

“*The House of Mirth: A Feast of a Dying Self*”

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Abstract: *The past feminist interest in *The House of Mirth* focused on the capitalist values and moral scrupulosity that shaped and victimized the female protagonist Lily Bart. The desire to surpass rejection, failure, and death is what marks Lily who longs for a new self-definition realized in acknowledging the artistic in herself. Such past readings are marked by an ignorance of the authorial celebration of Lily as flesh becoming a true incarnation of art. Throughout the novel, Lily has been associated with artistic creation and creativity, accentuating therefore the author’s own reflection on her desires to free herself and her female characters from male-centered fictional world. Through the character of Lily, Edith Wharton celebrates a radical move towards a new female writing strategy and mode. Such reading also evokes an awareness of the painful as essentially primary accompany to the female artistic process. To understand the elaboration of Lily as a vivid celebration of female art, I will employ both of Hélène Cixous’ concepts of *écriture féminine* and René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire. Both concepts will help analyze and study scenes such as “*tableau vivant*” and burning the love letters where love, life, self and art mingle to celebrate the female despite the struggle against the stiffening patriarchy of old moneyed New York society in which Lily and Wharton strived to live and create.*

Keywords: *House , Mirth, Feast.*

1. Introduction

The past feminist interest in *The House of Mirth* focused on the capitalist values and moral scrupulosity that shaped and victimized the female protagonist Lily Bart. The desire to surpass rejection, failure, and death is what truly marks Lily who longs for a new self-definition realized in acknowledging the artistic in her self. Such past readings are marked by an ignorance of the authorial celebration of Lily as flesh becoming a true incarnation of art. Throughout the novel, Lily has been associated with artistic creation and creativity, accentuating therefore the author’s own reflection on her desires to free herself and her female characters from male-centered fictional world. *The House of Mirth* depicts Lily’s tragic downfall; it pens her struggle and failure to secure a place of her own in the world of a frivolous, old moneyed New York society that propels her emotional and social decline to succumb into the darkness of death. Interestingly however, such darkness proves to be liberating as it turns to be an announcement of rebirth. Through the character of Lily, Edith Wharton celebrates a radical move towards a new female writing strategy and mode. Such reading also evokes an awareness of the painful as essentially primary accompany to the female artistic process

2. Lily’s Tragedy: A Case Study of Mimetic Desire

After the economic collapse of her father, the beautiful and unwed Lily Bart must undo her rivals and finds herself a wealthy husband who will allow her to carry on living lavishly in a world of convention and mannerism. Using her beauty and charms presents Lily as a victim in a world that views women as ornaments of decoration. Raised by a mother who taught her nothing but superficial and materialistic values, Lily is told to use her beauty to marry into wealth, the only rescuing plan for a girl who has not been trained to count on herself. In Book one, chapter four, the narrator claims: “Society is a revolving body which is apt to be judged according to its place in each man’s heaven; and at present it was turning its illuminating face to Lily” (112). The narrator shows Lily in the peak of her search for a wealthy husband. Her choice seems to settle on Percy Gryce, an extremely wealthy, yet socially awkward bachelor. Determined, Lily pushes aside her ideas of love and romance with Lawrence Selden as Percy will provide her with security and stability. Such a decision makes her feel

powerful and in full control of her destiny. However, this “heaven” keeps revolving, taking its illuminating radiance away from Lily leaving her to dwell into eternal darkness. This quote asserts that Lily has never had actual control over her life or destiny. In the image of a tragic heroine, Lily has therefore to face the invisible powers of fate that chain her and prevents her from being with the man she truly loves.

