

The cost of conformity



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

According to the Marxist theoretician Louis Althusser, society's class structure and gender roles depend primarily not on economics, but on the power of attitudes and ideas. In Edith Wharton's classic work, *The House of Mirth*, characters show varying cognizances of this social force. Wharton's novel clearly illustrates that the evolution of a person's identity within Victorian-era American culture depended on his or her awareness of ideological influences. In particular, Wharton uses three archetypal groups to show that the margin of distinction between these two states of awareness is occupied by one's sense of self. She also structures the novel to poise her protagonist, Lily Bart, on the brink of a minefield that represents this dichotomy. Initially unaware, Lily's interaction with other characters gradually removes her ignorance, allowing her to see herself as she is—and, more importantly, forcing her to evaluate the emotional sacrifices associated with adopting her socially-constructed identity. Victorian America was based on a gendered hierarchy where men reigned supreme. In this world, men were regarded as the intrinsically superior sex, while women were looked down upon as an inferior caste. In "Wharton's *House of Mirth*," David Manheim discusses the oppressive forces of the gender ideology that dictated "the way in which woman is seen as a commodity, object, Other, to the observing male," a station that makes women suitable for nothing but marriage (Manheim 1). This placed pressure on women to assume a matrimonial capitalist mentality, or a mindset geared toward securing fortune and status (as opposed to love and happiness) through marriage. In seeing how this way of thinking affected Lily, Manheim illustrates that her identity struggle is largely induced by this social philosophy. Benjamin Carson also comments on the workings of ideology within the Victorian era in

“ That Doubled Vision: Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*.” He particularly identifies how sex roles act as bars in the “ iron cage of ideology” (Carson 695). It is in this “ prison” of conventional thought that Wharton’s prominent theme is realized: Socially acceptable decisions are superior to emotionally preferred ones. Since ideology dictates what is “ socially acceptable,” the need for a personal identity is greatly reduced. Even so, one still may develop a “ consciousness of oppression,” which Carson describes as a level of awareness that ultimately determines how clearly one is able to perceive his or her self being acted on by the ideology (Carson 698). With an increasing degree of this consciousness, one is able to differentiate between what is or is not emotionally preferable. Accordingly, one’s sense of identity is dependent on his or her cognizance of the ideology at work within the self. Manheim nourishes his own theories of identity with Carson’s “ consciousness of oppression” to show that characters unaware of or “ inside” the ideology are unable to be defined outside of society. Not surprisingly, these combined ideas expose how a character’s ignorance of ideological forces creates a sense of pseudo-individualism, further preventing him or her from developing this “ consciousness of oppression.” To underline this relationship between identity and awareness, Wharton poignantly depicts the different states of “ consciousness of oppression” in her characters. In particular, Wharton designs three archetypes to stimulate the evolution of Lily’s perception, as well as to encourage her to journey across the minefield. These archetypes range from impassive pawns to devious manipulators, yet they all contribute to Lily’s development. This process turns out to be gradual, however, as Lily, after being awakened to the presence of ideology, must then place herself outside of the society that forged her existence.

Wharton's strategy of refining the heroine's perception through interaction allows the reader to trace Lily's shift towards what Carson calls "that doubled vision," the recognition that one is both "constructed by ideology" and also cognizant of his or her "social constructedness" (Carson 695). The first and perhaps the most generic archetype that Wharton sets in Lily's path is that of the emotionally constipated woman, unaware of the ideology that compels her to act as though she were an object. This covert force, defined by author Peter Barry as "... an internalized form of social control which makes certain views seem 'natural' or invisible so that they hardly seem like views at all, just 'the way things are'" is responsible for the socially constructed identity of Mrs. Peniston, Lily's wealthy aunt and patroness (Barry 164-5). Like many others, Mrs. Peniston "faithfully conformed" to the aristocratic ideology that rendered her as lifeless as an ornament (Wharton, *Mirth* 38). Even her most generous acts are little more than the "code of 'niceness'" that Carson speaks of, which is a social convention that "demanded total suppression of instinct" (Carson 706). Altogether, Mrs. Peniston's fidelity to tradition stunts her emotive capacities as well as her will. As Manheim remarks, "Active will within a conventional frame is crucial" (Manheim 2). Extending his argument in light of Carson's, this will is critical because it defies the code of "niceness" and demonstrates that personal identity cannot exist outside of the cultural frame that first defines it. Another character that embodies this archetype, though not by default of tradition, is Judy Trenor. Judy, a longstanding friend of Lily, married "up" in both fortune and status. Because of this, her primary purpose in life is playing the social game that substitutes societal approval for meaningful relationships. Wharton introduces Judy as a woman who "knew no more

