By accessing and printing out this paper, you agree to be legally bound by International Copyright Law. Use this paper under the rules of Fair Use and correct Academic Citation. This paper is the intellectual property of its author, and while you are free to quote it as support for your own research-based opinion, you must cite any direct quotations and/or paraphrases. Failing to do so could result in severe penalties, and is a crime. If you are uncertain as to how to use this document correctly, consult the MLA handbook on Electronic Publications. Or, failing that, contact the site editor, Kim Wells, at kim@womenwriters.net

**Copyright Angela R. Adams,
November 27, 2000**

The Age of Ornament

In Edith Wharton's House of Mirth, there are two kinds of characters- the watchers and the watched-- with men primarily watching and women usually being watched. Watchers have the power of control, either legitimizing another's existence through acknowledging that other person or ignoring that individual; in effect, the watcher has the power to kill with a glance or by the withholding of notice. The action of the book indicates that if a woman is not being watched then she may as well be dead. Playing the role of the "watched" shapes a woman's whole identity around the way others see her. She has no "self" outside of her social set and their perceptions of her, giving her the status of a human ornament, which is the case with Wharton's female protagonist (I hesitate to call her a heroine), Lily Bart. Lily's very name suggests something of what we come to see as her decorative function. At least one critic has commented upon the possible connotations of her name; as a "lily" she is a flower, an emblem of femininity and of ornamentation, and her last name, Bart, contains within it the word "art," also suggesting her role is that of a material object. Incidentally, the lily is also the flower of death, and, indeed, Lily Bart lives up to her name. Hence, when Lily's "bloom," i.e. her desirability, "wilts" in the eyes of her

peers, she is no longer an ornament to be admired and exclaimed over and is cast aside. No one sees her, her identity is lost, and so she dies, driving home the point that an identity based exclusively upon appearance is lethal in the metaphorical sense and in the physical sense.

According to Jean Christophe Agnew's "The Consuming Vision of Henry James," "Commodities appear in virtually every space twentieth-century American culture affords. . .becom[ing] associated with themes of family, sexuality, and individuality. . .each commodity introduces itself as precisely that. . .which we must in fact acquire to remain full participants in our culture" (Wightman Fox 68). People, Agnew argues, have assumed the same commodity status as material goods, (though I would argue that the nineteenth-century role of women lends itself far more conveniently to becoming "commodified" than that of men, who had historically been allowed greater autonomy); we can be bought and sold at a moment's whim, based upon our appearance, or, in Agnew's terms, our "packaging." Women in particular, in their affiliation with material objects, show themselves and are shown in such a way as to best display wealth, which constructs the watcher/watched relationship between men and women. Middle and upper class men, more or less exclusively in Wharton's time, move in the outer sphere of the world and are exposed to the workings of visually-oriented consumer culture by way of stores and other facets of the marketplace over which they have control. Quoting Karl Marx, Agnew notes, "Within a commodity world. . . 'all the physical and spiritual senses' are replaced by 'the sense of having'" (Wightman Fox 75). Drawing a connection between the marketplace and the realm of

Copyright Angela R. Adams, November 27, 2000
http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/pdf/adamswharton.pdf

interpersonal relations, Agnew comments, "commercial affairs. . .acquire the same furtive and illicit undertones as love affairs; indeed the two sorts of relations are collapsed together in the novel as productive of the same sorts of satisfactions and the same sorts of shame" (85). According to The House of Mirth, ultimately, it is the woman, namely Lily, who will bear the brunt of the "shame" when her social set judges her private circumstances based upon a half-formed understanding of Lily's financial affairs. Indeed, it is not a far stretch to compare the displays in a shop window with the array of collected objects placed in prominent view in a man's home. Ultimately, a woman becomes the most significant commodity which a man must possess in order to "fully participate" in America's consumer-oriented culture. She is his perfect ornament, the embodiment of his wealth, wearing his gifts in public and caring for the physical well-being of his house to display his money and, hence, his power.

In Wharton's fictional microcosm, men assume authority over the marketplace and money, becoming collectors of rare and valuable objects. Wharton's depiction of society, in which men are collectors, also illustrates, to a certain extent, a kind of masculine voyeurism, where the men view everything as "eye candy" which exists only for the benefit of their gaze. The opening scene of The House of Mirth depicts Lawrence Selden, a collector of rare books, having his eyes "refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart" (25). He later muses that "she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must have been sacrificed to produce her" (27) and that "the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external."

This paper is from the *Domestic Goddesses* Website, and is provided as a research tool.

