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Claiming Agency: Edith Wharton's Public and Private Spaces in "The House of Mirth"

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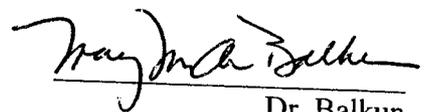
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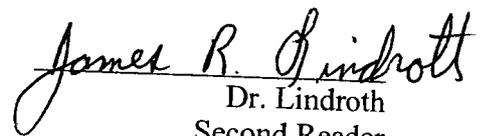
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Claiming Agency:
Edith Wharton's Public and Private Spaces in *The House of Mirth*

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Abstract

Late nineteenth-early twentieth century America ushered in changes in technology, transportation and economics that began to have profound affects on the way people were expected to live from day to day. Women experiencing these changes were caught between alternate modes of life and crumbling hierarchies of power, which produced both positive and negative results. In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart becomes a victim of two modes of living and consequently embodies both the positive and negative results. Her character marks the beginning of the end for the aristocratic women of Old New York, their replacement by the nouveau riche, as well as the emergence of the middle class and the rise of the "New Woman." The first way of life she was raised to pursue forces her to be a publicized object of Old New York while another prompts her towards individualism, ownership, and morality. These contrary ways of living form an irreconcilable rift in Lily's fictional life; another way to observe the clash is by observing the different scenes where Lily inhabits private, semi-private and public spaces. Her actions, which lead to the scene of her death, reveal a conscious choosing of the moral aspect of her character thus rejecting the childlike permanence that characterized the women of her time. In embracing this self, she transcends space and is able to see the value of true love and community. In Lily's case, the only way she can continue to inhabit private space is as a beautiful corpse; albeit, this is not the beauty of an object, but the beauty of an "true" woman.

“The heart of wise is in the house of the mourning,
But the heart of the fools is in the house of mirth”

- ECCLESIASTES 7:4

Some women marry houses.
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman *is* her mother.
That's the main thing.

- ANNE SEXTON, "HOUSEWIFE"

“The years that are gone seem like dreams – if one might go on sleeping and
dreaming – but to wake up and find – oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake
up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's
life”

- KATE CHOPIN, *THE AWAKENING*

Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* begins with Lily Bart's sudden appearance in the public atmosphere of Grand Central Station. The novel's chief voyeur, Lawrence Selden, is "refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart" (*The House* 17). Once he is sufficiently pleased with his musings, Selden approaches Miss Bart and the two characters decide to refresh themselves with some tea. Their stroll, however, leads them to Selden's apartment instead of a restaurant. Though Lily realizes the danger in being caught along with Selden, she declares: "'Why not? It's too tempting – I'll take the risk'" (*The House* 23). The innocent intentions of their interaction allow both parties to enjoy the short time they spend together; but the "luxury of impulse" costs her more than she can afford when Simon Rosedale spots her in front of the building – a building which he owns, no less (*The House* 34). Rosedale's presence is scathing to her on two levels: he could now endanger her reputation and he is physically and socially revolting to her. After offering transparent excuses for her presence in *The Benedick*, Lily denies his offer to take her back to Grand Central and flees in a hansom of her own. Once alone in the carriage, Lily considers the social faux pas she just committed: "In the hansom she leaned back with a sigh. Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine?" (*The House* 33). The weight of such an implication would brand her as a "dangerous woman" if Rosedale chooses to circulate the story, which she is certain he will since she has rejected his romantic pursuit of her. However, Lily puts these cheerless thoughts behind her and assures herself that all will be well once she reaches Belmont where she could "get away from herself, and conversation was the only means of escape that she knew" (*The House* 36).

These initial glimpses of Wharton's heroine, Lily Bart, in three different kinds of space – public, semi-private, and private – set the tone for the rest of the novel. Lily will continually succeed in public, take risks in semi-private spaces, and despair in private. She flourishes in

public space because of her expert skills at being an observer and being observed; her goals and her livelihood depend upon her performances. Her beauty and stature project the image of a mythical being right from the outset. Selden remarks, "The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was" (*The House* 20).

However, when she is in a semi-private atmosphere, she commonly mistakes it for a private one. Thus, the risks she takes make her even more vulnerable and end up directly contributing to her downfall. For instance, when she follows Selden into his apartment, she misjudges it as private space; as a result, the risk does not seem as great. Yet Wharton reminds the reader and Lily that it is not private by having her encounter the char-woman and Rosedale on her way out. The depression that accompanies her retreat into the carriage, a private space, arises from self-assessment. As Lily's social and personal affairs become increasingly distressing, and she avoids private space at all costs.

Though this example demonstrates rigid distinctions between kinds of space, it is also important to note that the physical space one inhabits can be just as plastic as man himself is. The very fact that a single space can be so flexible produces complex responses and interactions. Just like the scene in Selden's apartment, one's parlor can be used to entertain guests one day while on another day the curtains will be drawn, the room emptied, and it will be transformed into a private, relaxing haven. The presence or absence of the public in a given space at a given time, as well as the intended use of the space, can determine its nature as either public, semi-private or private. One's movement in and out of these different spaces throughout the course of a lifetime also contribute to one's identity, lack of identity, or fragmented identity. This certainly becomes true for the characters in *The House of Mirth*, especially Lily Bart.

The relationship between the self and its surroundings has been an interesting focus of study for many years and Wharton's novel proves to be fertile ground for such research. Ulfried Reichardt essay "Interior and Exterior Spaces: Versions of the Self in the American Novel Around 1900" uses Wharton's novel and Henry James's novel *The Ambassadors* to provide a basis for a discussion of the dichotomy of self and space in the early twentieth century. Reichardt considers ways in which people (including fictional characters) function in both private spaces and modern, urban social settings. He describes it as, "a folding-out of consciousness into the external world, which simultaneously renders the outer world significant mainly in regard to its effect on the self, to what the self makes of it and how it can situate itself within the external world" (342). Though the self is still the center, the public (and even the presence of the public) becomes increasingly significant in relation to that self.

In her essay "Spectacular Homes and Pastoral Theatres: Gender, Urbanity and Domesticity in *The House of Mirth*," Nancy Von Rosk addresses issues similar to Reichardt's premise. She provides enlightening background on the way urban space transformed the roles and functions of American women as they expanded out of the home into the marketplace, which produced anxieties and tensions in such a patriarchal culture. These changes, though seemingly positive and proactive for women, actually served to objectify them further: "Interestingly, then, as woman becomes increasingly more mobile and independent, more visible in the public realm, she is also increasingly objectified, her role an abstraction as she becomes either a commodity or a representation of cultural ideas" (Von Rosk 328). Von Rosk also takes a detailed look at the way Lily responds to various public and private backdrops and the way they are decorated, which in turn reveals key insights about her character in relation to the time period. Von Rosk holds that Lily's repeated attempts at intimacy are always problematized by the exaggerated

extent to which she is a spectacle. Von Rosk arrives at the conclusion that, because Lily is neither “here nor there,” she becomes the sacrificial lamb to the societal tensions between mounting female agency and autonomy and the deterioration of the leisure-class. Von Rosk remarks, “Lily Bart embodies the ambiguous and uncertain role of a woman in the new urban landscape in an especially dramatic way” (323). These ambiguities and uncertainties are also embodied by other characters such as Norma Hatch, Gerty Farish, and Nettie Struther.

