High Society Love, or, Woman as Nothing

Caitlin Matwijec

Essay Submission
December 2010
High Society Love, or, Woman as Nothing

The image of a powerful, beautiful seductress is a very persuasive one. We easily believe that a woman, graced with beautiful features and a manipulative frame of mind, can best a man. We see this concept in the idealized, abstracted Lady of Courtly love, an angelic creature possessing every feature of grace and wisdom man can imagine, daring man to crazed feats of prowess (Žižek 2407). Yet how real is this concept of a beautiful woman using man’s sexual fantasies against him? How much power would such a woman really have? It seems hard to believe that a woman can have no power over man—how can she not, when she has the power to act out his every fantasy? It is at this point that the paradox of a woman’s power can be illuminated: to control the man, the woman must alter herself to fit what the man finds most desirable, and, to appease the man, she must stay that way (Žižek 2408-2409). By doing as the man wishes, the woman has an illusion of control—one that she believes in. But truly, she is just another “object… emptied of all real substance” (Žižek 2407). Edith Wharton’s novel, The House of Mirth, exemplifies just how powerless such a woman really is by detailing the life of Lily Bart, a beautiful socialite that is slowly being forced out of the social register because lack of wealth, jealousy, and a long trail of social missteps. In the quest to ensnare man with his own fantasies so that she might marry him for his money and regain her social status, she is unable escape from what Jacques Lacan calls the mirror stage of development, or the Imaginary. Lacan argues that the child, at an age of about six to eighteen months, sees its reflection in a mirror, and takes that “form” as the “Ideal-I,” or the “I”: the child looks at the reflection in the mirror as the whole of itself, thus leading to the “jubilant assumption of his specular image” (Lacan 1164-1165). The image seen in the mirror, then, is what the child identifies itself as and what leads “lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity” (Lacan 1166). The child creates an intrinsically false identity based on the image reflected in a mirror, and gets caught up
in the “succession of phantasies” the mirror stage “manufactures” for the child (Lacan 1166).

Essentially, based on the image in the mirror, the child develops a bloated sense of self that allows it to see itself as powerful. This concept relates to courtly love in the sense that the Lady, the perception of perfection, of courtly love is the mirror, and nothing but the mirror (Žižek 2409). Lily’s life—her capitalistic upbringing, her parents, her hardships—have all trained her to strive to be the perfect mirror—the Lady—so that she can have power over a man and control his wealth. Yet, ultimately, as the novel shows, the role of the Lady is not one defined by power, but rather by a lack of it. Although Lily has been taught to believe that using the paradigm of courtly love against men will grant her control and a financial means to everything she desires, *The House of Mirth* actually demonstrates that to do so is to grant all the control to the man and to live entirely in the Imaginary as his fantasy, which leads, ultimately, to death.

*The House of Mirth*, published in 1905, was a novel that brought to Wharton even more fame and wealth than, as a society woman herself, she already had (Meyers xvi). Although at first glance, *The House of Mirth* doesn’t seem anything like the naturalistic works of her contemporaries, Jack London or Stephen Crane, a closer look at the novel’s characters and situations reveal a version of naturalism as found in the lives of society’s elite. (Campbell). This identification as naturalism is highly important when related to the notion of courtly love.

Consider literary scholar Donna Campbell’s definition of naturalism:

The term *naturalism* describes a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings…. Through this objective study of human beings, naturalistic writers believed that the laws behind the forces that govern human lives might be studied and understood. Naturalistic writers… studied human beings governed by their instincts and passions as well as the ways in which the characters lives are governed by forces.
of heredity and environment. (Campbell)

