

House of mirth essay



The Female Body in The House of Mirth The female body plays a very important role in The House of Mirth. Throughout the novel, Lily's body is objectified by others, and by herself. This objectification of her body leads to various hardships for Lily. Some of these hardships are caused by confusion, indecision, and communication issues. Also, I believe that both men in the novel, and Lily, are responsible for these hardships. Throughout the novel, all Lily really owns that is of value is her body.

I believe this to be true because there are various examples of men objectifying her for her body. Even Selden, who isn't even a member of the high society, and who should be more rational based on his lower social standing, objectifies Lily for her body. Edith Wharton makes this fact very clear at the beginning of the book when she writes: " Selden paused in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart. Selden had never seen her more radiant.

Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room, and under her dark hat and veil she regained the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing... .. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine gaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. "(3) As you can see from the quote above, Selden objectifies Lily for her body from the beginning.

He says that her distinguishing qualities are " chiefly external", which is what most of the men in the novel think of her as well. Also, after Lily leaves

Selden's flat at the beginning of the book, Selden "" paused to look about her", which is another sign of Selden's interest in Lily's looks. I think these quotes from the beginning of the novel show how Lily's beauty gets her attention from men. This becomes more apparent later in the novel when she was an object in a Tableaux Vivant. This scene from the novel exposed in greater detail society's views on women.

It brought to the forefront the problem of women being treated as an object, and men only being interested in women for their bodies. In the Tableaux Vivant, Lily stands in front of everyone as a sexual object for them to project their desires upon. For example, Gus Trenor sees Lily as nothing more than a sexual object that he has already paid for by investing in the stock market for her, and this is what leads to him bringing her to his home. Selden was also guilty of projecting his desires upon Lily.

Selden's guilt is proven by this quote: " It's expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part"(3) We can see, from the quote above, that Selden isn't really seeing the " real" Lily. He is, however, seeing Lily's beauty. I believe this because, if he were really seeing the " real" Lily, then he would see the hardships that she has suffered, such as how she is poor, and how she degrades herself to find a rich husband.

Instead, like everyone else, he just sees her beauty. He doesn't realize that, since she doesn't have money or power, she is never actually being herself. I say this because these things, money and power, lead to a lack of independence. This lack of independence leads to Lily doing things she

wouldn't do if she were rich and had social standing, such as performing in the Tableaux Vivant, and trying desperately to seduce men that she doesn't love. One example of how Lily tries to seduce men she doesn't love, for wealth and social standing, is her encounter with Percy Gryce.

Lily sees that he is shy, and she knows she can take advantage of him by using her looks. Lily also believes, after the encounter, that she can have his proposal by the end of the week. Lily knows that she would be nothing more than another acquisition for Percy, but she wants to marry him anyway. This shows that, on the outside, it seems as though Lily cares little about love and romance. Her main priorities are wealth and social standing. She shows that she is willing to objectify her body, like she did in the Tableaux Vivant, to gain wealth and social standing.

I believe that, because of the facts stated above, Lily is partially responsible for the objectification of her body. I say this because Lily somewhat enjoys being objectified. For example, the novel says she enjoyed being in the Tableaux Vivant because it gave her a chance to show off her attractiveness to potential suitors. The novel says: " But keenest of all was the exhilaration of displaying her own beauty under a new aspect: of showing that her loveliness was no more fixed quality; but an element shaping all emotions to fresh forms of grace"(3) Essentially, this is the same thing a prostitute or stripper does, except in a somewhat lassier fashion. Prostitutes and strippers show off their body in order to attract men, and to gain wealth. This is the same thing Lily is doing except without the sexual favors, which she will not do because she has higher morals. Also, during the Tableaux Vivant display, Ned Van Alstyne makes a statement essentially stating that Lily is nothing

more than an item displaying itself at an auction for bidding. This is yet another example of how Lily is objectified by men for her body.

By standing in front of all the men, dressed provocatively and showing off her body, she is letting the men determine her worth based on her body alone. In the novel, it is apparent that Lily has desires to be more than an object, but she is indecisive and confused, and never actually takes substantial action towards achieving that goal. I say this because what she is apparently trying to obtain, from her actions, is wealth and social status. But every time she gets close to achieving this objective, she remembers she wants freedom and love as well, and has second thoughts about the man she is going after.

For example, during her pursuit of Percy Gryce, she has second thoughts about trying to marry him. In the novel it says: " She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce - the more thought seemed to waken an echo of his droning voice - but she could not ignore on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom... and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life"(3) This shows that she clearly isn't happy with the lifestyle she is aiming for and finds it boring.

She shows this once again when she fails to go to church with Percy. These are examples of her being indecisive. This is because, at first, she wants wealth and social status, but then she has second thoughts and always fails to achieve her goal. This seems to be a common occurrence for Lily. She has trouble making up her mind, which is what I believe leads to her not taking

action on her real desires which are freedom, happiness, and love. I believe the problem for Lily is that she can't have everything she wants.

As I stated above, every time she gets close to obtaining wealth and social status, she decides she wants more and fails to achieve her goal. The problem she is facing here is that marriage with a person of higher social standing would be almost like a business deal, instead of a relationship based on love. Where the objective of marriage for men is not to be with someone they love, but someone who will help them rise in social status, and in Lily's case, someone of beauty to show off.

For example, during the Tableaux Vivant display, Rosedale sees her for the economic benefit she could bring him. He sees her beauty and believes she is the perfect woman for him to put on display with jewels, and place in portraits. He sees a potential marriage with Lily as a business deal or relationship. He even admits that he does not need Lily to love him, and that he only needs her to put on display for his own social benefit. All of these examples are examples of Lily failing to communicate her worth through words, and instead, letting men determine her worth through her body.

The Tableaux Vivant display is a symbol for the entire book of how she just stood there and let others look at her as an object and determine her value for her. Throughout the book, no one was able to understand Lily's needs and desires because she failed to put them into words. For example, at the end of the book, Lily had an opportunity before she died to tell Selden how she really felt. Instead, she just said that they wouldn't be seeing each other for a really long time and then overdosed on sleeping pills.

I think, if Lily could've just told and expressed her desires to Selden, then maybe she wouldn't have died and could have still led a happy life. Overall, the female body played an enormous role in the *The House of Mirth*. Lily's body being objectified was a major factor in her struggles throughout the book. She was put on display as an object, and she let others determine her worth for her. She needed to put her desires into words, and better communicate them to others. She could have determined her own worth and could have been happy.

Instead she became encumbered, and it eventually led to her demise. Works Cited 1. Harris, James W. " *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton. " Jameswharris. wordpress. WordPress. com, 21 Sept. 2008. Web. 30 Mar. 2012. . 2. Frances, Laura. " Language Conformity in " *The House of Mirth*"" UniversalJournal/AYJW. Universal Journal, 29 Sept. 2005. Web. 30 Mar. 2012. . 3. Wharton, Edith, and Elizabeth Ammons. *House of Mirth*. New York: W. W. Norton and,