1

Woman as Fetish

Self-Reification and the Aesthetic Commodity in Edith Wharton’s House of Mirth

Edith Wharton explored the relationship between the individual and the socius through issues of class and gender as they were manifested during one of America’s most explosive periods of industrial expansion and exploitation. As Blake Nevius observes, “Edith Wharton was one of the first American novelists to develop the possibilities of a theme which since the turn of the century has permeated our fiction: the waste of human and spiritual resources which in America went hand in hand with the exploitation of the land and forests” (55). The “exploitation of the land and forests” to which Nevius refers hit a high point during the post–Civil War industrial boom that made the fortunes of men like The Great Gatsby’s Dan Cody and The House of Mirth’s Gus Trenor, George Dorset, and Simon Rosedale. It was a time when get-rich-quick schemes proliferated, and the possibilities for fulfilling the American dream seemed to expand as rapidly as the nation’s borders. Of course, the “waste of human and spiritual resources” that accompanied this expansion included the waste of America’s womanhood, and in Wharton’s novels this theme is central. In both The Custom of the Country (1913) and The Age of Innocence (1920), for example, women are represented as marriage commodities who sell themselves to the highest bidder in their attempt to move up the American dream’s socioeconomic ladder. However, few works—in Wharton’s corpus or elsewhere—treat the issue of woman as commodity as thoroughly as her first major novel, The House of Mirth (1905), a chilling portrait of wealthy New York society at the turn of the century.

While readers disagree in their interpretations of some aspects of protagonist Lily Bart,¹ most see her as a heroic figure who is morally su-
prior to the socius whose victim she becomes. As Margaret B. McDowell puts it, “New York society was nefarious . . . precisely because it debased an individual like Lily Bart” (43), an individual whose “moral appeal,” Susan Goodman argues, “stems from her persistent refusal to define herself as a commodity” (50). A beautiful, intelligent young woman who hasn’t the money to support herself in the stratum of high society to which she was born and bred, Lily must rely upon her beauty and social graces in order to keep her position in the Trenor-Dorset milieu. Although she is twenty-nine years old when the novel opens—and should therefore lose no more time in acquiring the rich husband she needs in order to put a permanent end to her financial problems—Lily cannot bring herself to marry the dull, self-involved species of male, such as Percy Gryce, who has the money, if not the spirit, to keep her in the high style she requires. We learn, in fact, that the protagonist has spent the eleven years since her debut avoiding marriage to a number of rich men for whom she had successfully “set her cap.” A series of social difficulties, in which Lily figures as the victim of unscrupulous society figures Gus Trenor and Bertha Dorset, sends her into a severe social and financial decline. Unwilling, because of the higher vision of life awakened in her by Lawrence Selden, to reestablish her position through the morally questionable means at her disposal (the quiet purchase of Bertha Dorset’s good will through the use of some indiscreet letters written by that lady, followed by marriage to Simon Rosedale), Lily sinks further and further into poverty and despair and finally dies from an overdose of a sleeping drug.

This interpretation of the novel forms the core of a critical consensus that leaves several important questions—related both to our understanding of the protagonist and to the novel’s narrative progression—inadequately answered. Given that the wealthy life-style she requires is available in more than one stratum of society, what is behind Lily’s idée fixe that she must have a place in the relatively small world of the Trenors and Dorsets? Why doesn’t she finally marry to achieve the financial and social stability she seeks? What is the source of Lawrence Selden’s power over her? What is the source, in the final chapters of the novel, of the apparent hypermorality for which the protagonist sacrifices every possibility of survival? What is the significance of her death?

Most critics answer these questions in terms of what they believe is the moral opposition of the two worlds between which Lily vacillates: the superficial, commodified world of the Trenor-Dorset milieu and the rarefied, spiritual world she associates with Lawrence Selden. Despite
some critical antipathy to Selden, who, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff puts it, is "a mouthpiece for the worst of society's prejudices" (111), what is seen as the protagonist's growing moral fiber is linked with her growing interest in him. Lily's "spiritual needs," Roslyn Dixon argues, are what "draw her to Selden" (218). While Selden may not be worthy of Lily's admiration, her feelings for him are credited with the ethical concerns for which she sacrifices not only her last chance to return to fashionable society but the last of her financial resources as well. As Elaine Showalter notes, "Lawrence Selden... demands... [a] moral perfection that [Lily] can finally only satisfy by dying" (35).²

However, if we replace the victim model of the relationship between the individual and the socius, which has informed most readings of this novel, with a dialectical model of subjectivity, which foregrounds the ways in which individual desire and social formations coincide, we can see that the critical focus on Lily Bart's moral dimension misses the novel's analysis of a subtler phenomenon that collapses the opposition between the Trenor-Dorset weltanschauung and the alternative Lily sees in Lawrence Selden: the psychology of woman as commodity fetish, a principal avatar of the American dream. This chapter will attempt to show that The House of Mirth dramatizes the psychological contradictions and dead ends to which a woman's transcendental project—her labor to escape existential inwardness through self-reification—is liable in our culture. Lily doesn't "resis[t] reification" (92), as Dale Bauer maintains; as we shall see, she actively seeks it. Her project is to become an objet d'art, not as a transgressive act of self-authorship, as Bauer forcefully argues (97), but in order to escape existential inwardness.³ I will argue that Lawrence Selden finally exerts the more powerful influence on Lily, not because he offers her an alternative to this goal, but because he offers her, through a parallel project of his own, the more effective means of achieving it.

