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TRUTH AND EXCLUSION:
VERBAL DOMINANCE IN *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by

Teresa A. Genaro

1993

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

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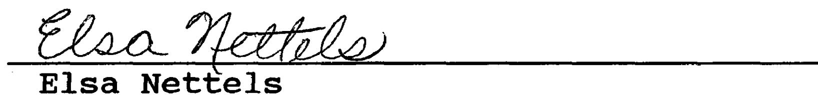

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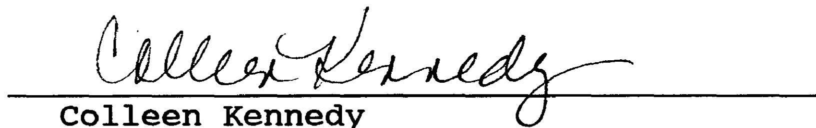

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ABSTRACT

Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth illustrates how a wealthy society victimizes and destroys those individuals who do not fit in and for whom it has no use. Lily Bart is a well-born but poor member of New York society; having been brought up in a wealthy family that is "ruined" financially, she struggles to maintain social position without the economic support necessary for such a lifestyle. As she works to find a rich husband and thus ensure for herself a place in society, she is drawn to Lawrence Selden, a man who proposes a "republic of the spirit," an alternative to the selfish and shallow existence that society offers.

Not having money or position constrains Lily because she depends on the rich not only for financial assistance, but also for her very existence in their social world. She is grateful for the gifts of gowns and other social accessories that her friend Judy Trenor bestows on her, but more important than outward trappings is the spoken and implied approbation of people like the Trenors and the Dorsets. That approbation is crucial to Lily's maintaining a position in their society. When they voice their disapproval of her, she is forced lower and lower in the social hierarchy, until no one whose company she has spent her life cultivating accepts her.

Social and financial security also grant linguistic power; money affords the rich the luxury of doing and, more importantly, saying what they please without fear of reprisal. Bertha Dorset's extramarital activities, though well-known, do not threaten her marriage or social position; mere rumors of illicit behavior are sufficient, however, to jeopardize further Lily's already tenuous position. Bertha spreads rumors and accusations about Lily, but Lily cannot defend herself. Bertha gets the benefit of the doubt because she is socially and economically secure, while Lily, who gradually becomes a social liability, is powerless to tell the truth about herself.

Michel Foucault, in "The Order of Discourse," discusses the ways in which discourse is controlled by procedures to ward off threatening forces. In The House of Mirth, the rich and socially powerful control what is said, and by doing so, determine what truth is. Bertha Dorset in particular creates a truth, and, indeed, a Lily Bart, that furthers her own social and personal agenda. Moreover, Lily's inability to defend or express herself allows Bertha the freedom to interpret Lily as she wants to; society then turns to that interpretation to draw its conclusions, seeing Lily once removed from reality, and having only Bertha's creation as a basis for judgment.

TRUTH AND EXCLUSION:

VERBAL DOMINANCE IN <u>THE HOUSE OF MIRTH</u>

That Lily Bart is a victim of her society has been well-documented; much has been written about the ways in which her society works to exclude and eventually destroy her. But while critics offer a variety of explanations for Lily's downfall,[1] none addresses how her victimization results from the way society silences and interprets her. Lily is at a financial and social disadvantage to the people in New York's social set; the rich, secure in their social position, use their power to silence, exclude, and eventually destroy her through their interpretation of her.

Lily's world is wealthy, social, turn-of-the-century New York, a world of parties, social conventions, gossip, and power. The most powerful enjoy both a "good" family background and a lot of money, though lesser degrees of power are available to those possessing only one of these attributes, evidenced by the rise of Sim Rosedale and the Gormers. While Lily is born wealthy and socially secure, her father's loss of fortune puts her future in jeopardy, and though her mother makes every attempt to secure a husband and a socially acceptable life for her daughter, Lily nevertheless reaches the age of twenty-nine still single and increasingly poor. Her power base is limited by her lack of money, though she can, still, rely on her beauty to help her achieve her goals. Beauty is a valuable commodity in her world, but Lily faces two inherent difficulties: first, her beauty will soon begin to fade;

second, as valuable as beauty may be, money and social standing wield greater power. Lily must depend on her friends for both money and party invitations; her behavior is therefore necessarily limited in order for her to continue moving in the highest social circles. Lily exists to please others in order to please herself; in order to find a rich, "acceptable" husband, she must remain in the good graces of those whose social and financial position is secure.

People like the Trenors, relying on good breeding and large bank accounts, are among the most powerful in the novel. Confident in their social position, they can say and do whatever they like without fear of reprisal; no one would dare, or could, alienate, cross, or exclude people of their standing. So long as Lily is useful to them--socially, personally--they encourage and support her quest for a husband; Lily is very much aware that a poor, single, aging, albeit beautiful, woman is hardly a social necessity, and that without the assistance of those with social power her own position is shaky at best. Practically, their gifts of dresses and other social accessories make it possible for her to continue the round of constant socializing that her husband-hunting requires.

While, then, Judy Trenor freely gossips about those within and without her set, Lily is restricted verbally. She represents a moral vision in the novel, one that is

forced upon her through economic hardship, but one which she heightens through personal integrity. While Lily can, and does, indulge in the superficial chat that often passes for conversation in her society, she is in no position to pass judgment on anyone; her own status is too uncertain. Furthermore, Lily possesses more integrity than any other character in her society. Even if she had been able to, her sense of morality would prevent her from being deceitful or cruel in order to get what she wants. Bertha Dorset, Lily's nemesis, lies whenever she needs to in order to get her own way, but Lily, often the victim of Bertha's lies, tries to rely on truth to get what she wants. At the end of the novel, Lily's integrity prevents her from blackmailing Bertha with Bertha's letters to Selden, even though she owes Bertha no allegiance. Instead of using lies as verbal power, she looks to honesty as a way to communicate her needs and therefore control her life. But her society, which places little value on truth, exploits her search for honesty; it destroys her through lies and their credibility based on who tells them.

When rumors circulate about Lily, she is unable to defend herself because she is a woman, and an insignificant one at that. She recognizes that to acknowledge the rumors would be to grant them credence, and she is thus a silent victim to what is said about her. Her silence is not perceived as dignified, as the sign of a "lady"; rather, it

implies guilt. Both of Lily's options--to speak or be silent--work against her because she is disposable. Her silence eventually destroys her because it puts her at the mercy of what other people say about her; the only Lily Bart that people see or know is the one who is talked about, the creation of gossips and scandal. Michel Foucault points out that commentary "allows us to say something other than the text itself" (58); rather than acknowledging an inherent meaning in an object (a text, a person), meaning is ascribed by an observer, a reader, a commentator. Commentary gives Bertha, among others, the opportunity to create a Lily; society then listens to (reads) Bertha's commentary on (creation of) Lily, instead of reading Lily as a text herself, and forms its own opinions of her. The secondary source becomes the primary source and basis of interpretation.