Copyright Angela R. Adams, November 27, 2000
http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/pdf/adamswharton.pdf

Phrased in this way, Lily is automatically set up as a thing, her sole purpose being to give pleasure to the eyes of others, an image created for consumption. Indeed, Selden's appreciation of Lily is that of a voyeur, receiving a type of satisfaction from Lily's outward form. Collectors must have their valuable objects about them at all times both to look at and to illustrate their wealth and power to others. Therefore, a beautiful woman is the most prized and desired possession of all, which explains, in part, Selden's attraction to Lily. In The House of Mirth, once captured in marriage, a woman is forever owned and a man's to display, as he would a painting. However, a woman is an even greater status symbol for a man to possess than a painting because a woman requires a type of financial upkeep that a painting does not. Once purchased, a painting remains in a stagnant state of display while a woman requires a constant supply of money from her husband in order to change and improve upon her display of self as the years progress. The man thus proves his ability to "keep" his wife financially and, in many cases, ostentatiously, which is a showing forth both of the power of money and of men's authority over it.

Reduced to an object that can be purchased for the price of a wedding ring, a woman's physical form and the manner in which it is displayed determines her attractiveness and, as a result, her worth. A young woman who wishes to climb the social heights through an advantageous marriage becomes the "watched" upon whom men, the "watchers," project their desires. Though an identity based upon appearances works to the detriment of both sexes, since it is so easily punctured, The House of Mirth argues, as do I, that women have far more to lose in a

This paper is from the *Domestic Goddesses* Website, and is provided as a research tool.

relationship of "watcher" and "watched." On one level, the novel chronicles how, for Lily Bart, being one of the "watched" leads in part to social ruin and death- circumstances which can only transpire because Lily is a woman in a culture where her being has no worth apart from others' opinions of her. Of course, Lily's role as purely a victim is quite problematic, since on several occasions, she either takes on the role of watcher herself or she deliberately uses the dynamics of watcher and watched to her own advantage. At any rate, even early on, she is far from unaware of her situation and that of other women. For instance, while having tea with Lawrence Selden, Lily astutely comments upon a woman's status as decorative object, noting, "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. . .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 [marriage, the only business transaction a woman is allowed to make]" (Wharton 33). Outward appearance, then, matters far more than substance if one is a woman, and particularly if one is a woman without money.

Critic Lillian S. Robinson points out that "Lily's sexual attractiveness is undeniably a material asset in her struggle to improve her social and financial position through marriage. But ironically it is also a liability as long as it is not yet backed up by money and status" (Benstock 347). We as readers learn that Lily has lost money and status as a young woman, after her father is financially ruined. Lily's mother is an ornamental type herself, having been "famous [prior to

Copyright Angela R. Adams, November 27, 2000
http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/pdf/adamswharton.pdf

her monetary losses] for the unlimited effect she produced on limited means" (Wharton 48). Mrs. Bart teaches Lily the importance of being displayed, bemoaning, "People can't marry you if they don't see you- and how can they see you in these holes where we're stuck?" (53). Lily's mother perpetuates the belief that appearance is all, that marriage is the way for a woman to live in material comfort, and, indeed, that being ornamental is a desirable identity for a woman (perhaps because it is the only one which she can fathom). As a result, Lily becomes unable to separate herself from her own "packaging," at one point, thinking of "her beauty as a power for good. . . she liked to picture herself as standing aloof from the vulgar press of the Quirinal, and sacrificing her pleasure to the claims of an immemorial tradition" (53). Here, Lily is beginning to internalize her mother's advice in "picturing [and I would add fictionalizing] herself" and hence, seeing herself as others might see her, already on her way to becoming the embodiment of "the watched" dependent upon "watchers" to validate her existence. Lily's "picturing herself" reaches the apex of its manifestation in the tableaux vivant scene, in which Lily literally becomes the living embodiment of a woman in a painting. Indeed, she sets herself apart from others as the most beautiful of displays; "The impulse to show herself in a splendid setting. . .had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings" (139). Yet, though Lily is clearly admired greatly for her physical appearance, to her male audience, it appears she has gone a bit too far in her open exhibition of her person. Ned Van Alstyne, a member of the audience and an

This paper is from the *Domestic Goddesses* Website, and is provided as a research tool.

"experienced connoisseur" (139), comments, "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!"(139). Like Selden before him, who assesses Lily as one who plots her every move, "that her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions" (25), Van Alstyne clearly sees a danger in an unattached woman so obviously using her beauty as a possible tool of power.