Lily’s acute awareness of her downtrodden situation and limited options of engaging herself into a marriage of convenience intensify her suffering. Being aware of Percy’s intellectual interest, she desperately tries to hold a conversation on literature. Yet, she fails remarkably. She endlessly tries to stay aloof amid her social, elitist milieu, answering therefore its codes of behavior and gender scripts that keep shaping her social image which is in contrast with her inner self. “[I] trust my happiness to your hands,” says Lily when addressing Gus Trenor, the epitome of her old moneyed New York society (240). Such a trust will bring her nothing but sorrow and pain as her attempts to remain within the contours of this social milieu will stifle her potential on the one hand, and will result in her ultimate seclusion. “Miss Bart,” announces Bertha Dorset, “is not going back to the yacht,” (208) confirming thus her final seclusion from the limited circle of this high upper class society which triggers her downfall: “Her danger lay, as she knew, in her old incurable dread of discomfort and poverty, the fear of that mounting tide of dinginess” (276). Dinginess has always stood for Lily’s ultimate fear of failing to meet the high standards of her society, foreshadowed by the decisive encounter between Lily and Nettie Struther, previously known as Nettie Crane, one of the charity cases of Gerty Farish. Meeting Nettie serves at accentuating the pain Lily feels when succumbing into nothingness as she stands as a reminder for the lost stability and easiness of the world of leisure. Unlike Lily, Nettie is now married and stable, enjoying a flourishing family life, something Lily will never enjoy. To ease the pain of loss, Lily searches for a remedy, an endless rest, she turns to sleeping pills thinking they will soften the agony of failure: “She had long since raised the dose to its highest limit, but tonight she felt she must increase it. She knew she took a slight risk in doing so-she remembered the chemist’s warning. If sleep came at all, it might be asleep without waking. But after all that was but one chance in a hundred: . . .” (299)

The above quotation asserts Lily’s conscious decision to put an end to her life and suffering. Some critics believe that Wharton’s writing of the last scenes in the novel put her in so much trouble as how to best convey the death of her heroine in an artistic yet realistic manner. In a letter addressed to Dr Francis Kinnicutt, specialized in mental ailments of the well-to-do, Wharton tries to seek some help. She claims: “A friend of mine has made her mind into committing suicide and has asked me to find out . . . the most painless and least unpleasant method of effacing herself” (qtd. in Wharton 200). The lady who deliberately wants to put an end to her life is the frustrated Lily Bart who grows bitter as her plans to marry into wealth and settle are shattered away.

The acute sense of loss and failure justify the violence of taking one’s life when facing social rejection. Such violence is at the heart of René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire that results in a fierce self-destruction process. A French literary critic, historian, and social science philosopher, Girard adopts the concept of mimetic desire inspired by Plato’s own understanding of human mimetic capacity to recreate the world as a basic learning structure. However, Girard soon departs from Plato’s concept to associate mimesis with the desire to copy others’ desire and longing: “Humans learn what to desire taking other people as models to imitate. Aware of a lack within ourselves, we look to others to teach us what to value and who to be”(16). According to Girard, it is this imitation that limits the potential of the individual into acquiring self-consciousness. Central to Girard’s theory of mimesis is the treatment of the notion of rival. “In desiring an object, the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions, but also and more essentially in regard to desire” (145).

In the opening of the novel, Lily is introduced as a woman of the world with her fancy clothes and sophisticated accessories, presented as a prototype of a lady from the leisure class, a world of

parties and social gatherings where women exhibit beauty and richness. Despite the economic crush that left her family devastated, Lily has to keep appearances. She has to compete with people such as Bertha Dorset, Judy Trenor and others who stand for the lavish existence of old-moneyed New York society. This shared desire to be at the centre of such a class converge in a clash whose victim proves to be Lily as she is left to face such a world on her own. Violence generates therefore from mimetic rivalry to which only the defeat of the surrogated subject can put an end. In this respect, the character of Bertha Dorset serves as the spectrum of a community that thrives at the exception of individual desires. Lily grows aware of the threatening presence of Bertha, not only as a social rival but also as a rival for Lawrence's love. Many are Lily's rivals who will precipitate her downfall, including Bertha Dorset and Gus trenor.

Wharton addresses the impact of society in shaping Lily's desire in the image of its demands and scripts. Since the opening encounter of Lily with Selden, Lily's status as an object of male gazing has been settled. In this vein, Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out that "Lily has adopted her society's images of women narrowly and literally. She has long practiced the art of making her an exquisite decorative object, and under Selden's eye she comes to think of herself as a moral object as well. . . . It is an art she has practiced . . ." (127). Lily has lost her individuality for the sake of social acceptance through her endless performance to be seen as they desire her to be. She tries very hard to be the entertaining, beautiful, and clever woman everyone would seek her company. Seeing into her painful performance, Selden assures that Lily "was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (6). These ornaments are chains holding her from fulfilling her true identity to remain at the margins in a world that thrives at denying its individuals potential and consciousness.