Foucault also maintains that discourse is "controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off [discourse's] powers and dangers" (52). The wealthy in Lily's society control those procedures, and thus the discourse, because of their financial power. Among their methods of control are social artifice--"polite conversation"--and gossip; their purpose is to exclude not only those whose social resume is suspect --like the Brys and the Gormers--but also people like Lily Bart, when her existence challenges their own agenda of

careless socializing. Those in control of the discourse also control what is considered true and what is considered false; Foucault acknowledges that "the division between true and false is [not] arbitrary," and goes on to say that the "will to truth" becomes a system of exclusion, which is indeed the case in The House of Mirth (54). Money and position allow people like the Trenors and the Dorsets to manipulate, and even define, truth; Lily is thus at their mercy in her attempt to climb the social ladder and at the same time maintain moral integrity. She is excluded when society creates "truth" about her; that is, rumors are considered truth, regardless of the actual occurrence. Bertha's created truth damages Lily and provides the impetus for society to push her out. Yet Lily, the holder of "real truth," is silenced; she cannot tell her version because her position does not grant her the privilege of being an arbiter of truth.

Lily is additionally set apart from society because she uses conversation as a means of communicating her feelings; while she does indulge in dialogue as social filler or as a means of deception, Lily's private, as opposed to social, dialogues, particularly with Selden, serve to express the truth she is forced to withhold in most social situations. Dale Bauer points out that "in Lily's social world... [conversation] is only the lowest common denominator of speech" (92); the characters use speech not to communicate,

but to further their own agendas, as we will see first during the weekend at Bellomont. Bauer also argues that Lily uses conversation to hide from herself and her own "self-alienating thoughts"; she cites as an example Lily's train trip to Bellomont: "[Lily] wanted to get away from herself, and conversation was the only means of escape that she knew" (HM 20, Bauer 92). However, this scene is not wholly representative of Lily's character; she does try to avoid "the self-communion which awaited her in her room" at Bellomont after the poker game, but when she realizes that the unpleasant thoughts will not go away, she considers her future and confronts her past (HM 28-32). When she speaks with Selden and later with Bertha, and toward the end of the novel when she struggles to confront her financial situation, Lily acknowledges her thoughts and makes every effort to express what she is thinking, instead of hiding behind social artifice and superficial chat.

Foucault points out that discourse not only communicates desire; it is also, in itself, an object of desire, a "power which is to be seized" (53). Lily, whose beauty is her primary source of power, looks to discourse--as a means of communicating truth and her wishes and desires--to give her a voice in society and thus empower her as a member both of society and of Selden's republic.
Lily unconsciously recognizes the power that discourse--communication--would bring her, and strives to achieve that

power with Selden, who has power because he is a man, and with Bertha, who has power because her husband is rich. Lily fails to achieve a dialogue, however, because her only power besides her beauty is her desire for truth, and truth carries little value in her society; people do not want to hear her "truth," and she is silenced.

Lily's desire for expression and truth does not, however, exclude her from playing the games of social discourse. She does indulge in the occasional fib to make the best of a bad situation, but lies calculated to hurt others are not a part of Lily's agenda; her fibs function only to help herself, and not to injure anyone else. In fact, Lily is bewildered by the lack of truth around her, and her naivete regarding the power of language to convince with lies effects her downfall, as much as anything she actually does. What she says (or does not say), what others say about her, and what she <u>cannot</u>, according to society's strictures, say, put her at the mercy of those with linguistic power. As Elaine Showalter points out, "Lily pays only for the appearance of [a fall], for her inability to explain or defend herself" (139), not for an actual fall; those with social and economic power create the appearance of her fall because she threatens their complacency and well-being. Judy and Bertha, afraid that their husbands admire Lily more than their own wives, take steps to make sure that their husbands have no opportunity to see her.

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Lily's verbal struggles usually involve either Bertha Dorset or Lawrence Selden. The three of them form an unusual love triangle, and their interaction constitutes the basis for Lily's conflict and eventual downfall. Bertha, formerly Selden's lover, is rich and a "pretty woman" herself (HM 26), but she nevertheless feels threatened by Lily's beauty. Bertha wants the attention that men pay to Lily, and she determines that Lily will not achieve her goal of a rich husband and social position. As long as Lily stays away from Bertha's love interests, Bertha leaves Lily alone; as soon as Lily begins moving in on what Bertha considers her territory, Bertha uses gossip to control Lily. She uses her own voice to silence Lily's.

While Bertha is Lily's nemesis, Selden is positioned as her savior. He is as much a part of society as Bertha is, although he claims to be free from the constraints that society imposes. His affair with Bertha Dorset, his willing participation in the parties and activities of the social set, and his appraisal and subsequent appreciation of Lily as a beautiful social being belie his declarations of social and moral independence. Although at times he evidences a compassion and understanding of which few people in the novel are capable, ultimately his sensitivity falls victim to his social sensibility; at critical times he lets himself be pulled into the "gilded cage" (HM 59), even as he criticizes Lily for doing the same. By returning to the

gilded cage, he abandons Lily, whom he tries to lead away from society and into his republic. His own vacillation between two worlds confuses and often hurts Lily, who is eager to join him in his republic, and finally, he is as cruel to Lily and as much, if not more, responsible for her downfall and eventual death than Bertha Dorset is.

Lily's relationship with Selden illustrates both her attention to verbal interplay and its importance in the novel. She knows well the rules of the game, knows what will further her aims and what will hinder her; she does not, however, always play to win. When she meets Selden in Grand Central Station, she controls him with language; her verbal cues elicit the responses she desires, putting herself, for a time, in control. Her exclamation, "How nice of you to come to my rescue!" (HM 6), commands Selden's attention and obligates him (though he hardly complains) to ask what form of rescue she is looking for. When, by accident or by design, they reach his building, her compliments to his apartment set the stage for him to ask her in for tea (HM 7-8). While she obviously promotes the idea, when Selden suggests that she come up, she replies, "'Why not? It's too tempting--I'll take the risk," preserving a certain propriety by acknowledging that she knows there is something not quite right about visiting his apartment.

As they settle into his living-room for tea, the

conversation moves from the politely social to the personal, as Lily and Selden discuss her situation as a poor, marriageable woman. When she remonstrates with him for never coming to visit her at her aunt's, he flirts with her; she, however, remains direct and practical, trying to establish a conversation free of artifice:

> "I wish I could make you out. Of course I know there are men who don't like me--one can tell that at a glance. And there are others who are afraid of me: they think I want to marry them...But I don't think you dislike me--and you can't possibly think I want to marry you." (HM 10)

Lily is as forthright as she can be; she is trying to find out what Selden thinks of her, assessing honestly the situation as she sees it. She addresses directly the assumptions about women in their society, confronting what is not talked about. Selden, on the other hand, concentrates on "[t]he provocation in her eyes," and keeps the conversation focussed on Lily's appearance, rather than on himself or their friendship; he flirts overtly with her, believing that he is obligated to because of her beauty (HM 10). He follows, but does not acknowledge, the social rules with which Lily is grappling. When he comments that he does not go to see her precisely because he knows that she does not want to marry him, Lily, continuing to be direct and candid, replies, "'Dear Mr. Selden, that wasn't worthy of

you. It's stupid of you to make love to me, and it isn't like you to be stupid'" (HM 11). She controls the conversation because she recognizes that Selden is simply following a set of verbal rules instead of saying something meaningful; her power derives from her honesty and her perception. While she is trying to discover the basis of their relationship, he hides behind social interplay. While I interpret Selden as playing the gallant, social flirt, it is possible that he is covering up his genuine feelings for Lily in order to spare himself rejection. Either way, he does not equal her honesty and tries to avoid the issue that Lily is confronting.

Lily refuses to be put off, however; she senses that she can be honest with Selden and pushes him to understand that she resents the position she is in.