In a much more extensive fashion, Judith Fryer’s book *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* examines the way fictional characters in the works of Wharton and Cather react to the public and private environments that surround them, particularly when contained. She notes, “The structures that contain – or fail to contain – women are the houses in which they live, the material things of their lives, and the illustrations and stories that instruct them in ways of perceiving themselves and relating to others” (Fryer 64-5). In her study of *The House of Mirth*, Fryer is concerned with looking at how many scenes are doubled throughout the novel, in particular the appearance of Lily as a tableau vivant, the sequential tea scenes between Lily and other characters, and many “mirror” scenes involving Lily and her changing view of herself. Issues of space come into play when Fryer closely cross examines the interiors of Mrs. Peniston’s house, the Gormer’s and the Trenor’s homes, Gerty’s flat, Selden’s flat, and Mrs. Hatch’s apartment with Lily’s state of being within them. All of these examinations reveal the ways in which Lily exploits the space around her to her own advantageous (as well as tragic) ends, and the different ways she inhabits or is unable to inhabit these different spaces. Although Fryer does not concentrate on urban settings as Von Rosk and Reichardt do, she does establish firm connections between Wharton’s affinity to European art and classical art and the deliberate use of characters, settings and decor in her novels.

Accordingly, Wharton's childhood as well as her nonfiction works like *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* and *The Decoration of Houses* frequently make an appearance in *Felicitious Space*.

Edith Wharton's co-authored work *The Decoration of Houses* can serve as a guidebook for the way architecture and decoration create a household atmosphere destined for both private and semi-private settings. Curiously, many of her characters in *The House of Mirth* violate her "guidebook," such as Norma Hatch and Mrs. Peniston. This discord immediately signals the shifting attitudes and lifestyles by which characters like Lily Bart, Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther are victimized, paralyzed, or subdued. Characters such as these women – especially Lily – find it difficult or impossible to flourish. Wharton also displays a heightened awareness of how one's aesthetic reaction to furniture, decoration and light affects one's interactions with the space and with others, which generates a likeness between Wharton and her construct, Lily Bart. In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton demands that people recognize the supple nature of households; she communicates this through her recommendations to place staircases out of public sight, and situating private rooms on different floors and different ends of the house. In addition to this, servants and other household help should have alternate paths and routes throughout the household so as not to be seen. These various chapters culminate into a book fit to instruct the housewives of the upper-class of Old New York, a set that Wharton was born and raised among, whose homes were often subjected to the public eye.

In one way or another, all of these authors recognize that late nineteenth-early twentieth century America ushered in changes in technology, transportation and economics that began to have profound affects on the way people were expected to live from day to day. Reichardt notes, "The main factors for change were urbanization, industrialization and immigration, the rise of mass journalism as well as a strong shift to market relations and an acceleration in the

development of new technologies, especially the new media of communication and transportation” (344). Women experiencing these changes were caught between alternate modes of life and crumbling hierarchies of power, which produced both positive and negative results. My argument will seek to demonstrate that Lily Bart becomes a victim of two modes of living and consequently embodies both the positive and negative results. The first way of life forces her to be a publicized object of Old New York while another prompts her towards individualism, ownership, and morality. These contrary ways of living form an irreconcilable rift in Lily’s fictional life; another way to observe the clash is by observing the different scenes where Lily inhabits private and public spaces. Lily Bart’s character marks the beginning of the end for the aristocratic women of Old New York, their replacement by the nouveau riche, as well as the emergence of the middle class and the rise of the “New Woman.”

First, what is meant by public, semi-private, and private must be firmly established. The way Wharton’s characters experience space is to a large extent dependent on this nature of public, semi-private, or private. Some individuals are nourished by the public eye and seek it out at every turn. Frequently their needs become contingent upon their performances in these spaces. As a result, these types of people are rarely at home; home represents a confining private space that contains nothing but emptiness because their performances are of no profit there. In the fortunate event that their home is used to entertain, it is characteristically a transitory space, not to be owned, but to perform and to gratify. Private space becomes uninviting to these people because they do not find purpose or gratification in spending time with themselves; without the presence of the gaze, the image or construct they project fades away, and so it often seems as though these characters cease to exist in private space. Instead, their time is spent at functions, at work, and going from place to place. Certainly, on the other hand, there are people who are

exclusively private individuals. In this case, all forms of the public are strictly regulated and kept out of the home. Still, being social creatures, it becomes necessary that they be recognized from time to time. When these people attract the gaze, it is intentional but subtle because exposure to the public typically leaves them feeling vulnerable or inadequate. Other private individuals simply do not attract the gaze; they lead normal, simple lives that do not provoke attention. Private space in this case does not require regulation, but rather seems to create itself and become characteristic of the person inhabiting it. As a result, these homes and private areas are less rigid and confining.

As one examines Wharton's interiors and exteriors in her novel, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine whether her characters actively affect the space around them or whether space has an active affect on them. Depending on the type of individual and his or her circumstances, the private space of the home could be extremely confining and rigid, or this privacy could be very warm and cozy due to the total absence of this public presence. The potential for public intrusion marks a space as public, semi-private or private and, hence comfortable or restricting.

What further distinguishes the two categories of public and private from one another is not simply the physical status of being inside or outside; rather, it is the psychological and sociological notion of a rule-governed space. Again, the gaze becomes a crucial factor. It is because of the presence of the public that the rules of behavior that apply to a drawing room apply to a restaurant or park, whereas they would differ or potentially fade in one's bedroom or kitchen. In this way, private space only becomes possible in Wharton's (or rather, Lily's) Old New York when characters are able to escape social standards. These private spaces are often the locale of reflective practicing, romantic rendezvous, or shady dealings. Numerous

examples of private space occur in the novel and each is different; on one hand, the reader is presented with Mrs. Peniston's home, which is a cold, desolate private space. On the other hand, the reader is shown the homes of Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther, which are warm, inviting private spaces. The final private space the reader encounters is Lily's flat, which is at the same time inhabited and bare.

A public space, on the other hand, is not contained – it is typically outdoors or in an open-setting. Despite this qualification, public space is strictly rule-governed, especially for those who are members of the upper-class; these rules provide protection against the vulnerability created by crucial social interactions and chance encounters. Public spaces occur throughout the novel, and are typically outdoors. As previously mentioned, the very first (public) space the reader is introduced to is Grand Central Station; others range from the streets of New York City to the avenues of Monte Carlo.