personal emotion than that of hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house-parties than herself” (Wharton, *Mirth* 42). Judy’s existence as a mannequin of social instruction is motivated by her hunger for attention. More clearly than any other character in the book, Judy’s character is a perfect paradigm of Carson’s reminder that ideology transforms people into “ subjects” that “ lack the possibility or agency of self-determination” (Carson 697). Manheim then takes this a step further to show that self-definition is clearly revealed by one’s motivation. This indicates that Judy’s incentives as a hostess prevent her from carrying out anything that does not bear her social image in mind, let alone identifying her plight. Thus, without realizing that she is a socially constructed individual, Judy, like Mrs. Peniston, cannot be defined outside of her role as a woman in Victorian society. It is easy to see how Lily’s interface with these characters exposes her to the emptiness that comes with fulfilling her gender role. Soon after moving in with her aunt, Lily learns how superficial her appearance is; comparing how her aunt acts when in a crowd to when she is alone in her parlor, she sees the use of facade. This introduces Lily to the reality that society largely consists of people who, like her aunt, really only act as though they are living. As Manheim reminds us, “ To act is to play a role inscribed by someone else, with some else’s words” (Manheim 2). This role-playing is the socially constructed role also enacted by Judy, whose actions and words reveal her emotionally impoverished state. Lily’s “ consciousness of oppression” is aroused by these characters because she sees how gender ideology reduces women to subjects that lack any definition outside of a social setting. As this realization sinks in, Lily foresees the propensity of her own submission to this complacent and meaningless

lifestyle. The male counterparts of this archetype also have an effect on the development of Lily's awareness. In particular, her dealings with Gus Trenor and George Dorset allow her to see the behavioral confinements that outline socially acceptable conduct. Trenor and Dorset are lonely, middle-aged married men who find themselves infatuated with Lily because she is not yet a puppet of society. Both men are victims of hegemony, despairing of the detachment from their wives because they do not see a way to remedy it. Their actions only amplify Lily's own perception of the forces at work in society. Meanwhile, although Lily is still a long way from directly identifying her emerging consciousness with ideological forces, this interaction illuminates the "slippage between the social construction of gender and self-representation of gender," what Carson cites as the critical point in recognizing the existence of ideology (Carson 697). This is the stimulus for Lily's "consciousness of oppression." It frightens her to think that her intentions for marrying well put her on the very same path that led these men to emotional destruction. In addition to its intended applications for Lily's dynamic character growth, Carson's evaluation of the margin of distinction between "social construction" and "self-representation" of gender provides Manheim with a point of departure into the text. Noting that it is not without significance that Lily never marries, Manheim remarks, "...an undefined part of [Lily], unassimilated to the cultural frames that define her, resists marriage precisely because in all its plausible forms it threatens to fix in her the very sorts of conventional actions that make her feel most like a cog in a machine" (Manheim 2). Thus, Lily's actions precede her awareness of a nagging voice deep down: that the security of conformity is not worth the emotional sacrifice. To draw this specific concern toward the surface of