> "Don't you see...that there are men enough to say pleasant things to me and that what I want is a friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable ones when I need them? Sometimes I have fancied you might be that friend--I don't know why, except that you are neither a prig nor a bounder and that I shouldn't have to pretend with you or be on my guard against you." (HM 11)

She is providing a model for Selden by doing what she wants him to do: to break down the artifice of polite conversation and be honest, to go beyond the meaningless

dialogue that permeates their stratum of society. Even as he listens to her define her situation in society and seems to understand her, he does not take her very seriously: "Selden glanced at [Lily] with amusement; it was impossible, even with her lovely eyes imploring him, to take a sentimental view of her case" (HM 14). He concentrates on how Lily looks instead of on what Lily says, hinting at the conflict that will exist between the two of them throughout the novel.

While Lily is inside the Benedick she controls the pattern of the conversation; she feels confident and unconcerned about her position because she is not trying to get Selden to marry her. She has nothing at stake. She eventually has to drop the conversation, however, because Selden does not take her seriously, and only she is trying to communicate. She loses control of the conversation because Selden refuses to establish the mutual honesty that she desires.

Her leaving signifies her return to society and to all the behavioral baggage that she had left outside Selden's door; she worries about being seen leaving his apartment. The social hierarchy of power, and Lily's place in it, becomes evident when the charwoman's obvious disapproval causes Lily a moment of anxiety; she feels guilty and uncomfortable, but then pushes the thought aside, consoling herself by thinking that the woman is simply dazzled by

Lily's appearance. Lily "put aside the thought [that she was one in a line of female visitors to Selden] with a smile at her own fears," and turns instead to the idea of finding a cab.

Lily is easily able to assuage her fears of a charwoman questioning her morals--after all, the charwoman holds no social or economic power over her. But when her fears of detection are realized and she bumps into Sim Rosedale, she is flustered and mismanages her encounter with him. Although she doesn't consider Rosedale any higher on the social ladder than she is--indeed, she thinks he is far below her--she recognizes him as a threat because he is rich, and because he is male, but even more so because she allows him to get the better of her (HM 20). Her decision to go to Selden's apartment is less the social faux pas than her denial to Rosedale is. Although Lily lies to Rosedale to save face, she immediately realizes that her denial hurts her more than her behavior does--verbal action is more dangerous than physical action is. Admitting her visit to Selden would have suggested to Rosedale, in a more precarious social position than Lily herself, a confidence in her own behavior that would prevent him from using the information against her. If Rosedale thought that Lily was secure about her behavior, he would not have had the leverage to use it against her. Once she is in the cab, Lily realizes that the truth would make the incident seem

innocent, but that lying implies something illicit. Lily's blunder shifts the power in the relationship from herself to Rosedale. The incident suggests that behavior itself is not governed as strictly as language conventions are, that what one says is more important than what one does.

The Bellomont scene goes one step further, to illustrate that, in Lily's case, what *is said* about her is more important than what she says or does. The scene also functions as a microcosm of the rest of the novel. It demonstrates Lily's tendency to change her mind and behavior at critical stages in her plans for marriage and security. Lily's plans to ensnare Percy Gryce at Bellomont are thwarted by her own desire to spend time with Selden. Although she vows to behave in a manner that would achieve her goals, she sets up her own failure. She takes a chance with Selden and loses both him and Gryce. Selden's arrival at Bellomont holds the promise of fulfillment, but when he and Lily actually spend time together, Lily gains as little as she would have had she married Percy Gryce.

The initial tension in t

he scene occurs when Lily encounters Bertha and Selden alone in the library. The two women begin a politely sparring repartee, each feigning a nonchalant attitude toward Selden, Lily doing so for the express purpose of antagonizing Bertha. Lily's response of "Yes, I had," to Bertha's inquiry about an earlier engagement is designed to make

Bertha think that Lily's appointment was with Selden, which of course is not the case. Feeling empowered by the beautiful day and her confidence in her power to snag Gryce, Lily dares to take on Bertha, to try to make her jealous by implying a relationship between herself and Selden. Bertha, on the other hand, tries to affect a careless attitude, but is unable to conceal her anger. Lily emerges the victor, not only because she verbally conquers Bertha, but because Selden, fueled by Lily's attention, eludes Bertha and acts on his desire to spend the day with Lily.

Lily's afternoon with Selden begins with the potential for them to unite in his "republic of the spirit" (HM 73); hurrying to catch up with her after he abandons Bertha, he admits that his sole motivation in coming to Bellomont is to see Lily. As they did in his apartment, they speak to one another about Lily's behavior, which he evaluates as fraught with "far-reaching intentions":

> "You are an artist, and I happen to be the bit of colour you are using to-day. It's a part of your cleverness to be able to produce premeditated effects extemporaneously." (HM 71)

He is right, and Lily recognizes it. But rather than regarding Selden's remark as intrusive, she takes pleasure in recognizing that Selden knows her so well, and does not resent his prying into her private motives; part of what attracts her to Selden is what Bauer calls the "potential

[dialogue] she imagines with Selden versus the conventional silence she would be forced to assume with Gryce" (105). She knows what her future with Gryce will be like, and uses the afternoon to break away from it temporarily, to indulge for a while in what could be a more equal relationship.

Selden and Lily seem to be reaching an emotional communion when Selden talks about the "republic of the spirit," but then his conversation degenerates into meaningless phrases that serve only to separate the two. Anxious to reach some sort of union with him, Lily responds to his explanation of the republic by saying "I know... that's just what I've been feeling today" (HM 73); she seizes on his idea, yet at the same time that he seems to reach out to her, for all intents and purposes he says that she is incapable of joining his republic. He responds to Lily's enthusiasm for the republic and her appreciation that he pointed it out to her by replying that she needs to find the republic herself, and implies that although the directions are everywhere, she lacks the insight to recognize them: "'Ah, there are signposts--but one has to know how to read them'"(HM 73). Selden destroys the alliance they began to forge by controlling the conversation, keeping it out of Lily's reach, and deliberately setting the boundaries of the republic--and the discourse--to exclude Lily.

Lily reacts to Selden's implied condescension by

crying, "'...I have known!...Whenever I see you, I find myself spelling out a letter of the sign--and yesterday--last evening at dinner--I suddenly saw a little way into your republic'" (HM 73). She feels excited and privileged at the idea of joining Selden in his republic, but rather than feeling the exultation at communion that she does, Selden pulls back into himself and assesses his position in Lily's plans:

> Selden was still looking at her, but with a changed eye...his attitude had been one of admiring spectatorship, and he would have been almost sorry to detect in her any emotional weakness which should interfere with the fulfillment of her aims...he had come on her that morning in a moment of disarray; her face had been pale and altered, and the diminution of her beauty had lent her a poignant charm...[he] note[d] in her the change which his coming produced...to be the unforeseen element in a career so accurately planned was stimulating even to a man who had renounced sentimental experiments. (HM 73)

There is no evidence of the republic of the spirit here; Selden has put Lily in a position where she is charging full emotional steam ahead in an effort to reach a level of understanding with him, but at a crucial moment he concentrates on her appearance rather than on her spirit; he

disregards her completely by focussing on his pleasure at affecting Lily Bart, the social personality, instead of considering Lily Bart, the individual. What Lily says is far less important than how she looks; Selden prefers to look at Lily, rather than listen to her.