A third kind of space is “semi-private,” arising from the need for spectacle and, at the same time, sanctuary. Defined by its exclusive nature, “semi-private” space can be neither wholly private nor wholly public; the psychological impact of being both confined and watched unconsciously reinforces social customs and conventions. The best examples of semi-private spaces occur in upper-class gatherings such as the Trenor's country estate, Bellmont, or lavish weddings like the Van Osburgh's. These spaces have been constructed for the purpose of entertaining the upper-class and even the general public via the press. Another striking example of semi-private space is the Bry's mansion, as described by Lawrence Selden: “Their recently built house, whatever it might lack as a frame for domesticity, was almost as well-designed for the display of a festal assemblage as one of those airy pleasure-halls” (*The House* 192). Semi-private spaces are often deceiving in that they may pose as private but are subject to change at

any time due to the presence of others and/or the intentions of the homeowner. The Bry's mansion shelters Lily's intimate moment with Selden in the conservatory after her tableau is unveiled, but it also acts as a facilitator for her image when the tableau is revealed in front of the men and women of her set, in addition to the society columnists. In this way, the very nature of semi-private space is to be flexible and transitory. As previously mentioned, Lily initially makes this misjudgment about Selden's apartment and continues to misapprehend semi-private spaces throughout the novel, which, much to her detriment, leads up to her public disgrace.

Since public and semi-private spaces are meant to entertain and foster relations, it is of the utmost importance that they are aesthetically appropriate. In other words, they must be "fashionable." For the purposes of this argument regarding space, "fashionable" will be defined as a comfortable, luxurious and advantageous atmosphere resulting from a particular appearance and occupancy. The necessary occupancy for a fashionable space can be broadly described as containing an affluent, socially acceptable crowd of people who collectively abide by the traditional, accepted social roles and standards of behavior belonging to Old New York upper-class society. In fact, fashionable spaces are not possible if the proper crowd is not present. Indeed, the absence of some form of the "crowd" – the public eye – hinders the potential for a space to be fashionable. Thus, fashionable spaces are only possible in public and semi-private settings. For instance, when Lily first arrives at the Belmont, she fixes upon the opulence and comfort she is surrounded in: "There were moments when such scenes delighted Lily, when they gratified her sense of beauty and her craving for the external finish of life" (*The House* 47). A fashionable appearance indoors is comfortable and gilded, reflecting both a "modern," conforming style and a meticulous eye for detail and organization; appearance must be one that facilitates a properly regulated, entertaining social interaction. When outdoors, the landscape

must be aesthetically appealing and comfortable as well, for similar purposes. Above all, this appearance must act as a constructive backdrop for characters and their motives.

Space is also governed by one more, equally important construct: the patriarchy. The hierarchy and tradition of Old New York designate that men are independent beings who govern and command the space around them, as opposed to women who are dependent upon men for even their most basic needs: shelter, food, clothing, and so forth. Even a woman who was independently wealthy through the fortunate occurrence of a legacy or inheritance was expected to marry and thereby extend her affluence to her husband. This gave men control and prerogative not only over themselves but also over women (to the extent to which late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century women chose to participate in this order. Lily does note this choice over tea in Selden's apartment when she contrasts the lifestyle of a marriagable girl to that of Gerty Farish). As a result, money becomes the force that stimulates the plot and guides the intentions and motivations of Wharton's characters, especially women. Judith Fryer reinforces the fact that, "In the world in which Lily moves, space is money" (91). Fryer's keen observation is supported by Lily's conversation with Selden in his apartment – the first full-length conversation of the novel. Lily begins by remarking,

"How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman." She leaned back in a luxury of discontent...

"Even women," he said, "have been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat."

"Oh, governesses – or widows. But not girls – not poor, miserable, marriageable girls!" (*The House* 22)

This conversation reveals the impossibility of a marriageable girl being independent and governing a space of her own. From the viewpoint of an upper-class member, a "free" woman

must be undesirable and resigned to living in “dingy” surroundings. Clearly this kind of “freedom” is not a viable solution for Lily. Even Selden notes, “She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (*The House* 23). Not only then is Wharton suggesting from the outset that Lily does not have the capacity to change her fate, regardless of her will to (or not to) do so but also that this problematic situation is further complicated by the fact that she is female in a male-centered society.

By the same token, the authority of currency does not end in the public; it extends into the very domestic space that women inhabit: the expensive dinners they host, the lavish parties they arrange, and the mansions in which they come to live. This engenders an irony within the novel, since the domestic realm is notoriously recognized as the female realm. Wharton demonstrates that women of the upper-class are objects and ornaments even in the home, and therefore command no space of their own within it. Women in this social order are expected to occupy themselves with domestic concerns as a distraction from other wants and desires, such as independence. Lily’s awareness of this limited agency is signaled by the fact that she does not seem to take the same interest in her surroundings as most women in this novel do. Her aunt and benefactress, Mrs. Peniston, is the first character to pick up on this disparity; when discussing the Van Osburgh wedding with her niece, the narrator notes Mrs. Peniston’s dismay that, “Lily, however, had been deplorably careless in noting the particulars of the entertainment. She has failed to observe the colour of Mrs. Van Osburgh’s gown, and could not even say whether the old Van Osburgh’s Sévres had been used at the bride’s table” (*The House* 160). Beyond noting the general qualities of the atmosphere around her, Lily’s outward observations remain inattentive. She does not gloat over the miniscule details of other character’s events and

surroundings beyond the opportunities they present her with or the way they make her feel as appropriate or inappropriate settings to her spectacle of self. Lily is unable to effectively divert herself in this way and becomes perturbed by the hypocrisy and manipulation that characters like Bertha Dorset are capable of achieving. Without a family or any hobbies of her own, she is left to fantasize about refurbishing her aunt's drawing room or using Percy Gryce's affluence to decorate herself and her surroundings to her liking; but both of these endeavors require money she does not have access to, and she finds herself paralyzed. Therefore,

Unable to decorate her interior space in a way that reflects her personality leaves Lily unfulfilled, feeling deprived. And it is not just notions of self-expression which Lily finds so appealing; there is something sentimental here, a warmth...In Selden's apartment, Lily can be frank, can share a cigarette, can reveal her worries...Her thoughts regarding Selden's home also emphasize its organic fluidity, it's changing with the seasons as opposed to Mrs. Peniston's home frozen in a distant time. (Von Rosk 334)

Von Rosk hints at the unfulfillment of other needs in Lily, beyond agency, which suggest an unhappiness with her current options to either marry advantageously or remain single. In addition to the agency she will gain from affluence, she seems to be seeking out her vague notion of companionship and love, too. The existence of this discontent is confirmed when Gus Trenor agrees to "surely do as much for a girl who appealed to his highest sympathies"; yet, she is appalled when she discovers that Trenor has not been investing her money, but has instead been giving her his own under the supposition that she will repay him sexually (*The House* 128).

Likewise, she is reluctant to give herself up to Rosedale later in the novel in order to recover her

status in her old set. In other words, Lily constantly finds herself torn between the “republic of the spirit” and the “house of mirth” (*The House* 105).

So, because money is the prerogative of men during the early twentieth century, women are devoid of any agency that is not *given* to them by their husbands. In “Women and Economics,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman explains, “Economic progress...is almost exclusively masculine...Speaking collectively, men produce and distribute wealth; and women receive it at their hands” (289). Although Bertha Dorset performs the role of a “free woman,” the characters in her set know that this is contingent upon her ability to hide her affairs with Lawrence Selden and Ned Silverton from her husband. This outlook is further supported by the importance of the written exchanges between Bertha and Selden that fall into Lily’s hands via *The Benedick’s* charwoman. Space, whether semi-private or domestic, can be taken away from women just as quickly as it is given. However, Lily continually disregards her awareness of this final characteristic of the space she inhabits in Old New York.