Most readers easily recognize that the world of the Trenors and the Dorsets, among whom Lily has cast her lot, is a marketplace where women number among the commodities for sale.⁴ Lily was raised to succeed in this world by being its best commodity. Her mother

studied [Lily's beauty] with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance [for having lost her money and, therefore, her social standing]. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. She watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its
mere custodian; and she tried to instil into the latter a sense of the responsibility that such a charge involved. She followed in imagination the career of other beauties, pointing out to her daughter what might be achieved through such a gift, and dwelling on the awful warning of those who, in spite of it, had failed to get what they wanted. (35–36; bk. 1, ch. 3)

The individuals with whom Lily socializes prove Mrs. Bart to have been right in her assessment of high society. Percy Gryce would like to marry Lily for the same reason he likes being the owner of the Gryce Americana: she is an eminently collectible item that will gain him the attention and envy of his peers (51; bk. 1, ch. 4). Simon Rosedale—an extremely wealthy aspirant to the world of the Trenors and the Dorsets, who, it seems inevitable, will ultimately be accepted into that group—is attracted to Lily because of “his collector’s passion for the rare and unattainable” (119; bk. 1, ch. 10); he wants the sign-exchange value he would get from the possession of a wife who could “make all the other women feel small” (185; bk. 1, ch. 15). Mrs. Wellington Bry, among the more recent pretenders to the Trenor-Dorset clique, desires Lily’s company during her tour of Mediterranean watering places because she believes that Lily can secure her the introduction she seeks into the European aristocratic set (209; bk. 2, ch. 2).

Although more intelligent and sensitive than most members of her group, Lily commodifies people just as they do. She wonders, for example, why Selden “had always been kind to his dull cousin [Gerty Farish] . . . why he wasted so much time in such an unremunerative manner” (94; bk. 1, ch. 8). Similarly, Lily doesn’t accord her poor and unattractive cousin Grace Stepney the “scant civilities . . . [she] accorded to Mr. Rosedale” because she did not “foresee that such a friend [as Grace] was worth cultivating” (128; bk. 1, ch. 11). Most important for our purposes, Lily commodifies herself.

As a commodity, Lily has fashioned herself to resemble one of the rarest and most expensive items on the market: the objet d’art. Her appearance as a tableau vivant of Reynolds’s “Mrs. Lloyd” at the Wellington Bry entertainment epitomizes her concept of herself as an art object. As Lily is well aware,

The unanimous “Oh!” of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brushwork of Reynolds’s “Mrs. Lloyd” but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart. . . . It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds’s canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the
beams of her living grace... she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings. Her pale draperies, and the background of foliage against which she stood, served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm. (141–42; bk. 1, ch. 12)

Lily is as much a tableau vivant in the daily routine of her social life as she is in her representation of Reynolds's portrait. Always wanting to produce an effect of idealized beauty, Lily is very deliberate in her exploitation, not just of costume, but of facial expression and setting as well. As she leans against the balustrade of the terrace at Bellomont, for example, she notes that Percy Gryce has spotted her from the midst of his reluctant tête à tête with Mrs. Fisher. "He cast agonized glances in the direction of Miss Bart, whose only response was to sink into an attitude of more graceful abstraction. She had learned the value of contrast in throwing her charms into relief, and was fully aware of the extent to which Mrs. Fisher's volubility was enhancing her own repose" (49; bk. 1, ch. 4).

Similarly, the life-style she desires for herself would be a "frame" for the display of her beauty: like Annie's desire for "perfect moments" in Sartre's Nausea, "the life [Lily] longed to lead [was one] in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness" (94; bk. 1, ch. 8). Thus, she dreams of living in "an apartment which should surpass the complicated luxury of her friends' surroundings by the whole extent of that artistic sensibility which made her feel herself their superior; in which every tint and line should combine to enhance her beauty and give distinction to her leisure!" (115; bk. 1, ch. 9). Even nature is reduced to the function of frame and put in the service of Lily's desire to fashion herself as an aesthetic commodity: during a solitary walk in the woods near Bellomont, she finds a "charming" spot, "and Lily was not insensible to the charm, or to the fact that her presence enhanced it; but she was not accustomed to taste the joys of solitude except in company, and the combination of a handsome girl and a romantic scene struck her as too good to be wasted" (63; bk. 1, ch. 5).

It is this aspect of commodification—Lily's conception and treatment of herself as an aesthetic commodity—that is most important for our understanding of her psychology. And it is her psychology that must be explored if we are to find sufficient motivation for behaviors that ulti-
mately result in the protagonist’s social and financial downfall, beginning with her decision to try to retain, at all costs, her membership in the Trenor-Dorset milieu.

Wharton gives us a number of reasons for Lily Bart’s idée fixe that the only world in which she can be happy is the narrow social stratum led by the Trenors and the Dorsets. As a young girl, she was socialized into the world of ease and plenty by her mother, who brought her up to be “ornamental” (313; bk. 2, ch. 11), to be beautiful and well versed in the social graces and little else. Therefore, Lily’s skills suit her for two occupations only: making herself useful to wealthy society hostesses and attracting a wealthy husband. In addition, many critics believe, as Lily herself does, that her desire to remain a member of this world is related to an appreciation for beauty that manifests itself as a deep-seated need to be around lovely things: “An atmosphere of luxury... was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in” (27; bk. 1, ch. 3). “She knew that she hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it” (40; bk. 1, ch. 3), while “she felt an affinity to all the subtler manifestations of wealth” that she enjoyed at Bellmont in “the studied luxury” of, for example, “her breakfast tray, with its harmonious porcelain and silver, a handful of violets in a slender glass, and the morning paper folded beneath her letters” (41; bk. 1, ch. 4).