Wharton's shift in emphasis here, from what Lily says to how Lily looks, parallels Lily's relationship with Selden; at crucial junctures in their friendship, as Lily considers breaking out of the "gilded cage" of society, Selden fails to recognize Lily's needs and steps back into the cage, falling back on the social values--beauty and superficiality --that he claims to renounce. Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out that Selden "luxuriates in [Lily's] studied decorative quality" but "would have her absolutely reject the material world that sustains it" (124). In the same conversation in which he disavows a need for society, he admits its worth: "It seems to me the sense of splendour has justified itself by what it has produced. The worst of it is that so much human nature is used up in the process" (HM 75). His words recall his thoughts when he sees Lily at Grand Central Station: "He had a confused sense that she 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" (HM 7). His own ambivalence apparent, he wants Lily to make a choice that he himself won't make. As he will throughout the novel, he focuses on

Lily's beauty and the part he plays in it, instead of approving and encouraging her desire for independence. He is self-centered at Lily's expense, just as Gus Trenor and George Dorset will later be, and his egocentrism effectively shuts Lily out of the republic.

Lily recognizes Selden's hypocrisy in imposing such limits on entrance into the republic, which excludes the rich and the social: "'It seems to me...that you spend a good deal of your time in the element you disapprove of'" (HM 74). Whereas Lily, when caught in a obviously social climbing act, acknowledges her motives and behavior, Selden claims a higher consciousness:

> "Yes, but I have tried to remain amphibious; it's all right as long as one's lungs can work in another air. The real alchemy consists in being able to turn gold back into something else; and that's the secret most of your friends have lost." (HM 74)

Selden is at his most pretentious here. Lily, practical and realistic, points out that either accepting or rejecting society wholly is equally foolish, and that one could use it to one's own end without necessarily seeing it as the goal of one's existence. Whether Lily is capable of such pragmatism is debatable; that she even considers the idea, however, illustrates her difference from those who are inextricably bound to society. To defend his republic,

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Selden likens those who disdain society (like himself, supposedly) to the "fire that tempers a sword," while those who exist within the society (like Lily) to the "fish that dyes a purple cloak" (HM 75). His argument verges on the absurd, and proves that he is not listening to Lily; it further separates him from her because he refuses to allow for the possibility of a republic other than his own. His own selfish behavior does not support his point, and his dichotomous argument puts him in the position of her adversary. He puts himself on a pedestal and looks down at Lily's aspirations, challenging her to reach his level of consciousness, but he makes no attempt to understand her, to realize that she might have a republic of her own.

Lily recognizes Selden's contradictions when she asks, "'[W]hy do you call your republic a republic? It is a close corporation, and you create arbitrary objections in order to keep people out'" (HM 75), to which Selden retorts that it is not <u>his</u> republic. Although Selden sets up the rules of entry into the republic, he does not want to take responsibility for it. He says that if he could he would put Lily on the throne, apparently forgetting that he had just told her that she would not qualify to get in (HM 75). Selden's word choice here is especially telling; by using monarchical language to describe a position in a republic, he implies that Lily would be the queen of the republic, an obviously inconsistent notion. If he is being ironic, he is

also being deliberately cruel. His conversation is fraught with such contradictions because he is playing a game with Lily, taunting her with her ambitions and attempting to offer her an alternative, when all the while he does not have the courage to act on any of his suggestions. Selden epitomizes one sort of disparity between action and language in the novel; his words are forceful and convincing, but they lack any commitment.

Selden acknowledges his passivity after Lily reproaches him for criticizing her life without offering an alternative: "The words roused Selden from the musing fit into which he had fallen. He himself did not know why he had led their talk along such lines..." (HM 76). Although Selden's words have dominated the conversation, now as before Lily's words bring reality to the situation. Her words communicate her feelings; Selden's words are empty, positing an abstract notion so that he can feel that he is important--even necessary--to her. His conversation attempts to bring her closer to him, yet when she begins to move toward him, he hides behind words to prevent her from taking him too seriously. But he overestimates her capacity for tolerating shallowness. Angry at his backing away from her, Lily cries, "'...for all your fine phrases you're really as great a coward as I am, for you wouldn't have made one of them if you hadn't been so sure of my answer'" (HM 77). She recognizes his manipulation of language and his

deliberate avoidance of truth; by deriding his "fine phrases," she acknowledges his superficiality and his cruelty in playing games with her.

To his credit, Selden finally recognizes Lily's hurt, and takes seriously her willingness to consider relinquishing society for him, and for the first time that afternoon he is emotionally honest enough to admit that he would be willing to "take the risk" of marrying her. Tempted by his tenderness, Lily wavers, and she almost succumbs when he takes her hands in his. Lily and Selden are one, briefly, until the noise of a passing car brings reality back to her and she breaks their unity. She is distracted, recognizing the effect that her absence will have on her plans for Gryce, but Selden pulls back more severely, lighting a cigarette because

> [i]t seemed to him necessary at that moment to proclaim, by some habitual gesture of this sort, his recovered hold on the actual: he had an almost puerile wish to let his companion see that, their flight over, he had landed on his feet. (HM 78)

Again, his studied calm might mask hurt at Lily's withdrawal, but his calm breaks into careful cruelty when, responding to Lily's question, "'Are you serious?'", he says that he "took no risks in being [serious]" about her (HM 79). Lily's reaction is swift and serious--she grew "pale

under the retort"--and Selden quickly suggests leaving and re-joining the party. He has no understanding of Lily's frailty, and he uses the same verbal weapons that the rest of society does; by hiding behind empty phrases and saying things he does not mean, he protects his feelings at the expense of Lily's.

Although her behavior--walking with Selden and spending an afternoon with him in the woods--is certainly fodder for gossip, what causes the rift with Percy Gryce are not the rumors about a liaison between Lily and Selden. Rather, Bertha Dorset takes advantage of Lily's absence to fill Gryce's ear with stories of borrowed money, with all the illicit relations that such action implies. Judy Trenor, ostensibly Lily's ally, both laments her friend's poor judgment at giving Bertha such an opportunity and berates Lily for behaving so foolishly. "'I told you Bertha was dangerous,'" (HM 80) Judy tells Lily, laying the blame on Lily for failing to recognize Bertha's social, and therefore linguistic, power; in accepting Bertha's gossip and machinations, Judy introduces the skewed moral atmosphere of the novel. Lies and deceit are the norm and it is your own fault if you do not protect yourself. When Lily recognizes that Bertha conveniently distorted the facts of the story, Judy nonchalantly comments, "'Well, of course she left <u>that</u> out,'" confirming her casual acceptance of Bertha's lies and foreshadowing her own behavior: "'They're all alike,

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you know: they hold their tongues for years, and you think you're safe, but when their opportunity comes they remember everything'" (HM 81). Had Bertha, envious of the time Lily was spending with Selden, hinted at a romance between Lily and her own ex-lover, Lily would have had only herself to blame for losing Gryce; after all, Lily knew that going off with Selden was risky. But Bertha chose instead to manipulate the truth and present her rumors when no one was around to defend Lily, thus making Lily a victim of Bertha's verbal treachery.

Linguistic power, like social power, belongs to the rich, to the people who do not have to worry about being in or being out. Although intent on maintaining her position in society, Lily does not realize that her verbal rules differ from those of the people around her. Lily operates under the assumption that people tell the truth, even though she has so recently been the victim of manipulated facts and contrived false impressions about her. Instead of recognizing the verbal power of the rich, she concentrates on her financial predicament, and while economics are a big part of Lily's problems, she fails to recognize that she hurts herself by not being more attentive to the rules that govern conversational behavior in this society. Lily does not foresee Bertha's linguistic ruthlessness--her willingness to lie-- and therefore slips when she deliberately makes Bertha jealous.

