to absolve himself from any feelings of guilt or responsibility. Even more importantly, however, by making Lily's death a story about him, Selden upholds the belief that, as a woman, Lily can only be defined relationally. She cannot have her own story; she can only be a supporting player in his tale of heroism.

That Wharton disagrees with Selden is obvious; the existence of *The House of Mirth* is a testament to that. What is perhaps less apparent is the extent to which Wharton disagrees with Lily. Nevertheless, considering closely Wharton's characterization of Selden leads to the conclusion that this characterization stands in opposition to Lily's perception of him. Whereas Lily believes that Selden is singularly untouched by leisure-class norms, Wharton disproves this notion by repeatedly demonstrating how these norms are ingrained in him. As a result, Wharton undermines the legitimacy of the "republic of the spirit" as a counterpublic, a realm apart from elite society. We may recall Warner's argument that a counterpublic is "structured by alternative dispositions or protocols" than the prevailing social code (Warner 56). With Selden as its seemingly only occupant, Wharton indicates this description cannot be applied to the "republic of the spirit".

Instead, it appears the “dispositions” and “protocols” that currently govern Lily’s life also await her within the republic. That is, the republic is no different from leisure-class society, just as Selden is no different than its members.

This conclusion is somewhat disheartening, as it is when she is with Selden that Lily comes closest to a “subjective experience” of privacy. As I discussed in the previous section of this chapter, her moments of solitude never match up with her vision of privacy as an empowering state of liberation. The same is not true of her intimate moments with Selden, which Lily regards as a chance for her to escape her current existence and establish a new one. It is disheartening then that this “subjective experience” is based on an illusion. By now, it is clear that Selden cannot offer her any alternative. The question then becomes: is there *any* alternative?

Class

Unfortunately, the only alternative that emerges is Lily’s life among the working class. Examining Wharton’s depiction of class is an intriguing venture, as her engagement with this issue is often overlooked. Her own wealth and the fact that her novels frequently revolve around affluent characters have both contributed to “the reigning view of Wharton as a writer unable to see clearly beyond the elitist ethos of her leisure-class background” (Jones 155). Renée Somers opens *Edith Wharton as Spatial Activist and Analyst* with an anecdote that demonstrates the influence of this “reigning view.” Somers recalls overhearing a woman attempt to educate her partner about Wharton’s background, informing him that Wharton was, “that rich lady who wrote about the guy that tries to kill himself on a sled,” a reference to *Ethan Frome* (Somers 1). The woman, unsurprisingly, immediately defines Wharton in relation to her wealth. While

this understanding of Wharton is not inaccurate, it is nevertheless incomplete. Wharton is, in fact, able to “see clearly beyond” her own leisure-class milieu. Her works often portray the harsh reality of poverty, and *The House of Mirth* represents arguably her most profound confrontation with this issue.¹¹

Poverty is especially prominent in the novel’s final chapters, but the threat of economic insecurity is present from the very beginning of Lily’s story. Miss Bart consistently worries about her depleted finances and how her life among the elite is therefore far from secure. Accordingly, Lily is well aware of the existence of the working class: “She had always accepted with philosophic calm the fact that such existences as hers were pedestalled on foundations of obscure humanity. The dreary limbo of dinginess lay all around and beneath that little illuminated circle in which life reached its finest efflorescence, as the mud and sleet of a winter night enclose a hot-house filled with tropical flowers” (Wharton 150). This moment is important, first of all, for its clear illustration of class oppression, expressed through the image of the leisure class being “pedestalled” on those beneath them. It is also noteworthy that the quote configures the members of each class quite differently, comparing the leisure class to “flowers” and the working class to “mud and sleet.”

These disparate images suggest that the two classes have access to different degrees of privacy. Flowers, though similar, can be distinguished; that is, one can take note of individual flowers within a larger assortment. Conversely, “mud and sleet” represent a mass in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify individual

¹¹ Along with *The House of Mirth*, Wharton’s later novel *Summer* comes to mind as an instance where she explicitly grapples with poverty.

components. In likening the members of the working class to mud and sleet, Wharton therefore characterizes them as “obscure” and anonymous in a way that leisure-class women such as Lily are not. This distinction can be understood as the result of Lily and her cohorts’ inhabiting a “little illuminated circle,” which reflects their status as objects put on display before others. The working class, by contrast, is figured outside this setting, in the “winter night.” Expressing the exclusivity of leisure-class society, this position also places members of the working class outside of the “little illuminated circle” that encloses Lily. Wharton, in this way, indicates that existing outside of the leisure class endows individuals with a greater sense of privacy, free as they are from the gaze of others.