There are, however, wealthy hostesses and eligible bachelors in strata of society other than that of the Trenors and the Dorsets. Indeed, the Sam Gormers have as much money as many of the members of the Trenor-Dorset set, and they are willing to afford Lily the same material upkeep and the same beautiful surroundings she requires. Moreover, at the Gormers, there is “a greater good-nature, less rivalry, and a fresher capacity for enjoyment” (244; bk. 2, ch. 5). In fact, the Gormers don’t impose upon Lily the chafing little tasks—the obligation to entertain boring guests and bored husbands, to perform secretarial tasks when asked, and to play bridge for stakes she cannot afford—the Trenor-Dorset clan requires of her in exchange for their patronage. Yet, for Lily, only the world of the Trenors and Dorsets will do. When her fortunes decline and she finds herself socializing with the Gormers, she desperately seeks to return to her former group. Certainly, it isn’t a case of nostalgia for old friends and good times that makes the protagonist long for her old clique: Lily has been deeply hurt by Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor, the only two women in that group with whom she had spent
much time. And it's not likely that the consideration of social standing alone is the reason behind Lily's dissatisfaction with her new, somewhat less prominent milieu. For even the stigma of *nouveaux arrivés* won't cling to the Gormers for long in a society in which, as Lily herself observes, "social credit" is "based on an impregnable bank-account" (274; bk. 2, ch. 8).

There is, however, one thing the Trenor-Dorset clique can provide that the Gormers don't, and it's something that a "superfine human merchandise" (268; bk. 2, ch. 7) like Lily can't resist: a more discriminating appreciation for her exchange value. At the Sam Gormers, "Lily had the odd sense of being caught up into the crowd as carelessly as a passenger is gathered in by an express train" (244; bk. 2, ch. 5):

Miss Bart's arrival had been welcomed with an uncritical friendliness that first irritated her pride and then brought her to a sharp sense of her own situation... These people knew her story—of that her first long talk with Carry Fisher had left no doubt: she was publicly branded as the heroine of a "queer" episode—but instead of shrinking from her as her own friends had done, they received her without question into the easy promiscuity of their lives. They swallowed her past as easily as they did Miss Anstell's [an actress of unknown origin], and with no apparent sense of any difference in the size of the mouthful. (245; bk. 2, ch. 5)

In contrast, the Trenor-Dorset clan is very discriminating in their appraisal of associates—they're used to the best human commodities available, and they make fine distinctions among them. Although people like the Wellington Brys and Simon Rosedale—owing to the strategic use of their great wealth—manage to increase their social exchange value to the point where the Trenor-Dorset set accepts them, Lily knows that they can never receive "that precise note of approval" that a woman of her abilities is capable of calling forth (143; bk. 1, ch. 12). As an aesthetic commodity long devoted to the attainment and maintenance of her position at the market's "top of the line," the protagonist must display herself before a company who knows exactly how much she costs.

Lily's commodity psychology also figures strongly in her problematic relationships with men. Because she can't afford to keep herself in the style required if she is to socialize with the Trenors and the Dorsets, her goal is to marry a wealthy man from this group and thereby perma-
nently fix her position among them. While "a few years ago it had sufficed her" to take "her daily need of pleasure" from "the luxury of others," as the novel opens, "she was beginning to chafe at the obligations it imposed, to feel herself a mere pensioner on the splendour" of her friends (27; bk. 1, ch. 3). Therefore, she sets her sights on the eligible heir to the Gryce fortune, Percy Gryce. However, once she is certain that a proposal of marriage is forthcoming, Lily loses her advantage by spending the day with Lawrence Selden instead of with Gryce, as planned. Because her attention to Selden interferes with Bertha Dorset's amorous plans for that young man, Bertha revenges herself, as Lily was warned she would, by scaring off Gryce with stories about Lily's husband hunting and gambling debts. Lily thus ruins her chances with Gryce just as she has ruined her chances with every eligible man who has wanted to marry her over the past eleven years.

Lily's apparent lapse in strategy with Percy Gryce is not, as Irving Howe claims, the result of spontaneous behavior (121) or, as Wendy Gimbel would have it, one of her miscalculations (44). The pattern of Lily's behavior is too consistent to ascribe it to impulse or miscalculation. As the protagonist's friend Carry Fisher observes, the same thing happens every time Lily is about to receive a proposal of marriage: "She works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic" (197; bk. 2, ch. 1). Mrs. Fisher guesses correctly that Lily ruins her chances of marriage deliberately, but her speculation that she does so "because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for" (197; bk. 2, ch. 1) is only partially correct. What Lily despises is not "her predetermined role as object" (Wershoven 58) or the idea of herself as a commodity (Fryer 86): as we have seen, her goal has long been to be the best object on the market, and she takes great pleasure in the signs of her success. Rather, Lily is unconsciously repelled by the psychosexual demands of an intimate relationship.

Lily's self-image as art object reflects and supports a psychological structure that is at odds with the psychosexual requirements of marriage. Objets d'art are commodities that are seen but not touched, and Lily's desire to be an art object reflects her desire to be admired from afar, to be viewed without being touched. Like a framed portrait or the hard surfaces of the finely crafted jewelry she loves, Lily wants to be beyond history—impervious to the "humiliating contingencies" of life (191; bk. 1, ch. 8)—and beyond the existential inwardsness that an
awareness of existential contingency promotes: “more completely than any other expression of wealth,” jewels enhanced by an artistic setting “symbolized the life she longed to lead, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement” (94; bk. 1, ch. 8). Physical intimacy endangers the transcendental project because it touches nerve endings tied to emotions (fear, anger, love, hate) and moods (anxiety, insecurity) that preclude the possibility of achieving transcendence. As Walter Davis observes, when transcendence becomes a major project, sexuality becomes a major threat (Inwardness and Existence 82).7

Lily’s desire to aestheticize herself out of existence informs her life so pervasively that we see its expression even in the seal with which she secures her letters: “a grey seal with Beyond! beneath a flying ship” (163; bk. 1, ch. 14). And it is this same desire we see in her reaction to her stay with Mrs. Norma Hatch, her first sojourn into the twilight area beyond the Sam Gormer periphery of the Trenor-Dorset beau monde: “Lily had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung” (290; bk. 2, ch. 9). She prefers the world of formal manners, where familiarity is kept at a minimum and where the right side of the tapestry is gazed upon by an admiring throng who always remain at a safe distance.