Economics aside, such constraints upon a woman by the patriarchy force her to project a particular image to society: one of beauty, chastity, innocence, obedience. Every woman – maid, married, or widowed – who makes an appearance in public must be careful to maintain this image, and such aspects of her character become both a public and a private matter. Since Lily is not married, her objectification is both a public and private matter, and as such, must be handled delicately if she wishes to attract a worthy buyer. She knows she is beautiful, charming, and cunning and that these traits can be exercised through her body to manipulate and profit. This characteristic of Lily’s condition is confirmed from the outset when she joins Selden in his apartment for tea. He observes her gliding over the floor, skimming through the books, and glancing at the bindings; Lori Merish notes, “Lily exhibits for Selden what Freud would later

describe as the ‘enigma’ of femininity: ‘woman’s’ concurrent embodiment of accessibility and inaccessibility, assent and withholding, ‘publicity’ and ‘privacy’” (242). This “enigma” creates an allure that keeps men interested in Lily, despite her advancement in age (she is now 29).

The train ride on the way to Belmont is a further example of the significance of this private/public image and the precarious footing Lily holds. She is lucky enough to encounter Percy Gryce on the same train, in the same car, and utilizes this opportunity to advance herself in his favor. Although the train is a semi-private space, Lily does her best to domesticate the space in order to appeal to Gryce and make him feel at ease; at the same time, this also allows her to project the image of a perfect hostess and wife. The narrator reports,

When the tea came he watched her in silent fascination while her hands flitted above the tray, looking miraculously fine and slender in contrast to the coarse china and lumpy bread. It seemed wonderful to him that any one should perform with such careless ease the difficult task of making tea in public on a lurching train. (*The House* 38)

Lily continues to use the personal information about Gryce that she has acquired to hold his attention and make him comfortable. This succeeds undisrupted until Bertha Dorset boards the same train car and threatens Lily’s image of purity and innocence by asking for a cigarette.

Through a majority of the novel, Lily’s success is contingent upon her performance as a spectacle in public and semi-private spaces; it is not until she sets out on her own that the ability to function in private space becomes an impending issue for her. Reichardt, too, stresses the value of external space versus the value of internal space for her. He interprets Lily’s self as a chiefly “performative” and thus she can only be authentic when actually performing, as she does for her tableau vivant (348-49). Reichardt explains, “Lily Bart in Wharton’s novel can be

regarded as the prototype of a performative self, a character who constantly redesigns her identity in view of the conventions and expectations of society to the point of extinction of an independent self" (343). Yet, her vague notion of an Other self within causes her to act inappropriately at times, attributing to what Reichardt calls the "interpenetration of interior and exterior spaces" during such a transitional period in history (350). Due to Lily's reliance on external space, her autonomy is limited and eventually diminishes.

Lily's various performances are influenced not only by other characters like Bertha Dorset but also by the presence of the gaze and the way these spaces are decorated. Amy Kaplan notes, "Lily's desire for aloofness depends upon her attachment to the setting from which she wishes to be distinguished. Throughout the novel, Lily's identity is described in relation to a background against which she can outline herself, or a mirror in which she can be viewed" (Kaplan 89). Indeed, Lily harmoniously blends in with her background (even unfashionable ones) up until the point where she is cast out of her social circle and deprived of her aunt's legacy. The settings around her exist for her gratification – to amplify herself. In doing so, Lily becomes a living tableau vivant; she is constantly "framing" herself as a spectacle to be observed.

In fact, the opening scene of the novel places Lily Bart in this exact position, reinforced by Selden's spectatorship. He watches her for a moment, thinking, "There was nothing new about Lily Bart, yet he could never see her without a faint movement of interest: it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation" (*The House* 17-18). This tableau-like scene is later doubled at Bellmont, again with Lawrence Selden: "Lily had no real intimacy with nature, but she had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background of her own sensations" (*The House* 99). Selden follows Lily out to a semi-private space – an open field – where they stand, admiringly, alone. The gratifying

backdrop of the natural world places Lily in her element and endows her with a sense of freedom. However, “This garden is not an escape from performance, but an extension of the tableau stage” (Von Rosk 343). Whereas the trend in other classical works is that the garden is the site of seduction, Selden does not act upon this opportunity. Rather, he maintains his role as a spectator and, meanwhile, allows Lily to maintain hers as the spectacle. What provides Lily this exhilarating sense of freedom is her belief at this moment that she can be both spectacle and spectator. This illusion of agency is achieved through a fashionable backdrop and the ability to speak bluntly with Selden about personal, intimate matters. The setting is semi-private, of course, because Lily is still in her role as an object to be seen by anyone who stumbles upon their scene, but Lily mistakes it for a private space just as she did in the opening scene in Selden’s apartment. The intrusion of the motor car reminds Lily of her position and prompts her to return to the Trenor’s mansion; however, their absence has been noted by Bertha Dorset, which sets off a chain reaction of events that result in Lily’s mounting misfortune.

The scene at Belmont between Lily and Selden is replicated once again at the Bry’s mansion – the “house of mirth.” At this gathering, Lily’s striking tableau is unveiled, and the reader may note how “Wharton employs portraiture as a useful metaphor for Lily’s dilemma. She examines the differences and similarities between Lily’s ‘real’ and observed self, her private and public image, and her success and failure in meeting society’s expectations of appearance and behavior” (Dwight 195). Lily chooses to pose for Joshua Reynolds’s portrait, “Mrs. Lloyd” to which the narrator comments, “She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself” (*The House* 196). This statement is, on many levels, true (and tragic) for Lily. Lily is able to continue to be “herself” because that self is constituted by spectacle, by performance. It is precisely in

“posing” as she does in this framed portrait that she succeeds in being herself. However, this comment also reinforces the notion that Lily is and will be unable to escape the “house of mirth.” Despite her vague notion of freedom and independence, this is the only version of herself she knows how to successfully be, in spite of its inauthenticity. Selden remarks, “Its expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart” (*The House* 196). The implications of this comment are troubling; the fact that he, too, identifies the “real” Lily with the spectacle means that, even if she has a romantic future with Selden, she will never be able to escape her objectification.

Notably, the narrator points out, that these tableaux “may give magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination” and “Selden’s mind was of this order” (*The House* 194). Later, in the conservatory, “Selden and Lily stood still, accepting the unreality of the scene as a part of their own dream-like sensations” (*The House* 200). The backdrop provided by the conservatory fuels these “dream-like sensations”; the classical, natural elements of Lily’s beauty that were highlighted in the natural landscape are accented here as well as in the painting (*The House* 200). This not only confirms the intention to reproduce the tableau-like quality of Lily’s self but also to reveal the performative condition of this self-as-spectacle. Selden cannot seem to distinguish between reality and fantasy, and Lily has so absorbed herself in her objectified role that she, too, mistakes it for authenticity. Although Lily is surely using her tableau vivant to attract a wealthy suitor, the fact that “for the moment...it was for him only that she cared to be beautiful” confirms Selden’s importance as a voyeur of Lily. It is only when he ceases to see her in the manner in which she is accustomed that Lily ceases to be this “version” of herself.