The solution to Lily's pain to remain a member of such a community lies in marrying Simon Rosedale, a new moneyed, Jewish social climber. He never gives up on Lily though she keeps refuting his proposal. "But her course was too purely reasonable," claims Selden, "not to contain the germ of rebellion. No sooner were her preparations made then they roused a smothered sense of resistance" (72). Nothing could quench her flames of resistance as a telling feature in her characterization, accentuating her difference amid a flock of ornamented and decorated ladies of the leisure class. These flames put her at the outskirts of that society as its main scapegoat: "Talk of love making people jealous and suspicious--it's nothing to social ambition! Louisa used to lie awake at night wondering whether the women who called on us called on *me* because I was with her, or on *her* because she was with me; and she was always laying traps to find out what I thought" (250-51). The jealousy they feel is due to her innate difference that stems from her true love for Selden. In a world of luxury and leisure, an impoverished and unwed Lily will seek refuge in dreams of romance and love. Many are the occasions on which she chooses to surrender to her fate. For instance, instead of meeting Percy Gryce at Bellmont, the Trenors' county home, she chooses to be with Selden. The comfort and easiness marking her encounters with Selden stand as an escape from the smothering grips and chains of her society. As the novel unfolds Lily grows aware that her struggle to fit in is fruitless and the life of parties and gatherings ceases to be desirable. When "two hands reach for the same object simultaneously, conflict cannot fail to result," writes Girard (14). Hence, the rising turmoil of Lily as she becomes aware of the stifling atmosphere that clutches her soul and sinks her into darkness becomes evident when Bertha Dorset spreads rumors, "The whole truth?" Miss Bart laughed. "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," (23) that spoil her social image that cannot be repaired nor rescued.

Restoring order, according to Girard, goes through "organizing retributive violence into a united front against an enemy common to all the rivals, either an external enemy or a member of the community, symbolically designed as an enemy, violence itself is transformed into a socially

constructive force” (15). Violence becomes therefore legitimized and called for, and so is Lily’s death. Her death further accentuates her ultimate position as a “surrogate victim” (Girard 16). The deliberate act to put an end to her life presents Lily as a complex character who would in a moment of weakness prove to be strong and determined. She comes to view her decision as “not merely as postponement, but as a solution of her troubles. Moral complication existed for her only in the environment that had produced them. . . . [T]hey lost their reality when they changed their background” (186).

Her decision to leave the world of social pretense and hypocrisy and seek refuge in the comforting darkness of death stems from Wharton’s understanding of the rising spirit of the New Woman at the turn of the century. Reflecting on Wharton’s interest in the woman question, Elizabeth Ammons claims that “typical women in her view—no matter how privileged, non-conformist or assertive—were not free to control their own lives, and that conviction became the foundation of her argument with American optimism for more than twenty years. . . . In her opinion, the American woman was far from being a new or whole human being” (13). Her inability to be free is due to the holding chains of patriarchy and social hypocrisy that reduce her potential, which drove Wharton to dramatize Lily’s fate. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton confesses that by immersing into the tragic fate of Lily she wants to write about a “frivolous society” such as New York and “what frivolity can destroy” (207). While society puts Lily in a crossroads of marrying well and following the path of a lady like, Lily keeps willingly putting off her opportunities for stability. In doing so, she subconsciously refuses to be contained in the traditional female role as the latter imprisons her and smothers her potential. By the end of the novel, Lily cries out her pain: “I have tried hard, but life is difficult and I am a very useless person” (*House of Mirth* 296).

The rhetorical question in the above quotation asserts the smothering emptiness that used to mark her existence. It is a nothingness that stems from hypocrisy and pretense that sucked Lily’s potential and left her devastated, which explains her feeling of uselessness and helplessness. She has to escape this world rather than make “sacrifices,” (193) seeking personal freedom and fulfillment. Justifying her protagonist’s choice to end her life, Wharton writes “she could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume” (*A Backward*, 79). Though she has been trained to live under the light of the social gatherings of New York elitist society, Lily’s flower would only blossom when she abandons “the hierarchies of wealth and prestige” (80). The final scene where Selden bends over Lily to kiss her recalls the myth of Sleeping Beauty. The way Wharton visualizes the scene looks more of a parody as Wharton understands the death of Lily not as an entry into society but as an escape from the constraints and confinements unleashed by the prince’s kiss. It is Selden’s inability to kiss her that permits her self to be liberated.