Lily’s desire not to be touched is particularly apparent, of course, in her interpersonal relationships. While her avoidance of physical contact with unappealing, predatory men like Gus Trenor, George Dorset, and Simon Rosedale certainly needs no explanation, Lily doesn’t like being touched even by her attractive women friends, as we see when she “extricate[s] herself” from Judy Trenor’s embrace during a conversation between the two women at Bellmont (47; bk. 1, ch. 4) and “dr[aws] back” from Carry Fisher’s “clasp” after the reading of Mrs. Peniston’s will (242; bk. 2, ch. 5). As Gerty Farish knows, “Lily disliked to be caressed,” and therefore Gerty “had long ago learned to check her demonstrative impulses toward her friend” (176; bk. 1, ch. 14). It is a joke that has the ring of truth when Lily facetiously says to Carry Fisher, “Other things being equal, I think I should prefer a half-husband” (249; bk. 2, ch. 5). While the reason for her unwillingness to marry a rigid, boring fool like Percy Gryce is no mystery, the Italian prince she lost in a similar manner (197; bk. 2, ch. 1), her rejection of Lord Hubert’s suit (209; bk. 2, ch. 2), and the “few good chances” Lily confesses to having lost when she “first came out” (10; bk. 1, ch.1) reveal that her distaste for potential husbands is not limited to a single type.
Although she does seem, at one point, to resign herself to marriage with Rosedale, it is noteworthy that she actively pursues him only when she has reason to believe that he doesn't want to marry her anymore (251–52; bk. 2, ch. 5) and, even more significantly, only when it serves as a strategy to save her from marrying George Dorset (259–60; bk. 2, ch. 6). Using “another man” to deflect her attention from and ruin her chances with a potential husband is the same technique Lily used when she avoided marrying the Italian prince by paying too much attention to his stepson (197; bk. 2, ch. 1) and, as we have seen, when she avoids a proposal from Percy Gryce by paying too much attention to Selden (56; bk. 1, ch. 5). This technique both keeps her from having to marry and sets up a smoke screen that protects her from probing too deeply the motives behind her behavior.

Given Lily's desire to avoid intimacy, how can her attraction to Lawrence Selden be explained? Although, at first glance, her relationship with this character may seem to contradict the assertion that Lily dislikes physical contact, Selden's appeal can be seen as a direct outgrowth of her role as art object and the desire for emotional insulation it represents. For Selden shares Lily's desire to aestheticize her body, which is part of the larger project he shares with her: the desire to escape existential inwardness. In order to understand the psychological dynamics of his project and how it is related to Lily's, it is necessary to consider the relationship among woman's body, the commodity, the art object, and the fetish, or the (p)art object.

To begin, we must examine the way in which Lily is an object for Selden. Just as the Trenor-Dorset clique appreciates Lily's uniqueness as a commodity in a way that the Gormers do not, Lawrence Selden appreciates her as an art object in a way that the Trenor-Dorset group does not. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff aptly observes, the relationship between Selden and Lily is one between connoisseur and collectible: for him, Lily is an idealized object that the actual woman can never match (129–30). However, the standard of perfection that Selden demands she become is not “a flawless, absolutely constant embodiment of [moral] virtue” (129), as Wolff suggests, but an absolutely constant embodiment of aesthetic perfection. For it is only as the perfect aesthetic object that Lily can help Selden fulfill his own transcendental project.
Selden's clearest statement of his transcendental project occurs in the oft-quoted "republic of the spirit" speech. Here he explains to Lily that his idea of success is the attainment of "personal freedom," freedom "from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit—that's what I call success" (71; bk. 1, ch. 6). While Wolff (129) and Howe (120) believe that this speech refers to Selden's moral vision, this character's attempt to achieve a "republic of the spirit" has, instead, all the earmarks of an idealized aesthetic quest.

Raised in a household where limited funds and refined taste put a premium on the few fine things the family could afford—good books, fine paintings, old lace—Selden never lost the appreciation for aesthetic quality he learned as a boy, an appreciation that was never marred by the kind of material overindulgence practiced by his wealthier acquaintances (160–61; bk. 1, ch. 14). As a result of this early training, Selden has a "responsive fancy" that gives him "magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination," and "he could yield to vision-making influences as completely as a child to the spell of a fairy-tale" (140–41; bk. 1, ch. 12). This ability, coupled with his desire to be free from the exigencies of a world in which his moderate income affords him little protection from "material accidents," is responsible for his pursuit of a spiritual republic to compensate for the inequities of the concrete world in which he finds himself. Of course, Selden's quest for transcendence is a quest for a form of social superiority as well: Selden wants to be "above" his social group in every sense of above. The irony is that this very desire, because it is socially produced, ties him to the society he would transcend. Selden doesn't escape social desire; he merely abstracts it.

Lily represents for Selden the romantic incarnation of his aesthetic values. He was bred to have "the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean's pleasure in them," and "nowhere was the blending of the two ingredients so essential as in the character of a pretty woman" (161; bk. 1, ch. 14). When Selden believes that the Lily Bart he sees in the tableau vivant is "the real Lily," it is because she "is one with...her image" (143; bk. 1, ch. 12). This is the Lily—the external sign of beauty, the perfect object—with whom Selden finally admits he is smitten and for whom he "luxuriate[s]...in the sense of [his] com-
plete surrender” (143; bk. 1, ch. 12). And just as it is an aesthetic ideal that attracts Selden to Lily, it is her inevitable violation of this ideal that repulses him. As Davis observes,

Idealization necessarily pictures the other in terms of external signs—money, beauty, virginity, etc.—because the other can have no qualities suggesting interiority or otherness. The perfect object is one who has achieved successful externalization and is one with his or her image. But this is also where the whole project begins to unravel. For such a one is open to endless appropriation by others. . . . (Inwardness and Existence 309)

Thus, each time Selden rejects Lily—for example, after seeing her emerge alone from Gus Trenor’s house late at night, after learning that she joined the Duchess of Beltshire’s loose crowd instead of heading home after the Sabrina incident, after seeing her apparent resolve to remain in the employ of Mrs. Hatch—it is not because, as many critics believe, she has violated his social or moral prejudices but because she has violated his aesthetic ideal. It is not, as Frances L. Restuuccia argues, a “perfectly virtuous object” that Selden seeks in Lily (230) but a perfect aesthetic object. Each time Lily sacrifices the “republic of the spirit” for material comforts, she devalues Selden’s private, romantic world of beauty—the only world he can offer her—in favor of the crass public world of people like Bertha Dorset and the Duchess of Beltshire.