At this point in the novel, with the money that Trenor is providing for her and the success of her tableau vivant, Lily again experiences an illusive agency disguised as freedom: “the completeness of her triumph gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power” (*The House* 198). The sense of recovered power is also an illusion; in many ways, the tableau serves to worsen Lily’s social problems. The revealing nature of the portrait destabilizes her balance between public and private; Lily’s purity is called into question, not only by members of the press that are present but also by members of her own set. Ned Van Alstyne exclaims, “Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there isn’t a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!” (*The House* 196). Directly after the romantic liaison between Selden and Lily, Gus Trenor also accuses Lily’s tableau of being ““Damned bad taste”” out of jealousy (*The House* 201). This jealousy spirals into another chain of events that bring about her eventual expulsion from the upper-class social scene.

Lily is prompted to join the Dorsets on a trip to Monte Carlo just after she is attacked by Gus Trenor and rejected by Lawrence Selden. In spite of her successes in Europe, her experience in this public realm ultimately serves as the final blow to her reputation and the end of her public career. Not surprisingly, the previous tableau scenes are again replicated in Monte Carlo. What is preserved and reproduced is not only Selden’s spectatorship but also the background Lily sets herself against. Similar to Grand Central Station at the opening of the novel, her surroundings are not fashionable, but she benefits again from setting herself apart from them. Also, like the station in the city, she is in a public space that places her in the role of spectacle: “Miss Bart, glowing with haste of a precipitate descent upon the train, headed a group composed of the Dorset’s, young Silvertown and Lord Hubert Dacey, who had barely time to spring into the carriage, and envelop Selden in ejaculations of surprise and welcome, before the

whistle of departure sounded" (*The House* 272). In conjunction with the counterbalance of space and self, Lily's involvement with this group helps to reinforce the image she wishes to project as well. Erving Hoffman explains, "Thus, when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole" (Hoffman 35). Hoffman's point is perfectly exemplified by Wharton's heroine who, in this scene in Monte Carlo, and in public more than any other kind of space, reflects the norms and values of an eligible woman in Old New York.

Lily thrives in Europe, whereas she seems to suffocate in the city – a mish-mash of styles and tastes. The classical, antiquated backdrop highlights Lily's classic beauty. The narrator reports that, "The quality of the air, the exuberance of the flowers, the blue intensity of the sea and sky, produced the effect of a closing tableau, when all the lights are turned on a once" (*The House* 262). Europe also affords Lily a sense freedom once again. She is "free" to entertain Mr. Dorset in public and semi-private space as Bertha carries on her affair with Silverton but it is only duty disguised as autonomy. Lily has placed herself into the hands of a woman like Bertha who has also been jealous and eager to ruin Lily from the outset. This illusion of freedom and agency allows Lily to reach her maximum potential as a spectacle and accounts for her profitable encounters with the different parties she comes across – that is, until Bertha attacks the image of that autonomy by accusing Lily's behavior and intentions suspicious.

These various "tableaux" are important for two principal reasons: to confirm and emphasize Lily's primary role as a public creature and to establish the connection between space and Lily's sense of self. Lily performs this role of "spectacle" so much that she becomes unwilling to cultivate her authentic self, which in turn thwarts her goal to obtain and govern a space of her own. Amy Kaplan remarks, "the price of making Lily is both the work of women

who produce her and the cost of their spectatorship, which sustains her...When she loses the mirror, she loses a self" (Kaplan 101-02). In view of this last point, Lily avoids any kind of self-reflection and, hence any kind of private space where she must abandon her facade. This "other" self is only able to act through impulse or ethical behavior – the kind of behavior that causes Mrs. Fisher to refer to her as an "interesting study" (*The House* 270).

Such a lack of identity can, to a certain extent, be blamed on her upbringing; young Lily is given no solid foundation on which to grow. Lily's first environment is a perfect model of the one she attempts to recreate in adulthood: "Lily's childhood home is above all an arena of performance and publicity" (Von Rosk 338). The narrator describes this home as,

A house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was "company"; a door-bell perpetually ringing; a hall-table showered with square envelopes which were opened in haste...quarrels in the pantry, the kitchen and the drawing-room; precipitate trips to Europe, and returns with gorged trunks and days of interminable unpacking...such was the setting of Lily Bart's first memories. (*The House* 52)

Her mother's constant entertaining and spending directly contributes to the fall of both of her parents: "In this desultory yet agitated fashion life went on through Lily's teens: a zig-zag broken course down which the family craft glided on a rapid current of amusement, tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need – the need for more money" (*The House* 53). Her mother's determination to avoid living "like a pig" was taken to the extreme, and her husband was transformed into a veritable work-horse (*The House* 54). More importantly, her mother's continual projection of wealth is perfectly juxtaposed with the emptiness of the home within. When the crowd files out, all that is left is shallowness, vanity, and a loveless marriage. When Lily expects fresh flowers at her dinner table everyday, her mother and father scoff at the idea of

affording such luxuries for nothing other than personal, aesthetic appeal. Lily explains to Gerty, ““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”” (*The House* 320). Because of this shallow beginning, Lily’s expectations for her own life are automatically devoid of depth. John Clubbe explains, “without having had loving parents or a literal home, much less a figural one of ‘passions and loyalties,’ Lily Bart grows up a stunted being, emotionally arrested, imperceptive of others as well as of the meaning of place, and incapable of valuing interiors except as stages for her ego” (551). Likewise, because no stable, sustaining identity is provided by her mother or father, Lily lacks a stable identity in turn. There is even little mention of the past or any affectionate familial bonds. Her mother denies help from most of the “dingy” family members while the rest seem to despise her mother’s temperament; due to this, Lily is practically made into an orphan when they die.

Lily’s move from her parents’ home to Mrs. Peniston’s home only serves to exacerbate her problems. Her rootless nature is intensified rather than taking root in a new setting. The lack of identity is then fostered, as is her aversion to privacy. With no personal life to reflect upon and no family to rejoice with, private space takes on a negative connotation for Lily. The narrator reveals that,

To a torn heart uncomforted by human nearness a room may open almost human arms, and the being to whom no four walls mean more than any others, is, at such hours, expatriate everywhere. Lily had no heart to lean on. Her relation with her aunt was a superficial as that of chance lodgers who pass on the stairs. (*The House* 215)

Most of her time is purposely spent elsewhere with her set in semi-private or public spaces. Even the terms of Lily’s residence at her aunt’s home are based in public relations and spectacle. Mrs. Peniston’s “philanthropic” decision to take in the orphaned Lily is exposed as self-serving:

She had taken the girl simply because no one else would have her, and because she had the kind of moral *mauvaise honte* which makes the public display of selfishness difficult, though it does not interfere with its private indulgence. It would have been impossible for Mrs. Peniston to be heroic on a desert island, but with the eyes of her little world upon her she took a certain pleasure in her act. (*The House* 31)

As a widow, Mrs. Peniston's image would not be a leading concern to the public; she is thereby allowed more freedom in her actions. However, she remains conscious of the public gaze.