As Bertha's character and conflicts are clearly illustrated in the Bellomont episode, so does Selden's behavior establish the pattern of his relationship with Lily. Like Gryce, he rushes off to New York, without resolving his encounter with Lily; they meet next at the Stepney-Van Osburgh wedding. She spots him ahead of her in the church, and feels a "wave of resistance and withdrawal...because his presence always had the effect of cheapening her aspirations, of throwing her whole world out of focus" (HM 93). At the reception, however, "a man moved toward [Lily] from the knot of smokers, and she found herself face to face with Selden" (HM 99); he seeks her out. He disconcerts her right away, by objectifying her in the same way that Trenor and Rosedale do: "[H]is greeting expressed no more than the satisfaction which every pretty woman expects to see reflected in masculine eyes; and the discovery, if distasteful to her vanity, was reassuring to her nerves" (HM 99). He again falls back on his aesthetic appreciation of Lily without considering her emotional appreciation of him; by regarding her as another "pretty woman," he ignores their conversation about the republic and places her at an emotional disadvantage:

> she felt with a faint chill of regret that he had gone back without an effort to the footing on which they had stood before their last talk together...She longed to be to him

> something more than a piece of sentient prettiness, a passing diversion to his eye and brain. (HM 100)

His overt appreciation of her beauty--"...[he] let[] his eyes rest on her in the frank enjoyment of her grace"--and his willingness to ignore their conversation at Bellomont frustrates Lily. As Susan Gubar points out, "the only man in the novel who could possibly save [Lily] from becoming a commodity on the marriage market is himself incapable of viewing her as anything but a collectable in the aesthetic market" (80). Regardless of what Selden says, his attraction to Lily lies not in the potential he sees in her mind, but in the actuality of her beauty.

Remembering their conversation about the republic and its effect on her, Lily interprets his superficial greeting as evidence of the casualness with which he regards her, and attempts to establish her confidence through sarcasm tinged with truth: "'I have never recovered my self-respect since you showed me how poor and unimportant my ambitions were" (HM 100). True to form, Selden ignores the truth in Lily's words in order to shake off responsibility for her feelings, and replies "lightly, 'I thought, on the contrary...that I had been the means of proving they were more important... than anything else.'" He turns her own words against her, regarding their dialogue as a game that he wants to win, rather than as a way of communicating; he does not consider

how his words will affect her.

His words, of course, hurt her, and when her hurt becomes evident, he reacts as he did in the woods at Bellomont: he uses her pain to aggrandize himself. He has little interest in knowing what Lily thinks; he pays attention only to her reaction to him: "It would have meant nothing to him to discover that his nearness made her more brilliant, but this glimpse of a twilight mood to which he alone had the clue seemed once more to set him in a world apart with her" (HM 100). When she reacts positively to him, as she did when he dangled the republic in front of her, he shuts her out, but when he causes her pain, she becomes more endearing to him. Selden claims to admire and encourage Lily's independence, but in fact she is most attractive to him when he causes her to reveal her weaknesses and frailties; one of the reasons that he likes her is because she makes him feel strong, needed, and smart.

Because Selden controls the discourse, Lily must act on his cues; when she acts on her own initiative, he cuts her off. The situation at the reception is further complicated by the presence of Rosedale and Trenor, who demand yet another sort of verbal behavior from her. She can be--must be--the social coquette with them, but she doesn't want to behave that way in front of Selden, who reveals in public the part of her that she shows only him. She is thus in the uncomfortable position of confronting, in public, her two

selves. Having told her that she must be more than a social persona in order to be a member of the republic, Selden sets up an expectation that she must behave a certain way with him. Yet when Rosedale steps in and begins controlling the conversation, Selden withdraws; he abandons her in a situation where flirtatious, shallow behavior is expected, and Lily is forced to adjust her social role in order to preserve the little sense of self with which Selden leaves her.

Selden feels no sense of responsibility for Lily; he tests her over and over again, yet never acknowledges that she has passed the entrance exam into the republic. Except for the scenes at his apartment, which happen through accident or her initiation, Selden sees Lily only at the events that represent the society he claims to deplore. At the Brys' party, he admits that he has avoided Lily since the Van Osburgh's wedding (HM 143), which signifies that he has avoided any contact with her that would give him the opportunity to see the non-social, "real" Lily Bart. Such behavior makes it possible for him to enjoy Lily's social persona--the beautiful, flirtatious Lily--while at the same time prevents him from acknowledging the Lily who wants to join the republic. He offers her the republic in places where he knows she will not accept it; instead of honestly offering Lily an alternative, he revels in her beauty and thus tacitly approves her public behavior. As Bauer points

out, Lily's conflict arises when she tries to make private desires public (106); her society, including Selden, rejects those private desires and thus silences her private voice.

That Selden is more attracted to the public Lily than to the private Lily is clear at the Brys' _tableaux vivants_ party. The theme of the party reinforces the style over substance framework that the novel exposes, and reveals that Selden's sexual attraction to Lily is more powerful than the spiritual one he claims to foster. Wharton emphasizes that Lily's _tableau_ is one of pure sensuality, that Lily's body makes the impression; there is no greater context in the portrait: "The impulse to show herself in a splendid setting...had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings" (HM 142). Reacting to Lily's beauty, Selden feels that he "see[s] before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world" (HM 142), while in reality Lily emphasizes those trivialities by appealing to her society using the only power she possesses: her beauty. Lily uses her awareness of her own beauty as a means to the end of social security, but her beauty is a double-edged sword because her observers cannot go beyond her appearance to the person behind it.

In a discussion of George Eliot's novels that could also apply to _The House of Mirth_, Gubar says that

> narcissism infantilizes the female, turning her from an autonomous person into a character in search of an author...Such a woman is always and only "becoming"--that is, she is beautiful but she is also imagining some future identity that she is unable to realize by herself. (79)

Lily is always moving toward a goal, whether that goal is marriage or financial security or entrance into Selden's republic; in her tableau at the Brys', she hopes that her beauty will work for her, helping her to achieve an identity. Instead, it works against her; by appropriating a work of art, Lily becomes one-dimensional, and Selden forgets the republic and relishes the public, beautiful Lily Bart. Bauer points out that Lily's tableau "invite[s] the gaze of others which will lead, she hopes, to a dialogue with them" (96); but exactly the opposite happens: the guests talk about her, not to her, and Selden hardly speaks at all. He searches the party for Lily, grateful at first that he cannot find her because "it would have broken the spell to see her too soon in the surroundings from which accident had so happily detached her" (HM 143). He has no wish to see Lily as a living, breathing person; he instead prefers to think of her as suspended, as something plastic, to be admired.

Selden, of all people, should be disgusted with Lily's blatant sexual cry for attention; instead, he is more

captivated by her than he has ever been. While Wharton may intend to illustrate Lily's ideal beauty, to see her as part of a larger scheme of beauty and harmony, Selden's reaction emphasizes that for him, Lily's importance lies in her appearance, not in her spirit. His knowledge of her mind and her soul becomes insignificant; he basks in his own visceral response to Lily's beauty.