In this sense, then, naturalism works to document how people survive in the world based upon the world they inhabit, the tools and instincts they’ve been given, and what they’ve been taught, all while remaining distantly impartial to the fate of the characters to ensure a more honest rendering of human life. This focus on environment and, essentially, personality helps draw the connection to courtly love. Although courtly love, at the surface, relates to an idealized medieval love, it also has a strong relation to the romantic/sexual relationships of New York’s societal elite at the dawn of the twentieth century, specifically as it relates to how Lily Bart attempts to secure a wealthy enough husband. Slavoj Žižek’s 1994 addition to the centuries-long discourse on courtly love, “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” confirms this: “The impression that courtly love is out of date, long superseded by modern manners, is a lure blinding us to how the logic of courtly love still defines the parameters of within which the two sexes relate to each other” (Žižek 2407). Although society has changed much in terms of technology, fashion, fads, etc., the underlying hierarchically male-dominated attitude towards gender and romantic relationships has remained much the same. In this sense, a naturalistic work is uniquely equipped to deal with courtly love; a naturalistic writer examines the way a society’s rules controls its inhabitants and considers the way people survive or fail under such pressures. As is seen in The House of Mirth, gender and class are important facets of a person that are judged quite harshly—Lily has to conform to the rules of her environment in able to fit the role of the Lady of courtly love; Edith Wharton, as naturalist, carefully and scientifically records how Lily’s impulsive nature keeps her from becoming an ornamental society wife.

Lily, as were all women of this time, was meant to be married; as Selden says early in the novel: “Isn’t marriage your vocation? Isn’t it what you’re all brought up for?” (Wharton 12). For a woman like Lily, a financially advantageous marriage was the ultimate attainment of a
woman’s life. Most importantly, it would mean security: “The certainty that she would marry Percy Gryce when she please had lifted a heavy load from her mind…. Her vulgar cares were at an end,” although, as we see, she does not end up marrying Mr. Gryce because she does not appear pious enough (Wharton 53, 82). Lily, not having enough money to live her lavish life with, needs to marry into a wealthy family so as to keep from becoming “dingy,” and to do so required the use of her considerable beauty and singular charms (Wharton 37-39). To marry meant safety from money woes, and for Lily, her financial burden only worsens over the course of a novel as she fails to secure a wealthy husband, and loses her inheritance from Aunt Peniston (Wharton 236). Money, in this type of a capitalist society, was everything. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, in her essay “The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart,” draws on Thorstein Veblen’s idea of “conspicuous consumption” to explain how crucial the importance of having more really is: “Like Veblen, Wharton represents a world in which people acquire and maintain status by openly displaying how much they can afford to waste; and like Veblen, she knows that the crowded conditions of modern life compel them to make such displays all the more conspicuously” (Yeazell 16-17). Being able to show off how much money you can spend without worry is essential, and being able to do so to society’s exacting standards makes a person all the more desirable; any one, like Simon Rosedale—the Jewish property owner—can be rich, but that doesn’t mean you can fit into this exclusive little piece of society (Wharton 17). Constant attention to wealth and its display is of the upmost important, as is pedigree.

Lily’s mother, early on, taught her the importance of having more—more money, more clothes, and a fanciful backdrop to display all this wealth. She has been taught that not displaying wealth in the flamboyant fashion prescribed by society is to “[live] like a pig” (Wharton 34). A lifestyle of conspicuous consumption requires a man to cover all its various costs. From her mother, Lily has learned that men are to provide for fanciful life, and to not
provide that is the absolute failure (Wharton 36). When Lily’s father announces that he is “ruined,” he no longer has any value; his subsequent death hardly registers as a tragedy when compared to the fact that Lily and her mother no longer have the same financial resources that they used to have: “he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfill his purpose…” (Wharton 36). Men are therefore objects of purpose: “the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks” (Wharton 32). Men, as Lily has been trained to think, have a purpose only in that they are there to take care of her financially. Later in her life, this training persists: Lily will only allow herself to marry a man that can guarantee the lavish lifestyle her mother trained her to expect. Selden, while interesting, is too poor to be marriageable, and Simon Rosedale, while incredibly rich, is too Jewish to be marriageable (Wharton 80, 188). It is only when Lily thinks that she has no other means of procuring wealth that she is willing to marry Simon Rosedale (Wharton 269). Of course, by this point in the novel, she is too ruined in society’s eyes to be a profitable match for the socially climbing Rosedale (Wharton 271). For Lily, a man’s worth is measured by how much he can provide for her; as she consistently loses society’s favor, she becomes more and more willing to take risks—like marrying Rosedale—in order to gain the wealth she so desires.