Likewise, it appears that domestic space is more private for working-class individuals. As I described in my first chapter, Lily conceives of her gender as an obstacle that prevents her from occupying a private space such as Selden’s apartment: “What a miserable thing it is to be a woman” (7). Selden counters this claim by reminding Lily that they both know a woman who does live alone in an apartment: Gerty. Although Selden correctly points out that Lily’s argument has only limited applicability, Lily ignores this detail. She responds by saying that Gerty, “has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat” (7). Lily glosses over the fact that Gerty possesses a domestic space all her own (the very thing Lily wants), fixating instead on her inability to afford markers of prestige and wealth. These living arrangements, private though they may be, seem inconceivable for Lily herself. She closes the subject by assuring Selden, “I should hate that, you know” (7).

It therefore comes as no surprise that Lily truly does “hate” her later existence among the working class. Importantly, she appears to not even notice the potential for privacy that this environment contains. After being ostracized by Bertha and disinherited by her aunt, Lily falls out of favor with her former friends and consequently is forced into a more isolated lifestyle: “Society did not turn away from her, it simply drifted by, preoccupied and inattentive, letting her feel, to the full measure of her humbled pride, how completely she had been the creature of its favour” (262). Existing outside of the “little illuminated circle” of leisure-class society, Lily is no longer subjected to such intense scrutiny from others. Indeed, the eyes that had once been trained on her now pass her over, “inattentive.” Lily, however, experiences this development not as a gain in privacy, but rather as a deprivation of attention. The phrase “had been” indicates she understands the change in her circumstances in terms of loss; that is, she is focused on what she has been deprived of (attention) and not what she may have gained (privacy). Therefore, exiting the leisure class does not enable her to attain a state of liberation. The image of society moving “by” Lily implies that she herself is stationary, being left behind. Just as she once was confined within the “great gilt cage,” she now appears similarly trapped in her new existence.

Wharton thus reveals that the anonymity of the working class does not translate into an empowering experience of privacy for Lily. Instead, anonymity becomes synonymous with obscurity. Climbing the stairs to Gerty’s apartment one day, Lily takes note of their “steepness and narrowness...Dull stairs destined to be mounted by dull people: how many thousands of insignificant figures were going up and down such stairs all over the world at that very moment” (263). Whereas Lily earlier considered herself

above such an existence as Gerty's, she is now quite literally beneath it. The life she once denounced as distasteful appears out of her reach; the "steepness" of the stairs signifies the difficulty Lily faces in trying to rise to the same status as Gerty. Critically, in attempting to ascend, Lily becomes indistinguishable from the "thousands of insignificant figures" who are likewise trying to remain afloat in society. Upon finally reaching the top of the stairs, Lily voices a similar sentiment to Gerty. Articulating the challenges she has faced in trying to support herself, Lily declares, "And there are thousands and thousands of women trying to do the same thing already" (267).¹² No longer a distinctive flower, Lily has become part of the "mud and sleet" of the working class; she has become a figure who is indistinguishable from the mass of people in the exact same situation as her. Given the constant admiration to which she is accustomed, it makes sense that Lily would be troubled by such a feeling of obscurity. What could be privacy becomes invisibility.

Tied to this sense of insignificance is a feeling of isolation. As I discussed in the first section of this chapter, there are several moments earlier in the novel where Lily feels alienated from others. After she enters the working class, these moments become more frequent until they seem to define Lily's entire life. One day, for example, she enters a restaurant, "full of women and girls, all too much engaged in the rapid absorption of tea and pie to remark her entrance. A hum of shrill voices reverberated against the low ceiling, leaving Lily shut out in a little circle of silence. She felt a sudden pang of profound loneliness" (302). Having once resided within a "little illuminated circle," Lily is here "in a little circle of silence." She is now the one observing others, no longer

¹² Lily is unconsciously referring to the fact that her descent into the working class is but one instance of a societal trend. As Nancy Von Rosk puts it, "Lily Bart eventually becomes part of a larger historical phenomenon: 'women adrift' in turn-of-the-century American cities" (Von Rosk 327).

attracting attention herself; the other customers are too preoccupied to even “remark her entrance.” Lily has, in other words, been “shut out” in the “winter night” of obscurity. Crucially, being so invisible induces in Lily a “pang of profound loneliness.” Without the audience that once followed her everywhere, Lily finds herself profoundly alone.