This scene could be read as a turning point in the novel, when Lily, if she were more tolerant and less foolish, could accept Selden and enter his republic. But in order to accept that interpretation, we must ignore that Selden has misread Lily's tableau, that his understanding of her in this scene is limited to his appreciation of her beauty. He suspends his exclusionary rules of the republic; it seems that now beauty is the only criterion for entry. When he finds her at the party, silence pervades their encounter:

> Selden had given her his arm <u>without speaking</u>...[they] stood suddenly in the fragrant <u>hush</u> of a garden...there was <u>no sound</u> but the plash of the water...and <u>a distant drift</u> of music...Selden followed her, and still <u>without speaking</u>, they seated themselves on a bench beside the fountain." (emphasis mine)(HM 144-145)

Selden makes no attempt to communicate with Lily, and she, used to his conversational dominance, is silent also,

waiting for his cue. There is no understanding, no communication passing between them, as we see when Lily rebels against his silence, chastising him for it, accusing him of thinking "hard things" about her, thoughts to which, after all, she cannot respond or defend herself. Frustrated by his emotional games, she presses him to define their friendship, to explain why they only see each other at social functions, why he promised to help her, yet has abandoned her. Instead of answering her, he turns the conversation back to himself: "'The only way I can help you is by loving you'" (HM 145), which is hardly true, although it seems to satisfy Lily. Selden reacts to what he sees--Lily's beauty--and not to what he hears. The republic is forgotten; Selden does more than the other men by loving Lily, but his love is based more on sensual than spiritual appreciation. Despairing of Selden's inability to deal with her or his emotions about her, Lily cries, "'Ah, love me, love me--but don't tell me so!" (HM 145). He says he loves her, but he keeps changing his mind. Lily, too, vacillates between accepting and rejecting his love; though there is an emotional connection between them, they have already determined that love is not possible, or, in fact, desirable. Yet when Lily needs Selden's friendship, he falls back on trite words of love, instead of providing her with an emotional support that would go beyond an appreciation of her beauty.

Lily's relationship with Selden illustrates her need for emotional security and truth; her relationship with Gus Trenor underscores Lily's other overwhelming concern: her need for money. She uses her beauty and fragility to convince Gus to invest money for her; although she dimly realizes that there is something not quite circumspect in their "business" dealings, her delight at making money temporarily supersedes her need for truth. Continuing to flirt with Gus insures that he will continue to work for her; what she does not take into account is his relentless demand for her attention as a "payback."

The situation climaxes when Lily goes to the Trenors' after a dinner at Carry Fisher's. Words, and then lack of them, bring Lily to the Trenors' in the first place; she goes at Judy's request, but would never have gone had Gus forwarded the message that Judy had remained at Bellomont. Gus uses words--conversation--as a pretense to keep Lily at their house: "Now do sit down for a minute, there's a dear, and let's have a nice quiet jaw together" (HM 150). In the scene where Lily sees Gus at the opera, Gus has little interest in conversation with Lily; when she suggests, to mollify him, that they get together and talk, he replies, "'Hang talking!'" (HM 124). Yet at his own home he presses Lily to stay and talk to him. Lily uses conversation to delay action, while Gus uses words to instigate it. The dynamics of the situation differ from those with Selden

because Lily cannot regain control of the situation; by ignoring the social rules governing conversation, Gus strips away any pretense Lily might use as defense. The roles are in fact reversed, because here Lily is trying to avoid truth, as Gus tries to reveal the "truth" about their relationship, at least as he sees it.

When Gus reveals that Judy is not, in fact, in town, he takes off the verbal gloves and Lily realizes that she has underestimated him. She resists his demand "to talk things out," but where she had heretofore opposed him sweetly, flirtatiously, she now feigns incomprehension, further angering him; he knows that she does understand and is still playing him for a fool:

> "I don't know what you mean; but you must see, Gus, that I can't stay here talking to you at this hour--"
>
> "Gad, you go to men's houses fast enough in broad daylight; strikes me you're not always so deuced careful of appearances." (HM 153)

Lily feels the painful bite of gossip; she recognizes that she is not immune to the power of other people's words, in this case Rosedale's, a man to whom she has felt secure in her superiority. Recognizing her vulnerability, Trenor seizes the opportunity and presses his case, making Lily aware of the "debt" she owes him, and the way he expects her to repay it. He strikes the mortal blow when she offers to

pay him back:

> "[Y]ou'll borrow from Selden or Rosedale--and take your chances of fooling them as you've fooled me! Unless--unless you've settled your other scores already--and I'm the only one left out in the cold!" (HM 154)

He has all along regarded Lily as a social whore, one he thought he could buy with financial favors; he devastates Lily by actually saying it. "The words--the words were worse than the touch!" (HM 154). Naive Lily cannot understand Trenor's cruelty because she does not feel that she has done anything to provoke it. She played by the rules she had always counted on for social/public acceptance, but Gus, tired of artifice and polite delays, ignores the rules of gentlemanly conduct and emerges the victor. Even though Trenor eventually collapses, the effect of his words on Lily is irreversible, while he remains relatively unaffected.

Gus's verbal behavior contrasts with Selden's. Selden often skirts the truth while Gus confronts it--yet each of them manages to dominate Lily linguistically. Part of Lily's weakness is her belief in truth, an aspect of which is her willingness to believe in the selves that men create for her. When she is with Selden, she believes in the Lily that can join him in the republic. After her encounter with Trenor, she believes in the "bad girl" that he has created;

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she no longer sees the characteristics that Selden pointed out to her. Foucault's discussion of commentary works in an interesting way here, because the commentary of Selden and Trenor does not affect the way others see (read) Lily; rather, Lily is forced to "read" herself as she has never done, and therefore accept an interpretation of a self that she does not know. Lily's sense of self often depends on how others see her; she is so caught between her public and private desires that she allows others to create a self (or selves) for her. She fits into the tradition of the "male who is primary and the female as his passive creation--a secondary object lacking autonomy" (Gubar 77). Because Lily is aware of her own impotence to create and sustain the self she envisions, she seizes on the selves that men--who are powerful by virtue of their sex--create, instead of trusting her knowledge of herself.

Dale Bauer writes of Lily's confrontation with Gus that: "[w]hen words can force one to reconsider the self as other, these words have power. Trenor does not rape Lily, but he does as much violence in causing her to see that her 'two selves' have no relation. She is other to herself" (115). Trenor's words to Lily, unlike Bertha's, have no direct effect on Lily's public self; what he says to her does not hurt her in the social arena. But his words are terribly destructive to the private Lily. Unable to face herself--the self with which Trenor has presented her--Lily

goes to Gerty Farish's, where she can hide for a while and feel the benediction of Gerty's goodness. When Gerty tells her that Selden went to Carry Fisher's looking for her, Lily seizes on him as her savior; she wants him to grant her absolution if she confesses to him:

> "if I went to him, if I told him everything...[if I] told him the whole story...if I told him everything, would he loath me? Or would he pity me, and understand me, and save me from loathing myself?" (HM 174-5)

So recently devastated by words, Lily now looks to them to save her. Aware of their power to hurt, she still believes in their power to heal. But she does not get the chance to find out.

Selden's behavior following the Trenor episode epitomizes his attitude toward Lily. He ignores the insinuations about her that he hears at Carry Fisher's; he still believes that he and Lily can unite in the republic. Yet he casts her aside when he sees her leaving the Trenors' late at night. Instead of visiting her, instead of giving her the benefit of the doubt, he takes the easy way, aligning himself once again with the people over whom he claims superiority (in this case, Trenor), and he abandons Lily to fend for herself. Coward that he is, he ignores his appointment with Lily; his silence is as unambiguous as his words have previously been ambivalent. His refusal to

communicate with her hurts her as much as Trenor's words do, and has virtually the same effect: Lily knows that the rumors are affecting her reputation, but she has no opportunity to defend herself to Selden, her one supposed ally, and is thus powerless to appeal to him.