Because Mrs. Peniston does not have much of a social life, and her exclusively private home is purposely removed from the public, this great act of "generosity" functions as spectacle for the wealthy widow.

Lily's thoughts and behaviors in the confinement of her bedroom at Mrs. Peniston's house reinforce her otherness and homelessness. This private space is named as her own but only seemingly belongs to Lily. The decoration and furniture are essentially Mrs. Peniston's cast-off objects with the exception of a few small items that Lily has purchased. Again, Mrs. Peniston's influence invades a space that should be inhabited by Lily. Though it is "large and comfortably furnished," it does not compare to the guest room in the Trenor's mansion, which stimulates her inflated sense of self. Judith Fryer indicates that,

Lily's homelessness, then, deprives her of something fundamentally human; finally she is even poorer than a working-class woman like Nettie Struther, who has been able to gather together the fragments of her broken life and build herself a shelter...It is because of this lack of shelter, which Lily senses that none of the men in the novel can provide for her, and which she cannot provide for herself out of her own

experience, that houses for her are only settings, rooms only scenes in which to posture and pose. (88)

Lily's days and nights are literally spent in her aunt's home rather than lived and enjoyed as she perceives them to be with the Trenor's (*The House* 162). Unlike most houses where "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" Lily can only experience this vicariously, in semi-private spaces (Bachelard 6). The narrator reveals, "Once more the haunting sense of physical ugliness was intensified by her mental depression, so that each piece of the offending furniture seemed to thrust forth its most aggressive angle" (*The House* 163). The ambiance of alienation and the unattractive appearance of what should be a personal (as well as private) space sends Lily in to a downward spiral of despair rather than soothing her anxiety. The rootlessness of her home life and the purposelessness of her existence cannot be hidden in this space as they are hidden behind the gilding of a more luxurious room, and therefore act as catalysts for her dejected state of being. In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton and Codgen warn,

...it must never be forgotten that every one is unconsciously tyrannized over by the wants of others, – the wants of dead and gone predecessors, who have an inconvenient way of thrusting their different habits and tastes across the current of later existences. The unsatisfactory relations of some people with their rooms are often to be explained in this way. (*The Decoration* 18)

Lily's attitude towards her aunt's decor and demeanor, coupled with her lack of autonomy in inhabiting these interiors, translates into the obvious lack of affection between the two characters and Lily's own sense of powerlessness.

Her discomfort with private space in her aunt's house does not end with the bedroom. The entire home at once demands that Lily be invisible and ornamental. As previously suggested, this is not a private space in the sense that one's home is one's domain, but rather in that Mrs. Peniston takes great pains to rigidly separate and conceal the interior of her home from exterior, public world. This only contributes to Lily's sense that she is confined in living here. The immaculate cleanliness of the entire house is like a pervading emptiness to her. Several times in the novel, Lily comments on the dullness of the house's interiors – a dullness and heaviness she is unable to relate to and unable to continue to exist in; it is almost as though Mrs. Peniston is the house. On her return from the Trenor's estate, the narrator observes, "The house, in its state of unnatural immaculateness and order, was as dreary as a tomb...she felt as though she were buried alive in the stifling limits of Mrs. Peniston's existence" (*The House* 149). From this point of view, it would seem as though Lily's mental and physical deterioration begin much earlier in the novel than when she is living in a boarding-house without rest or nourishment.

Wharton uses a variety of milieus beyond Mrs. Peniston's household to make her point concerning Lily's relationship to space; often these spaces occur in the succession of public, semi-private and private, just as the very first scene in the novel does. Martha Banta discerns that, "Through Wharton's use of similar narrative strategies, *The House of Mirth* contains the mélange of physical settings available in the early years of the twentieth century that play a significant role in the descent into social hell experienced by Lily Bart" (60). In observing these successive scenes, the previous patterns are confirmed by Lily's experience in these various realms will be both corroborated and altered. The first succession of scenes occurs in Book two, during Lily's stay in Europe with the Dorset's. During this time, it is understood that Lily's task is to entertain George Dorset while Bertha carries on an affair with Ned Silverton. When Lily's

attentions work to settle affairs between George and Bertha, Bertha publicly dismisses Lily from her yacht. The accusation occurs after a dinner with the Bry's – what would have been a semi-private space. However, the fact that the press is present during the fiasco makes this space and the event a public one: “Selden, in the general turmoil of his sensations, was mainly conscious of a longing to grip Dabham by the collar and fling him out into the street” (*The House* 309).

Bertha's choice of a public venue had been a wise one; with a member of the press present, no one would make a scene, and no one does. The implications of Bertha's dismissal of Lily – namely, that Lily was attempting to secure George Dorset's affections with the intent to marry him – destroys Lily's reputation in New York. In accordance with the nature of the public space around her, Lily remains poised with a “faint disdain of her smile” as Lawrence Selden attempts to save what is left of Lily's public image by sending her to her unwelcoming cousins, the Stepney's (*The House* 309). He is the only person who is willing to help Lily once Bertha has cast her out of her crowd.

This leads rather naturally into the next scene, which confirms Lily's expulsion from the upper-class ranks of Old New York: her aunt's death. This scene is of a semi-private nature in her aunt's mansion; only relatives are present for the reading of the will. When Lily discovers that she has been disinherited in favor of Grace Stepney, she “stood apart from the general movement, feeling herself 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. And under her sense of the collective indifference came the acuter pang of hopes deceived” (*The House* 316).

Although Gerty is present to comfort Lily and her other family members are present, Lily's dominant feeling is solitude. Without money, save the ten thousand dollars her aunt has left for her, she has no existence among these upper-class men and women, relatives or not. With no

money, no husband or relatives willing to support her, and an enemy such as Bertha Dorset, Lily experiences social death in public and semi-private spaces. Here, too, the reader notices that Lily maintains a chilling self-possession in response to the semi-private space she is in. Gerty must entreat her several times to react authentically before Lily gives her the response she is looking for.

Once the two girls return to Gerty's flat, a private space, they discuss Lily's options. Gerty implores Lily to "tell the truth about her story" to which Lily replies, "'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'" (*The House* 319). While it was much easier for Lily to maintain a positive, composed attitude in front of the press in Monte Carlo and in front of her relatives at her aunt's house, she begins to lose hope and control in private space in comparison to Gerty's "quiet reasonableness" (*The House* 320). Gerty's situation as a "free" woman grows increasingly comparable to Lily's own state of affairs, and as Selden confirmed in the first chapter of the novel, these are not feasible circumstances for Lily.