Lily's consciousness, Wharton again uses interaction, though this time with a different character prototype, to intensify both Lily's awareness and the rising action of the plot. This second archetypal group that Wharton uses to further stimulate the evolution of Lily's awareness displays an intermediate "consciousness of oppression." Both Mr. Rosedale and Bertha Dorset belong to this group, demonstrating that they are at least aware – and perhaps even supportive – of the social ideology that allows them to manipulate people. Rosedale is a self-made millionaire who desperately desires to boost his social status, a feat that requires him to both uphold the gender ideology and respect its function as a social convention. Through his economic ascent he demonstrates that he possesses that "active will" which Mannheim finds so critical within a conventional frame. As a result, all that remains for him to close the gap is finding the right wife to insert him into the higher circles. Lily then becomes the object of his desire, both because she is exceedingly beautiful and because she has the connections and skills to smooth his transition, which Carson remarks upon as her cumulative value as a commodity. He proposes to Lily with the air of a businessman who anticipates a mutually beneficial exchange, openly acknowledging that their best reasons to marry are social ones. This strategic pursuit of elevated status reveals his awareness that society is a machine run by ideas, one of which is the socially constructed identity, and is therefore beyond the control of humanity. Bertha Dorset also manipulates the social system as she takes advantage of those who are unaware of ideological influences. She is a wealthy, self-absorbed woman who has a number of extramarital affairs that she furtively conceals from both society and her husband. The way she conducts herself reveals that she is quite conscious of ideology working on

society, while her objectification of others shows this force at work within herself. Carson remarks that such a state of mind is both inside and outside ideology, wherein she is interpellated. This means that “social representations [are] accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation, and so becomes, for that individual, real, even though it is in fact imaginary” (Carson 709). This is true of Bertha to the degree that her cognizance of the ideology gives her the capacity to accept or reject it. More accurately, however, she operates the ideology to her benefit because condoning social attitudes allows her both the luxury of maintaining her affluent lifestyle and enjoying her infidelity. Overall, it is much easier for Bertha to remain an informed insider in the circle of society than it is for her to foster a unique identity outside of ideology. More than anything, Lily’s interaction with Rosedale and Bertha reflects how both her perspective of society and her self-perception have changed. In general, her encounters with these two characters expose the “insidious nature” of aristocratic ideology, which confirms her suspicions about the constitutive attitudes toward gender and social status (Carson 699). This reassurance only strengthens her sensitivity to the ideological forces at work in and around her. Lily’s relations with Rosedale in particular, however, allow her to realize that her fears of poverty are so firmly ingrained in her character that she would consent to a loveless marriage if it meant attaining financial security. Lily initially dismissed his proposal, which Manheim notes as a sign that part of her is resisting being defined by society. Desperation, however, prompts her to later accept his offer. This teaches Lily that there is more to conquering ideology than realizing its existence. It shows her that she must exercise the active will to cross the minefield in order to completely discard

the socially constructed identity thrust upon her as a child. While Lily's situation with Rosedale reveals her weakness, her dealings with Bertha ultimately demonstrate her strength. Wharton does this purposefully, using an ironic "coincidence" in which Lily obtains the means to destroy her enemy's status; however, this comes at the expense of her true love's exposure. As the book progresses, this becomes less of a moral dilemma and more of a struggle between Lily's two conflicting identities: the approved female paragon and her own unique sense of self that has been developing since the awakening of her "consciousness of oppression." The former would obviously disclose the information at the strategic moment, an action conditioned by society. The latter, however, must determine how valuable this social reputation is to her new self-definition before she can decide what to do. A penetrating question is here raised by Mannheim, who inquires how actions can have meaning if "all one's acts are conditioned," as they would be if Lily ignored her "doubled vision," which has been significantly refined since Carson first cited its awakening (Mannheim 2). From her observations of Bertha, Lily is at least able to see that even manipulating people and quietly defying the ideological morals offers only a shallow existence. Additionally, Bertha acquires satisfaction, which is notably short-lived, through "nastiness," a trait that has never been characteristic of Lily. Just as Wharton uses the first two archetypes to demonstrate to Lily what will happen with submission to the ideology, she also gives Lily a paradigm for what will manifest itself in a life free from social anxiety. This model is embodied in the third group, the one beyond concern for societal approval. Lawrence Selden, Lily's true love, describes his own perception of this free horizon as the home of the "republic of the spirit," a state of mind that maintains