In each instance, Lily falls a little lower because she does not know how, or is not allowed, to control the discourse. The circumstance in which all control is finally taken away from her occurs in Europe, where she goes with the Dorsets to amuse George while Bertha plays with Ned Silverton. Bertha manipulates Lily on every level, and while Lily should know that she cannot trust Bertha, she is a well-meaning casualty of Bertha's game of adultery, jealousy, and deceit.

Bertha ostracizes Lily with a carefully planned set-up that not only places Lily in a compromising position, but also places Bertha above reproach. Bertha schemes to be alone with her lover and also manages to force Lily to return to the yacht, alone, with George. Fearing the power of the gossip about herself and Ned, Bertha cleverly reverses the situation to put herself in the position of wounded wife, while putting Lily in the position of adulterer. Lily, unfortunately, does not recognize Bertha's treachery; she believes that Bertha needs a friend and is prepared to be that friend, regardless of the cost to herself. Lily still believes in a certain moral truth that

Bertha does not bother with; Lily believes in friendship and forgiveness and truth, and she disregards Bertha's past treatment of her in order to help the woman she considers her friend.

When Bertha's first, rather private, attempt to get rid of Lily fails, she disgraces Lily in public. She has already planted the seeds of gossip about Lily and Gus, and she knows that further rumors would confirm Lily as the homewrecker and Bertha as the innocent victim. Thus when Bertha publicly forbids Lily to return to the yacht, not a single person comes to Lily's defense. Too many rumors have persisted too long, and Lily is not valuable enough, or selfish enough, to risk defending. Now emotionally detached, Selden had offered Lily sound advice--to get off the yacht--for the first time, but she ignores it, relying instead on truth and friendship to save her. Had she listened to Selden's advice, and not tried to be the friend she thought Bertha needed, had she considered her own position and not so easily trusted Bertha, perhaps she would have been worth protecting. But her naivete and her simplistic determination to "save" Bertha elicit pity and detachment, not support, from her "friends." Lily's persistent silence--her only option, really--is no match for Bertha's verbal backstabbing, and Bertha, trying to cut her losses and save her marriage from her own philandering, expels Lily from the group.

Lily must finally believe what Selden tried to point out to her: that Bertha set her up. Unable to conceive of anyone being as duplicitous as Bertha is, Lily must be her indisputable victim before Bertha's cruelty is real to her. Bertha's self-serving behavior finally makes Lily aware of the power of lies and of selfishness. Lily realizes that she has no recourse left her, that Bertha has effectively cut her off from anyone who had previously tried to help her; she will also realize Bertha indirectly contributed to Lily's being cut from Aunt Julia's will, which had been Lily's financial security.

Throughout her quest for a husband, Lily has relied on occasional generous gifts from her wealthy aunt. Although her inheritance is not emphasized in the novel, Wharton makes clear that Lily will be a wealthy woman when Julia Peniston dies. Grace Stepney, jealous of Lily's beauty and popularity, and nursing a grudge against a past slight, deliberately sabotages her cousin's relationship with their wealthy aunt. When the rumors of Lily's affiliation with Gus Trenor begin to circulate, Grace plants the seeds of suspicion in Aunt Julia. In the name of protecting the family's reputation and talking to Julia for Lily's own good, Grace raises her own position in her aunt's eyes and leaves Julia less tolerant of Lily's financial troubles. Without knowing it, Grace also sets the stage for Lily's disinheritance; when the Dorsets return from Europe and the

story of Lily's disgrace gets around, the reader is left to assume that Grace has passed the news on to Julia. Gerty admits that "Every one heard, of course, that there had been some disagreement--some misunderstanding--" (HM 232); who else but Grace would have told Julia Peniston? The specific conversations, implications, meanings are left vague; the reader is in Lily's place, left out, knowing why, but not exactly how, the disinheritance happened.

After the reading of the will, at which Grace learns the result of her scheming and Lily realizes that she is again the victim of words, this time Grace's vindictive, self-serving words, and of an interpretation that she has not had a chance to defend, innocent Gerty Farish implores Lily to tell the "truth." Lily laughs at such an objective notion: "'What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easier to believe" (HM 233-34). In Lily's society, any distinction between truth and falsehood is almost non-existent, for truth depends only on the position of and relationship between the speaker and the listener, and knowledge is power only when another, more primary power (money) is present. Of course Lily knows the truth about herself, and about Bertha, and about George and Gus, but that knowledge is useless because she lacks the power to be believed. Lily's beauty, her other strength, is also powerless in this situation and in fact works against her, because it makes more credible the idea of an affair between

her and George Dorset.

Bertha has thoroughly silenced Lily, as Lily realizes: "'the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks'" (HM 234). Her silence implies her guilt; her words would confirm it. Although guilty of complying with Bertha's plan to entertain George while Bertha plays with Ned Silverton, Lily nevertheless does try to help Bertha and at the same time maintain--not elevate--her own position in society. Certainly the punishment is too severe for the crime; Lily's real problem is that she no longer fits conveniently into Bertha's, or anyone else's, plans. Desperate to save her marriage and her social position, Bertha invents a scandalous scenario and Lily falls irrevocably, not through anything she has done, but because of what is said about her. Bertha's commentary is the criticism, which satisfies those who do not read Lily as a primary text. Bertha's words are the primary text.

What is <u>not</u> said, more than what is said, creates tension in <u>The House of Mirth</u>. Even when important words are spoken, we do not hear them. We do not know exactly what Bertha told Percy Gryce, or what she said about Lily and George. Wharton never tells us what Judy Trenor knows about the financial relationship between Gus and Lily; nor do we know what Bertha's letters to Selden contain. There is little conversation in the last section of the novel, the

section dealing with Lily as outsider. Wharton follows Lily's internal struggles--from determining to marry Rosedale, to being tempted to keep her inheritance and not repay Trenor, to being "saved" by Selden and not blackmailing Bertha. And each circumstance confirms Lily's insistence on honesty. The further down she goes, the stronger her moral resistance becomes; as she gets closer to death, social artifice disappears and Lily no longer has anything on which to rely except the truth.

In a pivotal conversation with Rosedale, Lily's appreciation of honesty and directness prevails over her personal desires. Willing, at last, to marry Rosedale, she puts forth her proposition to him with a "noble directness" (HM 263), which, though indeed direct, fails to take into account her own desperate circumstances. Rosedale makes clear that although he is indeed in love with Lily, her worth has decreased so much that she would be a social liability rather than an asset to him. And although her first reaction is one of proud anger, she admits, "'I like your frankness'" (264), and reacts with disgust to his suggestion that she blackmail Bertha with the letters. Even in such critical circumstances, Lily's ethics triumph over her material and social desires; now, if at no other previous time, could Lily be granted admission to Selden's republic.

The most significant dialogue in the final section,

however, actually promotes more silencing, less communication, when both Lily and Selden search for the "word" that would unite them. Selden has failed Lily time and again, yet nevertheless maintains a firm hold on her emotions and her heart. Regardless of their difficulties, and of her anger at his interference in the Norma Hatch affair, she goes to him on her way to see Bertha with Bertha's letters to him. Blackmailing Bertha would insure a new life for her, but it would also mean morally, as well as physically and financially, joining the society from which she has been excluded. Heretofore Lily has not been guilty of the charges against her; although there may be a grain of truth to the rumors that circulate about her, nothing that she has done warrants the ramifications the rumors effect. Going to Bertha with the letters would put Lily on the same moral ground as her enemy: willing to sacrifice others to get what she wants. Her burning the letters is a grasp at autonomy; she does not want to rely on words other than her own, particularly Bertha's, to save her (Bauer 122). Desperate, though not wholly convinced that she should go through with the blackmail, Lily still considers Selden the only person she can trust with her soul.