3. Lily and Art: The House of Mirth a Feast of a Dying Self

Lily’s true self would only be revealed through art and artistic creation as her death takes a dramatic dimension that recalls the downfall of a tragic heroine. She may not be an artist; still art plays an important aspect of her life. In critical moments in the novel tracing her downfall, Lily has been associated with the healing powers of art. In the first Book, Lily resorts to the art of letter writing. These letters were actually written by Bertha Dorset in which she confesses her love affair with Lawrence Selden. Mistakenly taken for Selden’s beloved, Lily seizes this opportunity to live such a fantasy. These narratives seem to provide Lily with a comforting sense of self-fulfillment that permits her to fantasize about her love for Selden. It is in the world of fantasy and dreams that Wharton’s heroine finds her true identity that blossoms in the written words of love and passion. However, a current pattern in Lily’s journey downwards is the tacit association of pain and joy. Amid agony and sorrow, Lily seems to find some joy as in pretending to be Selden’s secret beloved, though the one who truly wrote destroyed her unique chance to marry well.

Her self-identity is to be revealed in the “*tableau vivant*” scene, one of the turning points moments in the novel. Playing the role of Mrs Llyod as painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, Lily stands on stage in a theatrical manner covered by nothing but a white drapery. She seems to engrave an unfathomable word on a tree branch. Lily stands ““a wonderful spectacle,” claims Selden, ‘I always like to see what [she is] doing” (144). Commenting on her character’s choice of such a defying tableau, Wharton writes “She has shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself” (141-42). The type she represents emphasizes the dramatic and tragic quality of an existence doomed to be silenced over and not uttered as the current language fails at understanding. Additionally, the unfathomable words she is engraving and the white drapery she is wearing stand as a motif of emancipation, asserting the importance of the scene as a moment of an awakening consciousness that will permit Lily to transcend the limitations of her social milieu. Her newly celebrated self-image unveils itself when setting free from the manacles and chains of class and gender, taking a higher level by the end of the novel when Lily deliberately chooses to put an end to her misery. Just after the end of the tableau, Lily returns home to burn the letters, collect her fine gowns and jewelry, and writes a few notes, evoking a new departure in life. Then, in a fairy-tale like gesture, she lies on her “black walnut bed,” (180) announcing the beginning of a new, everlasting journey. The preparations she handles and the serenity of the scene evoke an aura of religiosity as the scene stands as a ritual of rebirth and renewal.

The ceremonial quality of Lily’s rebirth ritual accentuates the corporeal nature of her desire for freedom and emancipation. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous, a French feminist philosopher and activist, proposes *écriture féminine* as the adequate linguistic system to transmit female desire that generates from and mirrors the workings of her body, reconstructing therefore a unique and exceptional experience. Cixous reckons the importance of corporeality; she therefore seeks to free the dancing serpents of the Medusa from the confining images of monstrosity that imprisoned her. Analogously, she attempts to free the female from the manacles of patriarchy. Such a freedom is conditioned with a renewed return to the body. Clothes and accessories are but ornaments of confinement and restriction. She further defines this newly-found female language as being fluid and unfixd. In the image of Medusa’s moving serpents, *écriture féminine* has no fixed order, located “everywhere” (336). Such fluidity entails a resistance to the cultural and linguistic constraints associated with masculine oppression. If ever there is a fine link between Girard’s theory and that of Cixous is their mutual agreement on the importance of desire in shaping one’s consciousness.