The Lady of courtly love is an interesting concept, because she is not in any way defined by her own character—this is something one can easily relate to the flexible Lily. The Lady is, at a surface level, a woman that exists only as a wholly idealized version of what a man wants; however, at a deeper lever, she is something a man avoids attaining because if he does, his Ideal will be shattered (Žižek 2407-2408, 2414). First, it is important to understand how the idealization of a woman works, as it is sort of a window to the rest of courtly love. Lacan said of her: “The Lady is never characterized for her real, concrete virtues, for her wisdom, her prudence, or even her competence. If she is described as wise, it is only because she embodies
an immaterial wisdom or because she represents its functions more than she exercises them” (Lacan qtd. in Žižek 2407). According to Lacan’s idea of the mirror stage, the Lady is, for no real reason at all, a fantasy ideal, the “I” that the young child found in the mirror. The Lady is a representational object, something that man finds to have meaning simply because he desires it to be so: the Lady, “deprived of every real substance,… functions as a mirror on to which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal” (Žižek 2408). The Lady, is, then, one of the “phantasies” that is “manufacture[d]” by the mirror stage (Lacan 166). Lily thinks that fulfilling this role will grant her power over the man, and she exhibits a keen understanding of how to properly represent herself, even if she doesn’t always follow the rules. Lily’s life and training, but especially her hardships, have made her exceedingly adaptable—“Misfortune had made Lily supple instead of hardening her, and a pliable substance is less easy to break than a stiff one”—which makes it easier for her to fit the role of the Lady (Wharton 40). Because of her pliancy, Lily is able to easily shape herself to fit the man’s desires, and she’s quite proud of her abilities, as evidenced by her self-congratulation while amusing Percy Gryce on the train to Bellomont, when she first caught his eye as a prospective wife: “It struck her as providential that she should be the instrument of his initiation. Some girls would not have known how to manage him” (Wharton 22). Yet, as the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that this role—the Lady—is the only one Lily knows how to fulfill. She, by imagining that she holds power over the man, fails to recognize that, in truth, she is nothing but a fragile bit of glass—a mirror.

Lily Bart is a woman that is hard to imagine on her own. When one considers Lily, it seems that one must also consider her suitors: Percy Gryce, Simon Rosedale, and, most importantly, Lawrence Selden. Lily’s mannerisms and actions are determined by society, and more specifically, whichever man she is most closely associated with at the time. Her father’s financial failures placed upon her shoulders the burden of reclaiming the wealth necessary to live
as a member of New York’s high society. She understands what men want to see in a prospective wife, down to the tiniest details; she shapes herself into this mold, stifling her own self in order to use man’s narcissistic weaknesses against him. She understands what men want to see; she shapes herself into the Lady, as defined by the centuries-long discourse on courtly love. The courtship process is all about disguise. Benjamin Carson, in his study of The House of Mirth, succinctly describes the system women are subject to: “‘accept and absorb’ your interpellated ‘imaginary’ self as ‘real’ and your social identity and investment in the hegemonic institutions are secure” (Carson 712). To be accepted as a possible wife, it is required that Lily live in the Imaginary, fulfilling the role of fantasy. In Lily’s case, this “absorption” is taken to a level that renders her completely unable to operate without acting as the mirror (Carson 712).