Wharton, in this way, constructs a similar situation to Lily’s earlier moments of solitude. Although there is potential for a private existence, Lily’s “subjective experience” is clearly not one of privacy. Unlike the protective insulation she feels when she is with Selden, Lily’s working-class life is marked by obscurity and loneliness. That is, except for one scene. In the midst of Lily’s utterly bleak existence, Wharton unexpectedly offers the most positive and encouraging depiction of privacy found anywhere in the novel. Sitting in a park one evening, Lily is greeted by a woman named Nettie Struther. A few years prior, Nettie had been seriously ill and, in her moment of greatest need, was aided by Miss Bart. Seeing that Lily is now unwell, Nettie decides to return the favor, inviting her into her home. It is important, in this context, to recall Lily’s criticisms of Gerty’s apartment, as one could reasonably expect Nettie’s working-class home to produce a similar reaction. In particular, Lily often pinpoints the size of Gerty’s flat as the source of her disapproval, repeatedly calling it “cramped” (25).

It is therefore striking that Nettie’s kitchen “revealed itself to Lily as extraordinarily small and almost miraculously clean” (313). The phrases “miraculously clean” and “extraordinarily small” are syntactically balanced; they are each composed of a five-letter word that is modified by a longer adverb. This construction makes it appear as if the room’s limited space is offset by its cleanliness. If anything, it seems that the latter attribute outweighs the former; the word “almost” gives the phrase “almost

miraculously clean” a larger syntactic presence, indicating it attracts more of Lily’s attention. Lily thus appears to be capable of seeing beyond the room’s small size, taking note of its more positive features as well. It is also worth noticing that the word “small” by itself has a neutral connotation. That is, the use of the word here does not create the same sense of scorn generated by Lily’s earlier description of Gerty’s apartment as “a horrid little place.”

Even more so than its cleanliness, Nettie’s home is defined by its intimate atmosphere. After the two women make their way into the kitchen, Nettie says, “We ’ve got a parlour too...but I guess it ’s warmer in here, and I don’t want to leave you alone while I’m getting baby’s supper.” Lily promptly affirms that, “she much preferred the friendly proximity of the kitchen fire” over the parlor (314). A parlor is similar to a drawing-room, as it is used for receiving and entertaining guests. I examined in my first chapter how Wharton portrays such spaces as sacrificing privacy to their social functions. It is significant then that Nettie chooses to not make use of the parlor, opting instead for the warmth of the kitchen. Instead of treating Lily as a guest whom she needs to charm and impress, Nettie ushers her into the inner sanctum of her family life, conversing with her while simultaneously preparing her baby’s supper. The kitchen emerges as a correspondingly intimate space, conveyed by both Nettie’s reluctance to “leave [Lily] alone” and Miss Bart’s own appreciation of “the friendly proximity of the kitchen fire.”

From this perspective, the intimacy of Nettie’s working-class home is quite distinct from the compromised privacy that exists within leisure-class houses. Indeed, domestic space appears to function in fundamentally different ways in these two milieus, upholding different constructions of gender in the process. The leisure-class home

supports differential conceptions of male and female subjectivity, offering men a private room in which to cultivate their inner life while maintaining social spaces where women adopt their persona as artwork. Working-class domestic space, it should first be said, is not free of gender inequality. Nevertheless, the gender binary appears less rigid here than it is among the leisure class. Lily admires how Nettie “had found strength to gather up the fragments of her life, and build herself a shelter...it had the frail audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built on the edge of a cliff.” Importantly, Lily recognizes that, “it had taken two to build the nest; the man’s faith as well as the woman’s courage” (319-320). Wharton indicates a mutual dependence between Nettie and her husband, as “it had taken” them both to establish a sense of security in their precarious existence. Additionally, the image of the “bird’s nest” classifies their home as far removed from the configuration of the leisure-class house as the man’s kingdom. Rather than a site of power and subordination, Wharton presents Nettie and her husband’s home as a nurturing and safe environment. This characterization of their domestic space reflects Gavin Jones’s assertion that poverty creates a kind of “communal” existence, “an adaptive structure of *shared* rituals and values based on ideals of hope and faith” (Jones 169; emphasis mine).