Lily's only hope is to scour the outskirts of upper-class society – the nouveau riche – in hopes of finding a way back "inside." The next succession of scenes also occurs in Book two, shortly after Lily's attempts to befriend the Gormer's and Mrs. Hatch have failed. With virtually no existence in public space, Lily begins to wither away; she becomes less capable of performing or functioning the way she is expected to. Public space begins to have a new, debilitating effect on Lily compared to the previous scenes that took place in public. In accordance with Selden's supposition about Lily's character, Gerty Farish's attempt to secure Lily a job as a milliner does not appear promising when Lily's work proves to be sub-standard. She is sent home with a

headache, and wanders the streets of New York unrecognized. The absence of the public eye begins to starve Lily, and these public places serve her no better than her aunt's dreary mansion. Contemplating whether she should visit Gerty Farish or not, Lily notes, "Something of her mother's fierce shrinking from observation and sympathy was beginning to develop in her, and the promiscuity of small quarters and close intimacy seemed, on the whole, less endurable than the solitude of a hall bedroom in a house where she could come and go unremarked among other workers" (*The House* 404). Remarkably, Lily begins to crave a certain measure of privacy now that her social standing is no longer an issue. Public space only seems to aggravate her senses rather than serve to gratify them. Thus, her affiliation with the public space around her as a backdrop has remained the same, but the produced effect is quite different; public space has become unbearable to her now that she has become destitute. The thought of being noticed by others makes her ashamed and self-conscious, but for the most part she is aware that the gaze is no longer strongly upon her. This is the first instance where Lily's previous sense of self – the spectacle – starts to weaken and fade.

However, the public space of the street and the drugstore very quickly changes to the semi-private space of a restaurant when Lily runs into Simon Rosedale. Despite her increasing need for assistance, as the novel progresses, the reader sees Lily grow increasingly resistant to male "deliverance" and nowhere is this progression as obvious as in her encounters with Simon Rosedale. After many attempts to take advantage of Lily's declining social situation, Rosedale surprises her outside of the boarding-house on two occasions. On this first occasion, he succeeds in moving Lily from the distressing street to *The Longworth* for tea. Lily, however, makes a conscious choice to go with him since the public space around her seems to constrain her rather than uphold her, as the narrator explains, "A cup of tea in quiet, somewhere out of the

noise and ugliness, seemed for the moment the one solace she could bear” (*The House* 407).

Once she enters this semi-private domain with Rosedale, she shares her story with him; meanwhile, the semi-private atmosphere protects her from his intentions. This exchange seems to strengthen Lily and she is touched by his attempts to “rescue” her, regardless of her hapless situation. Interestingly, semi-private space seems to maintain its function; Lily is once again transformed into a spectacle, even if it is an unfortunate one.

Nevertheless, when Lily returns to her flat, her psychological state plunges as it has throughout the novel in private spaces. Privacy leaves Lily alone with her thoughts of impending doom: “she discovered an increasing sense of loneliness – a dread of returning to the solitude of her room, while she could be anywhere else, or in any company but her own” (*The House* 413). Lily as a public creature dies a slow and painful death, and she seeks out company regardless of her circumstances; but the reality of her situation is that she has few friends to whom she may turn. As she turns down Rosedale’s offer to lend her money in exchange for “favors,” she contemplates the consequences of denying him: “Her danger lay, as she knew, in her old incurable dread of discomfort and poverty; in the fear of that mounting tide of dinginess against which her mother had so passionately warned her” (*The House* 416). Lily’s situation becomes increasingly apparent: she must choose between the spectacle and the opportunity to build her authentic self. This conflict sets her thoughts against herself, and they attack her like “pursing furies” in “the shape of Bertha Dorset” (*The House* 416). This inability to handle herself in private space drives Lily to a drug-induced sleep: “Through the long hours of silence the dark spirit of fatigue and loneliness crouched upon her breast, leaving her so drained of bodily strength that her morning thoughts swam in a haze of weakness. The only hope of renewal lay in the little bottle at her bed-side” (*The House* 417).

Although she is now no different than the average working-class girl, Lily finds it difficult to leave her role as a spectacle behind. The reader notes her continual preoccupation with her appearance and the space around her. When Lily first procures herself a flat and lives the meagerest of lifestyles, she is not yet capable of blending into her background. Lily explains to Gerty, ““Can you imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement – some hideous change that has come to you while you slept? Well, I seem to myself like that – I can’t bear to see myself in my own thoughts”” (*The House* 237). The subtle likeness to Dorian Gray confirms the fact that Lily’s beautiful spectacle is dying and will be replaced by a self that is much harsher; she has become hideous, if only a spectacle in her own mind. Even Rosedale notes the discord, though it is only one of aesthetic sensibility: “Lily sat down on one of the plush and rosewood sofas, and he deposited himself in a rocking-chair draped with a starched antimacassar which scraped unpleasantly against the pink fold of skin above his collar. ‘My goodness – you can’t go on living here!’ he exclaimed” (*The House* 419). The dingy surroundings she inhabits in the latter half of Book Two functionally displace Lily (permanently) since her idealistic integrity will not allow her to “save” herself, but “...this pining after moral significance brings with it no capacity to make choices, draw difficult distinctions, or bear hardship; it is, like much else in her nature, diffuse and indolent” (Woolf 326). The moral aspect of her character is cognizent of the fact that returning to the “house of mirth” may mean redemption but will never mean salvation.

Ultimately, Lily is forced to make a choice between returning to her old life of public display and wealth via the blackmailing of Lawrence Selden and Bertha Dorset or a new one of anonymity and labor. This opportunity to use the love letters sold to her by the char-woman creates a directly conflict with Selden’s indispensable role as her voyeur. When the reader once

again the reader observes Lily as she ventures out into public space, she no longer seems preoccupied with how she looks and “Her survey of the situation remained calm and unwavering” (*The House* 426). In Lily’s eyes, public space has no longer functions to frame her beauty and charm. This is established by the fact that she becomes drenched by the rain but decides to continue on her course to Bertha’s house until she notices *The Benedick*.

Before she even enters Selden’s apartment, the “overwhelming rush of recollection” is enough to place Lily back in her role as an object, a spectacle, similar to her previous encounter with Rosedale (*The House* 427). Semi-private space continues to maintain its function for her. Regardless of this continuity, Selden and Lily cannot ignore the changes that have taken place. The narrator reveals that, “While he spoke she had moved slowly into the middle of the room and paused near his writing-table, where the lamp, striking upward, cast exaggerated shadows on the pallour of her delicately-hollowed face” (*The House* 429). Her physical appearance alone provides a stark contrast to the first time she came to his flat; she no longer glides from one space to another, completely inhabiting the rooms. Now, she can barely inhabit her own dress. Lily slowly becomes aware of Selden’s preoccupation with her physical deterioration, and this places a heavy burden on her: “The tinge of constraint was beginning to be more distinctly perceptible under the friendly ease of his manner. Her self-absorption had not allowed her to perceive it at first; but now that her consciousness was once more putting forth its eager feelers, she saw that her presence was becoming an embarrassment to him” (*The House* 431). Selden’s inability to see Lily as he did before, as the person they both had perceived as “the real Lily Bart,” solidifies Lily’s decision to abandon her hope of regaining her stature in her old set. Now that “the veil” has been lifted from her perfect image of public and private, now that this crafted image of authenticity has been tainted, she can no longer go back (*The House* 435).