Lily’s relationship with Lawrence Selden is prominent from the first words of the novel. And although she will not marry him because he lacks the “great deal of money” that Lily requires, he crops up in the novel constantly (Wharton 12). One scene in the early chapters of the novel that examines their burgeoning relationship is when they take a walk at the Trenor’s Bellomont estate (Wharton 69). Although Lily is pursuing the wealthy Percy Gryce, she agrees to “[break] two engagements” with Percy in order to go out on a long afternoon walk with Selden (Wharton 71). This scene is one where we learn a lot about Selden, and his perceptions of Lily. Selden’s discussion of his personal idea of success, in comparison with Lily, is where he begins to gain a real measure of control over her. He calls success the ability “to keep a kind of republic of the spirit,” which is, “personal freedom…. from everything” (Wharton 74). The republic of the spirit is a state of mind that seems like a superiority he lords over the other members of society disguised with a thin layer of righteousness. In the description that follows, this republic of the spirit takes on some convoluted comparisons, including the Christian heaven: “[Y]ou will marry someone very rich, and [the republic of the spirit] is just as hard to get into as
the kingdom of heaven” (Wharton 75). This exclusive club is meant for those that are not quite so rich, an illusion that makes his lack of funds more acceptable; Lily, his illusion, needs to be saved from a fate of riches. When she says that he “create[s] arbitrary objections in order to keep people out,” Selden says something crucial: “It is not my republic; if it were, I should have a coup d’état and seat you on the throne” (Wharton 77). Lily is correct in saying that Selden is the one creating “objections to keep people out,” because the republic is within his own Imaginary. His idea is to make her the queen of a state of mind, the queen of a fantasy. The Lady—the queen—is the ideal leader for Selden’s imaginary republic. For him, his fantasy Lily is firmly entrenched in this role of trying to elevate her into a primary role of this illusionary republic of the spirit.

For Lily, the Imaginary is the Real. For example, in a scene where she takes part in Mrs. Bry’s tableaux vivants—a painted image is literally brought to life by an actress—she tries to charm society by dressing the eponymous part in Joshua Reynolds’s portrait of “Mrs. Lloyd” (Wharton 143). She certainly ends up charming Lawrence Selden: “In the long moment before the curtain fell, he had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life. It was as though her beauty, thus detached from that that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out supplicant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overmastering longing to be with her again” (Wharton 145). Selden is, of course, charmed by her beauty, but is most charmed by his fantasy of how the hardships of her life have made her reach out for him. He likes to imagine himself in role of champion, as one of the very few capable of seeing “the real Lily Bart,” an image that actually only exists inside his mind (Wharton 144). What Selden so likes about Lily is how important she makes him feel—because in an inexplicit way, he knows that the man controls the Lady. He has come to believe, from their conversations, that Lily’s charm lies in what he calls her “artificiality” (Wharton 15). And
for him, it does. Critic Gary Totten notes that Selden sees the *tableaux vivants* as “Lily’s perfect scenario” (Totten 80). For Selden, ultimately, Lily is meant to be an image, a work of art. Indeed, Selden’s perceptions of Lily color her any which way he desires even until the very last words of the novel.

In courtly love, it is essential that a distance always remains between the Lady and the man. This is why, in several scenes of the novel, Selden takes great pains to avoid being with Lily. After the *tableaux vivants* scene, Selden is enraptured with Lily, and wishes to visit her; yet, when he spies her exiting the Trenor house, immediately sails to Havana (Wharton149, 172, 190). After seeing her leave the Trenor home, when it is said that Judy Trenor is not in town, he assumes the worst of Lily, thinking she has entered into a sexual relationship with Gus Trenor, Lily’s friend’s husband, in exchange for money (Wharton 171). Of course, this is both, in a way, repulsive and appealing to Selden. Three months after the incident, Selden experiences a feeling of “disturbance” to be in her company again as a large group of Americans vacation in Paris (Wharton 199). Yet, he also develops a curious vision of her life in his head: “He seemed to see her poised on the brink of a chasm, with one graceful foot advanced to assert her unconsciousness that the ground was failing her” (Wharton 205). He finds alluring the idea that she is suffering from her downward spiral out of society, and, cannot help but resume the role of rescuer of the beautiful Lady, his dispossessed queen. He warns her to leave the company of the Dorsets, with whom Lily is vacationing; when Lily’s jealous “friend,” Bertha Dorset, strands her in Paris, Lily has nowhere to go for help but to Selden (Wharton 226, 233). He instructs her—“you must obey me,”—asserting his control over her, and notes her “weakness,” which he sees as the cause of this situation (Wharton 232-233). He needs to see her as the Lady in need of his help, always at the mercy of his kindness.