Both Jones and Wharton illuminate how the difficulties of poverty require men and women to work together, in contrast to the sharp division that separates them in the leisure class. In effect, both point toward the fact that working-class society operates differently than its leisure-class counterpart, especially in relation to gender. In the introduction to this project, I briefly outlined the theory of separate spheres, the notion that men reside in the public realm while women preside over the domestic sphere. This

framework is now regarded as an oversimplification of reality, but it is especially inadequate in the context of the working class. According to Monika Elbert, there was really never a “separate sphere demarcation for those below the middle class.” Elbert underscores how “for working women the public space was always accessible”; consequently, these individuals “have more access to the public affairs of men than ‘privileged women’” (Elbert 6-7). Jones builds on this idea by articulating how the need for women to be employed in a working-class environment leads to an unavoidable flouting of “patriarchal beliefs,” which argue that “women were not *meant* to be independent, nor to inhabit the world of work” (Jones 158).

Critically, Wharton suggests that this loosening of gender roles allows a truer sense of intimacy to develop. Nettie tells Lily that she was initially unsure if she should marry her husband: “I knew he knew about me. But after a while I began to see that that made it easier...George cared for me enough to have me as I was” (Wharton 315). Nettie has achieved that which Lily so desperately wanted but never attained with Selden: someone to see her as she is. As we saw in the previous section, Selden is unable to perceive the “real” Lily because he looks at her through the prism of leisure-class femininity, distorting his view. With its less pronounced gender binary, the working class seems to not have such an entrenched model of femininity. As a result, Nettie’s husband does not see her in relation to an ideal of womanhood; he just sees her.

In this light, Nettie’s working-class home almost appears to exist in a world apart from the rest of the novel; Lily never encounters another space marked by its degree of intimacy and its relaxed gender norms. Within this unique setting, Lily stumbles across the protective intimacy she once envisioned. Nettie first invites Lily back to her house by

asking, “Why won’t you get right into the cars and come home with me while I get baby’s supper? It ’s real warm in our kitchen, and you can rest there, and I’ll take *you* home as soon as ever she drops off to sleep” (313). Nettie characterizes the warmth of the kitchen as meeting a need shared by both Lily and her baby, the need for “rest” or “sleep.” Later, as the two women sit in the kitchen, Nettie asks, “You ’re sure you won’t let me warm up a drop of coffee for you, Miss Bart? There ’s some of baby’s fresh milk left over” (314). Nettie here takes on a maternal role to Lily, offering her the same milk that nourishes her child. Wharton thereby presents Nettie as caring and nurturing, a strong contrast to the selfish and callous members of leisure-class society who left Lily to suffer her fate alone. Even more importantly, it appears that Lily has finally found “enfolding arms” to embrace her. Just as she physically cradles her baby in her arms, Nettie protects Lily and offers her an escape from her isolation and loneliness.

This escape, however, can only be temporary. Although Lily is pleasantly surprised to find that her spirits have been raised by her visit with Nettie and departs with a feeling of “human fellowship,” she returns to her boarding-house only to be greeted by the reemergence “of a deeper loneliness” (316). That very night, Lily overdoses on her sleeping medicine and dies. Wharton seems to indicate, in this way, that Lily cannot become Nettie; she cannot “gather up the fragments of her life.” It is, in effect, too late for her. In reality, it was *always* too late, something Lily herself seems to know. As she lays in bed one night, Lily reflects on how:

Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight;

to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the hummingbird's breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? (301)

A particularly striking example of Wharton's use of naturalism, Lily is figured here as an "organism" powerless to overcome her "training." Her upbringing has sculpted her into a "highly specialized product" that is unfit for any existence other than a "purely decorative" one. Lily was quite simply never prepared for a life such as Nettie's and, as a result, finds herself "helpless," having never been given the blueprints that would enable her to assemble "the fragments of her life" into a "bird's nest."

This moment points toward what is, to my mind, the central tragedy of the novel: Lily has available to her only one existence and it is one that can never fulfill her. The privacy and intimacy she desires cannot be found within the "narrow range" of the leisure class. Her "subjective experience" of privacy matches up with her vision of it only when she is already "on the edge of a cliff." The social order has pushed her to this ledge and offered her no way back. So too does Wharton leave her here, to fall. That is, Wharton refuses to provide Lily with the rescue that society will not afford her and, by the same stroke, denies *us* any unrealistic hope. She leaves both *us* and Lily only with a wish that things could be different, forcing *us* to imagine the solution that she cannot provide. She charges *us* with the task of envisioning an entirely different social order, one that could have saved Lily, where she could have escaped poverty without having to yield control of her private life to a husband. In the end, Wharton leaves it to *us* to consider what exactly it would take for Lily to have a private life of her own.

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