His real detachment from her had taken place, not at the lurid moment of disenchantment, but now, in the sober after-light of discrimination, where he saw her definitely divided from him by the crudeness of a choice which seemed to deny the very differences he felt in her. It was before him again in its completeness—the choice in which she was content to rest: in the stupid costliness of the food and the showy dullness of the talk, in the freedom of speech which never arrived at wit and the freedom of act which never made for romance. (200; bk. 2, ch. 1)

And, significantly, Selden perceives Lily’s failure to live up to his “republic of the spirit” in terms of the change in her as an aesthetic object. When, for example, he meets her for the first time since the night he saw her leaving Trenor’s house, Selden notices that

a subtle change had passed over the quality of her beauty. Then [during their brief interlude in the Bry’s conservatory after the tableaux vivants] it had had a transparency through which the fluctuations of the spirit were sometimes tragically visible; now its impenetrable surface sug-
gested a process of crystallization which had fused her whole being into one hard brilliant substance. The change had struck Mrs. Fisher as a rejuvenation: to Selden it seemed like that moment of pause and arrest when the warm fluidity of youth is chilled into its final shape. (199–200; bk. 2, ch. 1)

Although the apparent loss of "fluctuations of the spirit" may have moral implications for the protagonist, Selden nevertheless focuses on the aesthetic domain, on the result of Lily's change as it manifests itself in her beauty. The concern here is not ethical but aesthetic, romantic, transcendental.

At first glance, Selden's aestheticization of Lily contrasts sharply with the rather crass commodification of this young woman by the Trenor-Dorset group. As Carol Wershoven notes (50), during the tableaux vivants, in contrast with the rest of the company, who focus on the scantiness of Lily's drapery and speculate on her intention to display her form (for social profit, of course), Selden is moved by the "eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part," and he angrily condemns a society unable to appreciate the virtues of her loveliness (142; bk. 1, ch. 12). However, his aestheticization of Lily intersects with the other characters' commodification of her in a way that is central to the psychology involved: in both commodification and aestheticization, the object becomes a fetish.

According to Marx, as soon as an object becomes a commodity, "it is changed into something transcendent" (26). Just as "the productions of the human brain appear [in the religious experience] as independent beings endowed with life and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. . . . so it is in the world of commodities with the products of [human] hands" (Marx 27). While the religious fetish is endowed with life in the form of metaphysical meaning, the commodity, Marx explains, is endowed with life in the form of social meaning (27). However, in both cases that meaning exists in a realm beyond the actual physical properties of the object in question. And because it "stands for" something beyond itself, the commodity can also function as a partial object; that is, the commodity can be a fetish in the Freudian sense as well: it can be used as a substitute point of focus in order to mask and deny a painful psychological reality.

Lily's body, as aestheticized by Selden as well as by herself, has the qualities of a fetish in both these ways. The "eternal harmony" (142; bk. 1, ch. 12) of her "jewel-like" beauty (94; bk. 1, ch. 8), for which Lily
strives and which only Selden appreciates, is a meaning that points to a realm beyond the actual physical properties of her flesh-and-blood body. And her aestheticized body is also a surrogate. Selden’s focus on Lily as objet d’art masks and denies the same painful psychological reality that Lily’s self-aestheticization seeks to mask and deny: psychological vulnerability to existential contingency, a vulnerability that increases in direct proportion to one’s poverty and that promotes an existential inwardness neither character desires. Thus, Lily and Selden’s mutual attraction is grounded in a shared transcendental project. Selden fetishizes Lily’s aestheticized body as a sign of the transcendence, of the escape from existential inwardness, he seeks. And Lily, in order to achieve the aestheticized body—the self-reification—she desires, fetishizes Selden’s gaze.

Because Lily sees Selden as a connoisseur of objets d’art, his appreciation of her beauty is extremely important. When she receives a note from him the morning after her stunning success in the tableaux vivants, “the sight of Selden’s writing brought back the culminating moment of her triumph: the moment when she had read in his eyes that no philosophy was proof against her power. It would be pleasant to have that sensation again . . . no one else could give it to her in its fulness” (147; bk. 1, ch. 13). This mutual gaze, which recurs throughout the novel, underscores Lily and Selden’s narcissistic folie à deux. As Joan Rivière explains in her 1929 article, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” women, as objects, look only in order to be looked at while looking. Lily likes to watch Selden watch her because it is his gaze that fixes her as the aesthetic object she wants to be. Conversely, her return gaze, as aesthetic object, fixes Selden in his desired identity as connoisseur. The pair thus fulfills the desire of each for self-reification, for self-abstraction.

As an abstraction, Selden’s attractiveness to Lily lies largely in the ways in which he is beyond her reach. Lily’s desire to feel her aesthetic power over Selden is therefore increased by the uncertainty that she will always be able to do so. When they meet at the Van Osburgh wedding, for example, Lily expects him to be still under the sway of their last encounter at Bellomont, where he first revealed a personal interest in her. She is distressed to see that now there was not the least trace of embarrassment in his voice, and as he spoke, leaning slightly against the jamb of the window, and letting his eyes rest on her in the frank enjoyment of her grace, she felt with a faint
chill of regret that he had gone back without an effort to the footing on which they had stood before their last talk together. (99; bk. 1, ch. 8)

This experience is unique for Lily: she is accustomed to easy victories in her sentimental experiments. Finding Selden frequently beyond her reach makes him all the more attractive to her, not because she wants what she can’t have, but because his unavailability protects her from an intimacy that, unconsciously, she doesn’t really desire.