While Girard believes that our desires are shaped by the others’ own desires, Cixous acknowledges the uniqueness of female desire that has been scapegoated by patriarchy. It is male rivalry that victimizes and binds female desire to shatter. In an attempt to free such a desire, Cixous calls on women to “write [their] body in order to discover [their] self. [They] must explore [their] *jouissance*, [their] sexual pleasure, so as to bring down phallogocentric discourse, and ultimately change the world” (426). In the imaginary world created by the love letters, Lily lives her own *jouissance* and explores sexual pleasure by pretending to be Selden’s secret beloved. She fulfills her desire which grants her power and daringness to kiss Selden and gives up on her previous plans of marrying into wealth. In the *tableau vivant* scene, Lily’s desire to break free from the manacles of her society is clear in her choice of the white drapery that stands as a motif of freedom and emancipation. It is a moment of radical metamorphosis, since “female libido [always] produce[s] far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think” (885). The political and social change announcing Lily’s emancipation is seen in her seclusion from the elitist circle of old moneyed New York society and her dependence on the few skills she has to survive. Her sense of dignity is manifested in her refusal to accept assistance from Rosedale, who remains a faithful friend willing to support her unconditionally.

Cixous trusts the “beautiful . . . and laughing,” (887) female to explore and voice her true self. Nevertheless, she does not exclude the masculine, considering him a “stimulus,” (888) and so did

Wharton by shaping Lily's journey towards self-realization with her love for Selden: "But now his love was her only hope, and as she sat alone with her wretchedness the thought of confiding in him became as seductive as the river's flow to the suicide. The first plunge would be terrible – but afterward, what blessedness might come!" (*House of Mirth* 49-50). Because of the joy it brings, Lily accepts to be Selden's secret beloved and refuses to reveal the truth though keeping silent over the matter harms her reputation. Being the supposed writer of these letters, "derives pleasure from this gift of alterability," writes Cixous (890). This new identity permits her to see herself as the "dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous and capable of others, of the other woman that she will be" (890). However, the final decision to put an end to her life asserts that Lily searches for a unique self-image and identity. She refuses to live in the shadow of deceit as she comes to grasp her true identity. It is by willingly succumbing into the comforting darkness of death that she sets herself free. Death proves to be the protagonist's ultimate moment of jouissance. Though painful, it is necessary. It hints to the issue of female authorship that has to surmount pain and rejection to assert her true print which may be different yet authentic to female experience. The darkness of death recalls that of the female womb; it is therefore from the labyrinth darkness of the female body that generates the female text gauging with female desires and dreams. Just as the words engraved on the bush in tableau vivant, female writing is unfathomable to male oppressing reader. Both of society and gender hinder the process of decoding female language as they do not permit him to see into its intricacies and account for its uniqueness. This explains Selden's inability to fathom the whispered name on Lily's dying lips by the end of the novel: "That was all he knew—all he could hope to unravel of the story. The mute lips on the pillow refused him more than this—unless indeed they had told him the rest in the kiss they had left upon his forehead"(300). Though he admired her beauty, he was unable to fathom her soul nor account for her uniqueness.

With the death of her female heroine in the *House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton abandons the house and its confining contours that influenced and shaped her writings. Previously, she had to abide to the role and script of the lady in a world of social gathering and gossiping. Seeing into the hypocrisy and pretense of old-moneyed New York society, Wharton grants her protagonist Lily Bart as well as herself as both a woman and writer the power to grow free from the wretched constraints of class and gender. In the light of converging a French feminist reading of female writing, Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine*, and an anthropological understanding of human desire, René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, the paper in hand aimed at scrutinizing the smothering effect of society when shaping one's desire through the study of Lily Bart's struggle for self-acquisition in a world that limits her potential in terms of class and gender stratification. Growing aware that she has been living another identity than her own, another desire than hers, Lily decides to put an end to a vicious circle that stifles her soul and shatters her dreams of love and romance.

4. Conclusion

She finds solace in the comforting darkness of death. Though the act of suicide may be mistakenly fathomed as a cowardly decision to escape life, it is a liberating step in the process of self-renewal and rebirth. Through the death of her female protagonist, Wharton is born anew, aware of the limitations imposed on her as a woman writer. In this vein, the darkness of death recalls that of the female womb, the locus of female language, experience, and desire, asserting therefore that her aesthetic consciousness is shaped by her corporeality and stressing the uniqueness of her experience and desire as a woman. Hence, the collapse of the house of mirth is a collapse of the old world.

5. References

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