Later in the novel, this role of benevolent dictator becomes even more pronounced. Lily,
having no options for a marriage and thus no money, has been put into the role of secretary for a Mrs. Hatch, a divorced lady of from the West, and quite unplaced in New York society (Wharton 289-290). It is the best suited option for her to make some money, and it allows her to live in the world she is accustomed to (Wharton 293). Yet, after not speaking with her for a time after her request for help in Paris, Selden cannot help but go to her to demand: “You are to let me take you away from here,” here being the employ of Mrs. Hatch (Wharton 295). He feels that the position is not befitting her, and, ultimately, unbefitting of the helpless Lady he expects her to be (Wharton 297). And, although at first she refuses to comply, within a few weeks’ time, Lily leaves the employ of Mrs. Hatch (Wharton 300). Lily, only ever having been a fantasy to the man most closely associated with her at the time, is unable to interact with Selden unless she conforms to his fantasy of her. And she obviously takes a serious step down the social ladder by quitting her job with Mrs. Hatch: she is forced to work, sewing spangles on fashionable hats in a shop; a task is as bad at as she is unused to (Wharton 300). Her troubles, as a result of bending to Selden’s desires, only get worse. The work and her constant failures, along with the crippling loss of the fabulous society she’s used to, lead her to become addicted to a sleeping medication called chloral (Wharton 305-306, 344). The work, which for her is entirely foreign, wearies her, yet renders her sleepless. As scholar Nancy Von Rosk says, “Though a woman always eager to assert her own individuality, Lily cannot make it on her own…. Her old life is gone, and yet she is not able to create a new one” (Von Rosk 345). Lily’s discomfort and pain grows as the arc of the novel comes to its close; it is becoming increasingly evident that she will not be able to sustain this lifestyle.

No one seems very surprised when Lily dies. We learn of her death in a scene narrated through Selden, which is very telling, in terms of what her death symbolizes. Her addiction to chloral has proved to be her undoing, and she overdosed—purposefully or not—at a fatal level.
This scene allows for us to see how entirely important it is that the Lady remain a distant object, a force that is never realized in the real world. By insisting she exile herself to a deadly poverty, Selden has created the ultimate limiter between the Imaginary and the Real—death. The following scene lays out exactly the barrier that now exists between them:

He felt that the real Lily was still there, still close to him, yet invisible and inaccessible; and the tenuity of the barrier between them mocked him with a sense of helplessness. There had never been more than a little impalpable barrier between them—and yet he had suffered it to keep them apart! And now, though it seemed slighter and frailer than ever, it had suddenly hardened to adamant, and he might beat his life out against it in vain. (345)

Lily is without corporeal form; now, she cannot be anything for Selden but a fantasy. She will forever be just outside of his grasp, an object that cannot ever disappoint. Jennifer Fleissner, in her article, “The Biological Clock: Edith Wharton, Naturalism, and the Temporality of Womanhood,” likens Lily to a literal flower—a concept of womanhood that relates very nicely to the Lady—and further says that “Perversely, then, to die ‘in the flower of her youth’ becomes one way for the woman as flower to inhabit an eternal spring” (Fleissner 529). Lily, then, is courted by Selden to the grave, a place where she can, without the intrusion of reality, be permanently elevated to the status of the Lady. Her death is required: now she is inaccessible, the inalterably perfect Lady. She will always remain in the distance; Lily will always be trapped in this reflective moment of beautiful suffering, a possible suicide, a Lady in need of what only Selden can provide: a republic of the spirit.

Death, then, is the final realization of the Lady. Lily’s death is required, and she executes entirely Selden’s condemnation. This is the failure of the Lady: she so disguises herself that her own self is lost in the fantasy of the mirror stage. The Lady has no power over the man—since
she herself is a fantasy, her power is then only a fantasy as well. Lily’s failures are ones that accurately display how the beautiful woman of courtly love actually has no power at all. In the end, no one has really died. For Selden, Lily lives on, the same fantasy that she always was.
Works Cited