Similarly, Selden seems deliciously beyond Lily’s reach because of the transcendental project—the “republic of the spirit”—he represents, which resonates powerfully with the otherworldly, romantic quality we see in her girlhood idea of a perfect husband: “Lily’s preference would have been for an English nobleman with political ambitions and vast estates; or . . . an Italian prince with a castle in the Apennines and an hereditary office in the Vatican” (36–37; bk. 1, ch. 3). Even Lily’s perception of Selden’s manner and physical features places him in another world:

His reputed cultivation was generally regarded as a slight obstacle to easy intercourse, but Lily . . . was attracted by this attribute, which she felt would have had its distinction in an older society. It was, moreover, one of his gifts to look his part; to have a height which lifted his head above the crowd, and keenly-modelled dark features which, in a land of amorphous types, gave him the air of belonging to a more specialized race, of carrying the impress of a concentrated past. Expansive persons found him a little dry . . . but this air of friendly aloofness . . . was the quality which piqued Lily’s interest. Everything about him accorded with the fastidious element in her taste. (68; bk. 1, ch. 60, my emphasis)

It is clear in this passage that Selden appeals to Lily because of her girlhood desire for men who don’t exist in the material world, a desire for the otherworldly that she has carried with her into adulthood. Indeed, we learn that when she had the opportunity to marry a flesh-and-blood English nobleman or a real Italian prince, she threw it away.

Although Lily and Selden do make physical contact on one occasion—they kiss—the context in which the event occurs reveals that it is not the manifestation of a budding sexual inclination on Lily’s part. Following the tableaux vivants—which clearly gave both characters the feeling that they were, for the moment, in another, more romantic world beyond existential reality—the pair enjoy a quiet tête à tête in the
conservatory, in a scene whose otherworldly, transcendental elements are foregrounded: "The magic place was deserted: there was no sound but the splash of the water on the lily-pads," and the "drift of music" from the nearby house seems as if it "might have been blown across a sleeping lake. . . . Selden and Lily stood still, accepting the unreality of the scene as part of their own dream-like sensations" (144; bk. 1, ch. 12). Then, as they sit in quiet conversation,

her face turned to him with the soft motion of a flower. His own met it slowly, and their lips touched.

She drew back and rose from her seat. Selden rose too, and they stood facing each other. Suddenly she caught his hand and pressed it a moment against her cheek.

"Ah, love me, love me—but don’t tell me so!" she sighed with her eyes in his; and before he could speak she had turned and slipped through the arch of boughs, disappearing in the brightness of the room beyond. (145; bk. 1, ch. 12)

The sentimental novels of Emma Bovary’s girlhood could hardly have produced a better line than “Ah, love me, love me—but don’t tell me so!” Both the semantic content of the phrase and the manner in which it’s delivered bespeak the subtext of Lily’s behavior in this scene: what she is really saying is “love me, but don’t do anything to which I will have to respond in the real world.” Indeed, the next morning Lily refers to the “scene in the Brys’ conservatory” as “a part of her dreams,” and she feels “annoyance” at Selden for sending her a note requesting a visit so soon afterward: “She had not expected to awake to such evidence of [the previous night’s] reality. . . . It was so unlike [Selden] to yield to such an irrational impulse!” (147; bk. 1, ch. 13).

For Wendy Gimbel (56) and Diana Trilling (112–14), who believe that a good deal of Lily’s behavior is motivated by her love for Selden, the protagonist’s “love me—but don’t tell me so!” could refer to the conflict between her desire to marry him and her need for the kind of wealth he cannot supply. On the contrary, Lily’s conflict, up to this point, has been between her desire for wealth and her desire to avoid marriage to the rich men who could provide it. In Selden she has, for the first time, an unconflicted romantic relationship: she can share her desire for the otherworldly, and play out all of its romantic possibilities, without having to face the importunities of a man whose station in life allows him to press his suit.

That Lily and Selden’s aestheticization of her body supports the
same desire served by commodification is also illustrated in the pair’s use of economic metaphors during their first conversation in the novel. Here the couple discuss the social conventions regarding women of New York’s upper crust. Lily tells 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 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.”

Selden glanced at her with amusement: it was impossible, even with her lovely eyes imploring him, to take a sentimental view of her case.

“Ah, well, there must be plenty of capital on the look-out for such an investment. Perhaps you’ll meet your fate tonight….” (12; bk. 1, ch. 1)

Of course, Lily and Selden’s use of economic metaphors in this passage underscores the profit-and-loss nature of what Lily calls the “business” of achieving social success. If a woman hasn’t the financial means to keep herself socially marketable, she must acquire a husband for the same reason a businessman often acquires a partner: to maintain her exchange value by maintaining her capital worth. However, their language has another, more powerful effect: it distances Lily and Selden from the objects of their discourse. Lily’s real project in discussing woman as commodity in this excerpt is to distance herself emotionally from the horror of her own situation as a genteel woman of scant means trying to maintain her social position among the very wealthy. Similarly, Selden’s real project is to avoid getting in touch with his own romantic feelings for Lily. As long as he can view her problem as a question of goods and exchange, and remain amused by it, he won’t be touched by the pathos of her plight, and he won’t have to deal with his attraction to her. Thus, the couple’s use of economic metaphors, when we first see them together, creates a language of abstraction that both mirrors and foreshadows the transcendental project they will share in the second half of the novel.