“[Freedom] from everything – from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, for all the material accidents” (Wharton, *Mirth* 71). Lily’s response to this theory reflects what both Carson and Manheim note to be her largest obstacle, her perception of herself as an expensive creature. Carson in particular remarks that “Lily is well aware of the fact that she is of that society, that she is of the ‘crowded selfish world of pleasure’” (Carson, 707). What Carson fails to say, however, is that Lily’s view of herself as one who needs money is continually massaged by her interaction with characters. These people are for Lily what Selden would call the “sign-posts” that guide one towards the republic of the spirit, but she has to “know how to read them” before she can find her way to the land of the free (Wharton, *Mirth* 71). This makes little sense to Lily until, by comparing people to this last archetype, she sees the socially constructed identity both in others and in herself, at which point these characters become the letters of these signs that spell out warnings of emotional debilitation. Despite Selden being one of the most influential people in Lily’s life, Wharton designs his character such that Lily is initially able to dismiss the significance of the “republic of the spirit” because he is a man and his gender role permits him more liberty. She comes to him towards the end of the book to tell him she is tired of fighting society. However, in the conversation that ensues, she realizes that she has become too much of an individual to give in to the ideology. This is why Wharton places Nettie Struthers, a female character of this archetype, in Lily’s path directly after Lily leaves Selden’s flat. Nettie comes across Lily slowly making her way home and, perceiving her fatigue, insists that she accompany her to her own warm, cozy home. Carson sums it up well when he says that Lily’s encounter with Nettie is the “epiphanic moment that has

been building since [Lily] first met the char-woman on the steps of the Benedick" (Carson 709). This scene is where all of the signs come together – and Lily no longer reads them as though they were a foreign language. All in all, Lily spends very little time with Nettie, but through the steady babbling of this pleasant woman Lily is able to see “ a vision of the solidarity of life” that had never before come to her (Carson 709). In a sense, Lily’s “ chance” meeting with Nettie is the final sign on the road to the “ republic of the spirit.” Lily now perceives herself standing at a fork in the outermost path in the minefield, knowing that one trail leads to freedom and the other winds back into the field. She finds her resolve to press on being antagonized by the voice of ideology, a forceful whisper that attacks the part of her heart still shackled to society. Yet Lily’s consciousness has developed so much at this point that she is able to refer back to the feelings she had at the Bry’s tableaux vivant, where Carson claims that “ she sees herself being seen, yet she no longer believes in the image reflected back at her” (Carson 709). She has “ that doubled vision: the knowledge that one is ‘ at the same time inside and outside the ideology...and conscious of being so, conscious of that twofold pull, of that division” (Carson 695). Manheim comments on this internal struggle with deeper scrutiny than Carson, citing it as it is the final tug-of-war between the free spirited Lily and the socially constructed Lily, the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde duo that she has been dragging around with her throughout the novel. It is this encounter, Lily’s last interaction with any person, that pushes her down the road less traveled. Altogether, Lily’s interface with these archetypes prepares her to realize what Wharton seeks to expose about ideological forces: that they are the means of and end that suffocates individualism. This suppression of instinct is a premonitory

statement of the emotional debilitation that accompanies conformity.

Moreover, it is the destruction of meaningful conventions, like fulfilling marriage relationships. Lily's journey to discover this bears evidence to the fact that discarding the manacles of ideology entails more than awareness. It also requires the development of self-defined motive and will, so that one is able to survive, as opposed to avoiding, the blows of social erasure that come with this consciousness. This is no easy feat. Yet, as Lily says herself, "One must go on living" (Wharton, *Mirth* 326).