

A feminist study of the house of mirth: lily bart as art and artist



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape? (27)

In this passage of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Selden's description of Lily Bart clearly exposes the image that her environment has shaped of her. Lily is seen as a finely crafted product of the culture that surrounds her. In order to survive, she is forced to maintain two specific roles. Trained to identify herself as a marketable item among the elite who so casually objectify her, the first role Lily maintains is that of an object d'art. The second role is very much an effect of the first. Displayed as an aesthetic commodity of her environment, Lily becomes not only art, but artist; not one who composes with an empty canvas or a palate of colors, but one who uses her own body as the medium. Educated at a young age about the shortage of opportunities for a woman of her status, Lily is immediately forced into the acceptance of her position in society as an object of art. As Frances Retuccia comments in her feminist perspective essay of *The House of Mirth*, " She makes plain her awareness of the sexism of her society by spelling out the difference between an insufficiently rich man and an insufficiently rich woman ' Ah, there's the difference- a girl must marry, a man may if he chooses'" (407). Lily continues this discourse with Selden: Your coat's a little shabby- but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is

<https://assignbuster.com/a-feminist-study-of-the-house-of-mirth-lily-bart-as-art-and-artist/>

asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop- and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership. (33)The language Lily uses in this passage perfectly illustrates the objectification of women during that time period. The clothes of a woman are described as the background and the frame, both are terms that relate directly to decorative works of art. Lily clearly recognizes this label placed on her by her prejudice and chauvinistic society, and as any naturally beautiful woman of that day would have been inclined to do, she embraces it. Lily knows that her only card to play in the social game is her beauty, for she was trained to believe that she alone would return the pride to her family with her face. Therefore, Lily values her appearance as something incredibly precious to her. The careful attention paid to her appearance is noted specifically when she is inspecting her reflection in the mirror at the Trenor home. She is shocked upon noticing the " faint flaws" and " little lines near her mouth," and responds in an attempt to justify their cause. The second role Lily finds herself entitled to fill can be easily viewed as a direct effect of the first. Upon the embracing of her objectified position in society as a piece of art, Lily soon distinguishes herself as brilliant in the art of enhancing her own beauty. This aspect of Lily as artist is displayed perfectly in the tableau scene. She is thrilled with the prospect of studying art under the guidance of Morpeth, " But keenest of all was the exhilaration of displaying her own beauty under a new aspect: of showing that her loveliness was no mere fixed quality, but an element shaping all emotions to fresh forms of grace" (136).

In this passage, Lily is seen as embracing her physical beauty as her only
<https://assignbuster.com/a-feminist-study-of-the-house-of-mirth-lily-bart-as-art-and-artist/>

method of survival in a male-dominant world. In Gary Totten's critical essay entitled, "The Art and Architecture of the Self: Designing the 'I'-Witness in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," Totten argues that Lily Bart's portrayal of the Reynolds' painting actually becomes a form of self-representation, or as he explains, "an instance of representation representing itself" (72). He suggests that, Lily manages to retain her own identity during the performance rather than becoming the figure in the portrait, and the spectators praise Lily's ability to express her own individuality on stage rather than her fidelity to the portrait. Totten continues in discussing the awareness Lily had for the impact her appearance had on its observers. In the tableau scene, this awareness is intensified as she assesses the impact, and then constructs her subjectivity based on what she sees, "Thus, rather than having her subjectivity eclipsed in the tableau's structure, Lily uses the tableau to stage her subjectivity" (72). Once identifying Lily's position as a self-representative artist, Totten concludes this section of the essay by exclaiming that, "we might even term Lily's production of self in the tableau an 'architecture of self,' due to Lily's (and Wharton's) interest in aesthetic design and structural decoration" (72). As Lawrence Selden gazes at Lily during her portrayal of the Reynold's painting at the tableau, he is awe-struck, "The noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt in her presence" (139). Yet this moment quickly fades with Ned Van Alstyne demeaning and chauvinistic comment towards her. Selden then finds himself unexpectedly affected by the accusation, "In the long moment before the curtain fell, he had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life" (139). Her beauty is both her blessing and her curse. Selden catches a glimpse of the

<https://assignbuster.com/a-feminist-study-of-the-house-of-mirth-lily-bart-as-art-and-artist/>

life Lily is trapped into living. She is an object of desire who has developed the keen talents of representing her beauty as art. Yet she is shunned and mocked by her observers because the implications suggested by being a bold, creative, beautiful woman. Ultimately, as a direct result of fulfilling the roles her environment has enforced upon her instead of discovering her true identity, Lily Bart brings about her own downfall. Works Cited Restuccia, Frances L. "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)." Ed. Shari Benstock. Boston: Bedford, 1994. Totten, Gary. "The Art and Architecture of the Self: Designing the 'I'- Witness in Edith Wharton's 'The House of Mirth.'" *College Literature* 27 (2000): 71-88. Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. Ed. Shari Benstock. Boston: Bedford, 1994.