Lily’s attraction to Selden’s otherworldliness, and her attempt to belong to the romantic world she glimpses through his eyes, also help explain the moral dimension that, as we have seen, so many critics associate with the protagonist’s ultimate preference for Selden’s approval over that of the Trenor-Dorset clan. Even Cynthia Griffin
Wolff, who recognizes that Selden desires Lily for her aesthetic qualities and therefore confuses the real woman with the ideal (126), believes that both characters are attracted to the notion of a “republic of the spirit” for its moral dimension (129). While I agree with Blake Nevius that the possibility of a moral dimension in Lily occurs at the novel’s close, the critical focus on her ethics overlooks the psychology that informs them. For example, her desire to discharge her debt to Trenor, although initially born of her desire to reestablish her relationship with his wife, Judy (239; bk. 2, ch. 4), soon becomes symbolic behavior, not in the literary sense, but in the psychological. This debt—like her disastrous voyage on the Sabrina and her acquisition of Bertha Dorset’s letters to Selden—represents one of Lily’s most horrifying experiences of existential contingency and the existential inwardness that accompanies it; in closing the door on this chapter of her life, she wants to close the door on existential experience. The hypermorality she develops during the novel’s closing chapters, which comes to a head in her destruction of Bertha’s letters, is a function of her desire to rise above the Trenor-Dorset group in the way she believes Selden has risen above it: by transcending the existential inwardness that keeps him aware of his vulnerability to life’s uncertainties. Lily wants to be admitted to Selden’s romantic “republic of the spirit,” and she knows only one way to get what she wants: by becoming the perfect object for her audience.

As Wolff observes, Lily “has learned so thoroughly to experience herself as an object that is being observed by others—not directly as an integrated human being—that her sense of ‘self’ is confirmed only when she elicits reactions from others” (128). Therefore, the protagonist must do whatever she thinks a member of the “republic of the spirit” would do in any given situation. At this point, hers is an outward-directed “morality”; because she hasn’t internalized the principles upon which it operates, her moral perceptions tend to apprehend issues in black-and-white terms, as the moral perceptions of young children often do.11 This is why she cannot save herself by letting Bertha Dorset know she has possession of her incriminating letters to Lawrence Selden. Although no third party would ever see them—and Selden could, therefore, in no way be hurt by them—the letters are written, as Rosedale says when he realizes the connection, “to him [Selden]” (273; bk. 2, ch. 7). Lily thus relinquishes her last means of regaining her social position and, with it,
her last means of avoiding the fatal dose of chloral that inevitably follows her growing dependence on the sleeping drug.

Because most critical analyses of Lily Bart are informed by the victim model of the relationship between the individual and the socius, most view her death as a severe criticism of the culture that both produced and destroyed her. However, a dialectical model of subjectivity suggests that the protagonist’s death has another function as well: to complete and safeguard Lily and Selden’s shared transcendental project. During the novel’s final four chapters—which take us from Lily’s last days at Madame Regina’s millinery workshop to her fatal overdose—we see a different Lily Bart, capable of a great deal of human warmth and with a new capacity to make real contact with others. For example, she responds with “the first sincere words she had ever spoken to him” (309; bk. 2, ch. 10) to Rosedale’s brave offer to visit her after she is dismissed from the milliner’s and is living in poverty in a run-down neighborhood. Similarly, she frankly confesses to Selden his importance in her life without expecting or requiring a response in kind: “She had passed beyond the phase of well-bred reciprocity, in which every demonstration must be scrupulously proportioned to the emotion it elicits, and generosity of feeling is the only ostentation condemned” (323; bk. 2, ch. 12). Even her distaste for physical closeness is suspended when, during a visit with Nettie Struther, she picks up that young woman’s child and “felt the soft weight sink trustfully against her breast . . . thrill[ing] her with a sense of warmth” (333; bk. 2, ch. 13).

This is not the Lily Bart who commodified herself and others; however, neither is this the heroic figure who, through loss and suffering, has developed into the superior moral being many critics want to see in her. Rather, this is a dying woman who is taking her leave of this world. She need not fear the existential inwardness to which her emotions will make her liable only because she will soon be forever beyond it. What we have here is a commodity fetish for which death can be the only issue, the only completion of its transcendental project. Lily herself becomes briefly aware of the relationship between death and the avoidance of existential inwardness—though, of course, she doesn’t recognize it as such—upon returning home after her final, exhilarating visit to Selden. She has just received the check for her inheritance:
There was the cheque in her desk, for instance—she meant to use it in paying her debt to Trenor; but she foresaw that when the money came she would put off doing so. . . . The thought terrified her—she dreaded to fall from the height of her last moment with Lawrence Selden. . . . She felt an intense longing to prolong, to perpetuate, the momentary exaltation of her spirit. If only life could end now. . . . (338; bk. 2, ch. 13)

Furthermore, if we regard death as a psychological force—as Freud does in Beyond the Pleasure Principle—rather than merely as a biological event, then its presence in Lily’s consciousness before her biological death can guide us in understanding the nature and significance of that event.

Death makes its first, and perhaps most direct, appearance in the form of the sleeping drug upon which Lily has grown dependent. The protagonist’s “dread” of “having to pass the chemist’s” on her way home from work, the chemist’s ominous warning that “a drop or two more [beyond the prescribed dosage] and off you go,” Lily’s agony of apprehension lest he should refuse her the drug, the way “the mere touch of the packet thrilled her tired nerves” (303; bk. 2, ch. 10)—all these elements suggest that we are in the presence of death. Lily’s physical aspect reinforces this feeling. Selden notices “the pallour of her delicately-hollowed face” (322; bk. 2, ch. 12), and “he saw too, under the loose lines of her dress, how the curves of her figure had shrunk to angularity . . . how the red play of the flame sharpened her nostrils, and intensified the blackness of the shadows which struck up from her cheekbones to her eyes” (326; bk. 2, ch. 12). This language could easily be used to describe a corpse. It is no wonder that Selden has “a strange sense of foreboding” or that the pair “looked at each other with a kind of solemnity, as though they stood in the presence of death” (326; bk. 2, ch. 12).