Intent on leaving a pure soul with him, Lily tries to thank Selden for the guidance he has given her. In choosing to recognize his help and forget the times he has abandoned her, she makes a final effort to secure an alliance between

them.

> "I may not see you again for a long time, and I wanted to tell you that I have never forgotten the things you said to me at Bellomont and that sometimes...when I seemed farthest from remembering them--they have helped me, and kept me from mistakes, kept me from really becoming what many people have thought me." (HM 318)

Although Lily is a stronger person than she gives herself credit for, Selden's advice does affect her, and may even have the guiding power which she attributes to it. Selden, however, refuses to acknowledge his influence on her, and in fact responds to her statement with a cruel irony: "'The difference is in yourself---it will always be there. And since it _is_ there, it can't really matter to you what people think: you are so sure that your friends will always understand you'" (HM 319). The irony is brutal, when Lily so obviously does care about what people think. Her friends did _not_ understand her, and that miscalculation caused her downfall. If he had tried to understand her, to allow for the differences between them instead of seeing only his kind of republic, he would have recognized that Lily does not see that the difference is in herself, and that her visiting him in such a state is a cry for help, rather than an opportunity for Selden to applaud her autonomy.

Visiting Selden helps Lily realize that she does not

really want to blackmail Bertha, but he does not give her enough strength to hope, to survive, to depend on the future. He knows that she needs help, but he waits for her to specify what kind. And when she leaves him, he is unable even to express what he feels for her: "His faculties seemed tranced, and he was still groping for the word to break the spell" (HM 321-22)--still groping while Lily takes definitive action by destroying Bertha's letters and with them any hope of regaining a foothold in the life for which she had striven so long. "[H]e remembered long afterward" the vision of her kneeling by the fire and the way the flames lit up her face. He focuses, as usual, on Lily's physical appearance, and there is something perverted about his reaction to the pathetic, poignant Lily that is before him. Once again, he claims to offer her support, but only an abstract kind, nothing that can truly help Lily.

When she goes home after visiting Nettie Crane and realizes that her legacy has arrived, Lily finds that rather than feeling liberated by re-paying Gus Trenor, she instead feels more constrained, and more wakeful, than ever:

> She could bear it--yes, she could bear it; but what strength would be left her the next day? Perspective had disappeared--the next day pressed close upon her, and on its heels came the days that were to follow--they swarmed about her like a shrieking mob. (HM 334)

She has nothing to look forward to. She has no future, and paying Trenor cuts the last tie to her past. As long as her aunt's money was withheld, there was something to wait for. But now that the money has come and been spent, little is left for her. The realization that each day will be spent exhausted and each night feverishly awake overcomes her; her craving for rest overwhelms all reason, and as she drifts away on the effects of the chloral, she tries to remember the word she needs to share with Selden, but fades into unconsciousness before she can think of it. Her last effort at communication with Selden fails, as his interpretation of her death reveals.

As usual, Selden is too late. He visits her the next day, intent on saving her, but he finds her dead. He may have all good intentions, but he fails in execution: "he had found the word <u>he meant</u> to say to her, and it could not wait another moment to be said" (emphasis mine) (337). For the first time Selden feels an urgent need to communicate with Lily; for the first time it does not matter. When he learns that she is dead, his first reaction is not one of wonder or surprise or anything else that relates to Lily; instead, he looks at her face and thinks about the way his presence had always affected her:

> That it was her real self, every pulse in him ardently denied. Her real self had lain warm on his heart but a few hours earlier; what had he to

> do with this estranged and tranquil face which, for the first time, neither paled nor brightened at his coming? (HM 338)

He considers himself first, without even asking about how she died. He brushes over the idea that her face is "tranquil," at peace, and focuses on its imperviousness to his presence. His detachment, signalled by the estrangement he feels, illustrates Selden's inability to communicate with Lily, even though he fabricates a posthumous alliance with her.

Because he puts together the pieces and solves the mystery surrounding her relationship with Trenor, he considers himself forgiven and at one with Lily: "...he could read into [her] 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" (HM 342). But his justification is absurd. Too often throughout the novel Selden either fails to recognize what Lily is trying to tell him, or he simply does not let her speak at all. His claim that he can now understand, that they have reached a communion at last, simply makes Lily a sacrifice to Selden's peace of mind.

Lily's suicide ends the discourse about her; even Selden, for whom her death should raise questions, not answer them, considers her death the closure of their relationship. Lily died searching for the word that "should

make life clear between them" (HM 335); Selden presumes to hear that word, to justify his behavior in Lily's posthumous forgiveness. Susan Gubar sees the "words [as] Lily's dead body; for she is now converted completely into a script for his edification, a text not unlike the letters and checks she has left behind to vindicate her life" (81). Selden's understanding of Lily has always been limited by his image of her; her death removes the constraints of reality and allows Selden the freedom to imagine that he really "knew" Lily Bart. The checks and letters leave behind the immutable facts that explain Lily's life; unlike Lily, who could not find the word that would serve as closure, Selden reads her body as the word for which he has been searching. Only when Lily is ultimately silenced can he be satisfied that he understands her; her actual, living dialogue has less effect on him than his imagined dialogue with her corpse.

From the beginning of the novel Lily is a marginal member of the society to which she strives to belong. Being a twenty-nine year old unmarried woman puts her in limbo; she is too beautiful and socially involved to be considered a spinster, but too old to remain a debutante. She is peripheral not only socially but economically; because she has no financial right to be in society, her existence depends on the good graces of the hostesses, on her cultivating them as her "friends."

Foucault maintains that no one "shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so" (62). Lily's beauty is her primary qualification, but that alone is not enough to provide full entry into the discourse for her. Lily is a member of society's discourse community because she knows the rules, but at crucial times she is only a passive member. Her membership rests less on her own ability to talk than on other's ability to talk about her. What Lily says is often irrelevant to the society, but what is said about her ultimately destroys her. Her lack of money and social position automatically puts her outside the discourse; her beauty and social ability allow her, for a time, to remain within it. Her attempts to take control, to take an active role in her life, serve eventually to advance her downfall, because the more she does, the more can be said about her, and the less she can say about herself. Even her death is misunderstood. Lily's suicide, her final attempt to control her life, to make herself happy, becomes no more than fodder for Selden's commentary; while she dies struggling to communicate, Wharton leaves us with his assumed understanding of her, revealing that in Lily's world her value lies not in her actual self, but in a social interpretation of her.

Notes

1. See, for example, Nancy Topping Bazin, "The Destruction of Lily Bart: Capitalism, Christianity, and Male Chauvinism," in Denver Quarterly 17.4 (1983): 97-108, for an argument about how the ethics of capitalism, Christianity and male chauvinism combine to require that Lily compromise her dignity and self-respect; Joan Lidoff, in "Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in The House of Mirth," American Quarterly 3.2 (1979): 519-539 writes that Lily's downfall is a result of the limitations of Wharton's narrative structure; in "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth," PMLA 102.5 (1985): 783-792, Wai-chee Dimock writes about Lily's involvement with and rebellion against the social marketplace; and Judith Fetterley, in " 'The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object': Double Standard and Double Bind in The House of Mirth," Studies in American Fiction 5.2 (1977): 199-211, points out that the tragedy of the novel lies in the temptation that society offers to Lily, but which ultimately destroys her.

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