Lily ends up in Bryant Park after she leaves Lawrence Selden for what she perceives to be the last time. Nettie Struther comes along and shows Lily true deliverance – though not into any fashionable space. When Nettie finds Lily, ironically, Lily is still performing the role of a beautiful object, despite her destitute state of mind and the changes that have come about in her life. Even Nettie cannot imagine her going beyond this role. Despite the struggle and hope of this scene, Wharton intends to demonstrate how, “This hidden self generally makes her uncomfortable when she is alone, and so she avoids the solitude that would force her into dialogue with it. Although the motto on Lily’s seal reads ‘Beyond!’, as a society woman she is not equipped to go beyond the narrow limits of her sheltered existence” (Sapora 373). The privacy that she has avoided so long now seems to embody the only answer for a woman in her position: the possibility of a reflective, authentic self. Lily has slowly come to grips with the fact that she may be willing to but she is unable to fully realize this kind of life, being the public, social creature that she is.

Facing these fears alone in Bryant Park, Lily places herself on the road to progress. Nettie Struther helps her to discover that private space can be managed by a woman and that this does not always require a woman to be alone or subvert herself to a man. Nettie has risen from the ashes of her former life and rebuilt her nest with a husband who loves and respects her; still, Nettie is also a woman torn between shifting values and traditions. A family has only become possible for Nettie with the help of a man, although she was able to survive (much like Gerty) on her own. This strength, courage and love, Lily realizes, are exactly what *she* needs. The newborn that Nettie places in Lily’s arms stirs her “other” emergent self; now that she recognizes this change in herself, the former, objectified Lily continues to wither away at a faster rate. “Lily’s death, then, is the end result of a ‘wasting away’ brought on by her double vision, a

wasting away precipitated by her ability to see her social order working to produce her,” Carson observes (704). Wharton accordingly finalizes this literal and symbolic decline in the following scene in Lily’s flat.

The private space of Nettie’s flat is distinguishable from the other private spaces in the novel on at least two accounts: it is not fashionable and it is owned by a woman. The other private spaces that are overtly gilded (like the Bry’s) or attempting to be fashionable (like the Trenor’s) are doing so out of a need to project an image of wealth and power. Nettie is aware of her stature on the social scale, and accepts her place in the social hierarchy. The fact that her lifestyle affords her agency in her own home seems to furnish it with comfort and warmth, which makes up for the lack of fashionable decor; the other private spaces that Lily encounters are owned by men and are consequently given to women – *not* owned by women. Hence,

In these ‘in-between’ spaces, we find more fluidity between women’s public and private roles...in the more sentimental interiors of Gerty and Nettie, we have women who take pride and delight in their domestic space, but who do not rigidly define themselves by it nor lose themselves in it the way Mrs. Peniston does (Von Rosk 332).

Notably, however, “Wharton does not make Nettie, a very minor character, a filter-character or endow her with special sensitivity to her surroundings – which would explain her cozy kitchen and disrupt the unintentional linkage between visual sensitivity and wealth” (Jones 191).

Women like Nettie and Gerty do not have to aestheticize the space that they inhabit and own in an effort to veil the emptiness within it because it is constituted by the authentic selves they act and live out of everyday. This authenticity generates a real home rather than constructing the image of a home. The other factors limiting the potential for these spaces to be fashionable is the lack of funds and the lack of public interest in their lives.

Nettie's example is Wharton's way of suggesting that the rootless American citizen is not fully realized, not fully matured. Such a person would not become victimized by the social forces that these women face. Instead, this rooted, mature person is predicted by Nettie's infant. Nettie does not have the resources or the inclination to do this; but progress will enable her successor, her daughter, to have all of these things without necessarily sacrificing an authentic self. As a result, "*The House of Mirth* ends not only with a death, but with the vision of a new world of female solidarity, a world in which women like Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther will struggle hopefully and courageously. Lily dies – the lady dies – so that these women may live and grow" (Showalter 370). By the end of the novel, these crucial differences in private space amend Lily's point of view on the home and on relationships. The distinctions between her childhood home, her aunt's home, Selden's home, and Nettie's home constitute a community of support that she had never before encountered; unfortunately this recognition does not come with a capacity to change personally.

Beyond the issue of Lily's aptitude to change, Lily cannot "kill" her double without killing herself. Death becomes the only option, whether the reader chooses to interpret it as an intentional or accidental one. Curiously, then, the scene of her death is the only private space owned and ruled by Lily, which she was not able to do anywhere else in the novel. In fact, "Her determination to write a check against the very last of her funds to her creditor, Gus Trenor, is the responsible act of a woman who has moved beyond the orbit of the corrupt survivors in 'the house of mirth.'" (Quawas 228). In her final hours, she makes decisions, rises above the decorated illusion of her surroundings and is able to view a sense of hope for rootedness in the future. "Tomorrow would not be so difficult after all," Lily muses, "she felt sure that she would have the strength to meet it" (*The House* 453). Perhaps most important, she understands that she

is not alone. Her time spent with Nettie, Gerty, and even Selden confirm a camaraderie that subdues her sense of loneliness. This achievement is manifested in the mirage of Nettie Struther's infant cradled in her arms: "She did not know how it had come there, but she felt no great surprise at the fact, only a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure" (*The House* 453). Like the mirage, Lily's triumph is only momentary; by the time Seldon arrives, she is transformed back into her role as a spectacle, a tableau.

Lily's struggle can be confirmed, then, as the contradiction of being both a public and a private object. Her attention on the public realm robs her of the resources needed to succeed in the private realm, and consequently, deprive her of the ability to obtain all that she truly desires. Fryer makes clear that, "Wharton attempts to reconcile her two lives by tacking back and forth between the private space and the public space, lingering in the ghostly reverie of the one, participating in the 'ceremony' of the other" (35-6). Once her public life is destroyed, her public self withers away and forces her to cling onto the semblance of another "self." Lily repeatedly denies her inward self but realizes by the end of the novel that she must either reconcile the two or destroy one of them. The conflict of space is manifested as a conflict of self. The reader receives the "Lily" that is for appearance only, the artifact and glimpses of an inner "Lily" that displays courage, morality, and a willingness to mature. Maturity and independence also mean solitude, though. This concede breeds fear in Lily immediately after her sexually-charged encounter with Gus Trenor in New York: "Alone! It was the loneliness that frightened her" (*The House* 215). It is only when Lily empowers her authentic self that she can hope to begin to govern and inhabit private space.

In her final hours, she makes decisions, rises above the illusion of her surroundings, and is hopeful. Subsequently, her final moments with Selden communicate her final effort to rise

above the space around her: “It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction; which, in her, had reached out to him in every struggle against the influence of her surroundings” (*The House* 462). Her actions, which lead to the scene of her death, reveal a conscious choosing of the moral aspect of her character thus rejecting the childlike permanence that characterized the women of her time. Yet, Christopher Gair establishes, “...Lily is finally inflexible, unable to adapt herself to the fluid speculative economy that surrounds her in a turn-of-the-century America identifiable to commentators as diverse as James and Veblen by its constant ‘newness’” and she must die (Gair 291). Still, in embracing this self, she transcends space and is able to see the value of true love and community. In Lily’s case, the only way she can continue to inhabit private space is as a beautiful corpse; albeit, this is not the beauty of an object, but the beauty of an “true” woman. Maintaining his role as the novel’s chief voyeur, this is the only time that Selden is able to see “deep into the hidden things of love” and finally sees her as the “real” Lily Bart (*The House* 458).

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