As these passages indicate, Lily is inhabited by death well before she actually dies, a condition that suggests that her desire for the transcendent— for the Unchanging, for substance—is becoming irresistible. Although Lily doesn’t commit suicide in the deliberate and premeditated way this term usually implies, she so desires the “brief bath of oblivion” the drug gives her (339; bk. 2, ch. 13) that she deliberately refrains from considering the risk she is taking when she increases the dose to compensate for her growing immunity to its soporific effect: “She did not, in truth, consider the question very closely—the physical craving for sleep was her only sustained sensation. Her mind shrank
from the glare of thought as instinctively as eyes contract in a blaze of light—darkness, darkness was what she must have at any cost" (340; bk. 2, ch. 13). Lily’s has to be a passive suicide because only an “accidental” death allows her to preserve the illusion she wants to preserve: that she hasn’t acted, hasn’t chosen, but has remained an object to the end.

Particularly striking in this context, the language used to describe Lily’s feelings when she takes the drug reveals that the chloral is more than a simple haven from the misery of her waking life: she is enamored of its deathlike effect.

She lay very still, waiting with a sensuous pleasure for the first effects of the soporific. She knew in advance what form they would take—the gradual cessation of the inner throb, the soft approach of passiveness, as though an invisible hand made magic passes over her in the darkness. The very slowness and hesitancy of the effect increased its fascination: it was delicious to lean over and look down into the dim abysses of unconsciousness. (340; bk. 2, ch. 13)

The unconsciousness the drug brings her is as “delicious” to Lily now, and as sensuously described, as her luxurious breakfast in bed at Bellomont and her morning-after reminiscence of her conquest of Selden in the Brys’ conservatory. Death—or deathlike unconsciousness—is as attractive to her now as those experiences were then because it is the only sphere of the otherworldly that remains open to her. She can no longer reify herself as a commodity for the Trenor-Dorset clique because they are no longer buying what she has to sell. And she feels she can no longer hope to share Selden’s otherworldly domain, the only alternative to her former life-style—however vaguely conceived—she has ever been able to imagine, because, having failed for so long to live up to his romantic ideal, her efforts to live up to it at the end of the novel seem to produce little change in his behavior toward her. Thus, “she saw herself forever shut out from [his] inmost self” (323; bk. 2, ch. 12). Feeling herself alone and helpless, she lets herself die. As Freud explains, “When the ego finds itself in an excessive real danger which it believes itself unable to overcome by its own strength, it... sees itself deserted by all protecting forces and lets itself die” (“The Ego and the Id” 58). While there may have been other “protecting forces” available to Lily—her budding friendship with Rosedale and Gerty Farish’s unflagging moral support—they wouldn’t have protected her in the way she most desired: from the existential inwardness produced by her vulnerability to the physical realities of life on the “wrong side” of the “so-
cial tapestry." Only the Trenor-Dorset life-style or Selden's other-worldly vision, Lily believes, could have that protection, and now only death can provide it.

For Selden as well, Lily's death is the only real source of the abstract perfection he seeks in her. It is no coincidence that Selden is finally able to tell Lily he loves her, is finally drawn "penitent and reconciled to her side," only when she is dead: "He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear" (347; bk. 2, ch. 14). These closing lines are as deliciously romantic as the description we saw earlier of Lily's relaxation into a luxurious sleep after taking the fatal dose of chloral. Her death is thus the consummation of both characters' desire for abstract perfection, and it fulfills the unconscious psychological agenda that has operated for Lily since she first came to rely on Selden's otherworldly vision for her refuge, since she first found "the thought of confiding in him... as seductive as the river's flow to the suicide" (183; bk. 1, ch. 15).

Unlike Flaubert, who dramatizes every nuance of Emma Bovary's slow demise, thereby metaphorically underscoring the nature of that character's self-unraveling, Wharton accomplishes Lily's death behind closed doors. It is appropriate that the author thus undercuts the concrete, biological reality of her protagonist's death, not only because we need to focus instead on the social implications of Lily's decease, but because it is as an abstraction and a mystification—and as the desire for self-abstraction and self-mystification—that Lily's death provides the appropriate closure for her life. The closest she comes to embracing psychological possibility is by embracing, in her imagination, its representative: Nettie Struther's child. Given that this embrace occurs only in her mind, and that this representative of psychological possibility is a member both of an oppressed gender and of an oppressed class, the chances that such possibility will be realized in Wharton's commodified world are rather slim.

The dialectical reading of the protagonist I have offered is not intended to let the socius off the hook but to put the individual on it as well. My explanation of Lily's behavior throughout the novel as the function of her role as aesthetic commodity fetish attempts to reveal the psychological characteristics of the protagonist's ideological investments in order to explain, in part, why she makes such investments and why she sacrifices so much in their name. In the society Wharton de-
scribes in *The House of Mirth*—a society whose values thrive in America today in our own ubiquitous marketplace culture—woman forgoes psychological possibility as the price paid to escape existential inwardness. And commodity psychology, which is tied to the American dream's merger of the economic and spiritual dimensions of human experience, offers the means to this end.

Clearly, the significance of Lily Bart's death, like the significance of her life, cannot be explained by her attraction to one side or the other of a moral opposition between the Trenor-Dorset milieu and the spiritual realm she associates with Lawrence Selden, for it is the opportunity they offer for self-reification that attracts her to both. While the protagonist's intelligence, sensitivity, and delicacy make her far superior to—and infinitely more sympathetic than—her milieu, the view that she is victimized by her social stratum for being too moral to survive in it casts her in terms that are too simple to reflect the depth and complexity of Wharton's characterization. If, in Lily's world as in our own, commodity culture claims many victims, *The House of Mirth* reveals that one powerful reason why can be found in the nature of the psychological payoffs it offers. It is not enough, then or now, to say simply that commodity culture victimizes women, for such a formulation of the problem leaves women's individual strength and collective power out of the equation. How does commodity culture lead women into collusion with their own victimization? This is the question we must also ask, and it is a question *The House of Mirth* can help us answer.