By the time Lily contemplates her possible marriage to the wealthy Percy Gryce, she clearly understands her status as an object, "determin[ing] to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it" (65). She freely admits to Lawrence Selden that she "is very expensive [and] must have a great deal of money" (31), which is her blatant motivation for marriage, since she possesses little money of her own. But the one social game Lily never quite masters, or maybe the one which she ultimately refuses to play, is perhaps the most important one of all: that of hiding her intentions to marry wealthy, a pretense essential to keeping up the "appearance" of being a passive object who simply allows romance and wealth to come to her. An object is not to speak, especially not to so completely reveal the nature of its own function, which, as I have already pointed out, is to glorify and amplify the power of its owner. Tania Modleski, in Loving With a Vengeance, notes that the worst thing for a female character to be is a "scheming little adventuress" (Modleski 49), a sentiment which Wharton (through Lily) seems to echo as well; "Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to

screen it behind a nature of artifice?" (Wharton 36). After all, when a man tries to better himself, he is applauded for his fortitude and ambition. However, a woman, using marriage, her traditional tool for ascent into higher social status, is condemned as a schemer and a manipulator. Modleski, continuing her illustration of the male/female double standard asserts that a woman protagonist must be "careful not to show that [she] set out to get him [a rich husband] and his goods. This is, of course, a simple reflection of the double bind imposed upon women in real life: their most important achievement is supposed to be finding a husband; their greatest fault is attempting to do so" (Modleski 48).

Lily, then, as a beautiful, unmarried woman, is a prime target for suspicion of being a "scheming little adventuress" and evinces her awareness of it in her statement to a rich, married friend; "Why don't you say it, Judy? I have the reputation for being on the hunt for a rich husband?" (Wharton 62). The fact that Lily's marriage plots ultimately fail and that she becomes condemned, and eventually dies, suggests that she has been damned by her social set less for her actions and motivations than because she admits to them openly. She may even be subverting the ornamental role on some level, at least by exposing its problematic nature both to her acquaintances and to us, the readers. But, possibly ironically, Lily may actually be damned by trying to uphold the male/female double standard for the benefit of Lawrence Selden. Lily acquires letters incriminating Selden in an affair with a married woman. A wealthy man, Simon Rosedale, offers Lily marriage if she uses these letters to damage the married woman socially

Copyright Angela R. Adams, November 27, 2000
http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/pdf/adamswharton.pdf

which would, along with marriage to Rosedale, re-establish Lily as a part of their mutual social circle. Lily, however, consigns the letters to the flames, perhaps because she loves Selden, perhaps because she cannot sacrifice her own honor. Either way, her gesture takes on a tragic and ironic tone, considering that she pays for her action, to save the reputation of a man who objectifies her, with her own life.

It is tempting to take the same approach regarding Lily that Lawrence Selden does when he surmises how she "was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (29). Such a view ties in neatly with Lily as purely ornamental: a flower, an objet d'art (or rather b'art). Yet we also know, through Wharton's narrative, that Lily is aware of other women who live well enough without a wealthy husband, such as Selden's cousin, Gerty Farish, who lives in her own flat and makes her own living. Gerty's example of female independence stands in direct contrast to the lessons taught to Lily by her mother, yet Lily chooses to follow in her mother's footsteps, simultaneously cursing "what a miserable thing it is to be a woman" (29), since women are expected to marry well, and embracing the ornamental lifestyle with which she seems to be so frustrated.

Therefore, is Lily not then, in some way, complicit in defining herself and being defined as an object? Feminist Frances L. Restuccia challenges Selden's view, which, she contends, has also been that of many feminist critics, that "the story may be read as a social fable that indicts fashionable, fin-de-siecle New York society for producing human feminine ornaments that it has

This paper is from the *Domestic Goddesses* Website, and is provided as a research tool.

no qualms about crushing" (Benstock 404). However, Restuccia claims that Lily's various poses, which hitherto I have offered mostly as examples of Lily's status as a displayed and often helpless object, are actually manifestations of Lily's power as a character. Restuccia suggests that "Lily eludes triumphantly the attempted encapsulations of her male observers [by making] the boundary of the natural and artificial unsurveyable" (407). This interpretation poses the possibility that Lily's apparently futile schemes for acquiring a husband are not just more desirable than a married life of ennui, but that, in fact, Lily "seems dedicated to a certain freedom from (especially connubial) definition" (409). Restuccia here seems to be suggesting that Lily deliberately avoids marriage and its defining/confining connotations. She argues that "accidents," like Lily's missing church, which leads to Percy Gryce's finding another love interest, are part of Lily's refusal to be captured and made into a stagnant object. Restuccia claims that because of Lily's "unusually sharp- and uncharacteristic awareness of the sexism of her society. . .if Lily is victimized. . . she is intelligent about it" (397). But how successful is Lily in defining and creating her own identity if she dies? Even Restuccia concedes that "Lily is murdered one way or the other. In point of fact, it is one particular set of laws that condemns and destroys Lily, which is the inevitable result of her trying to step outside it" (417).

Though Restuccia is referring to a deconstructionist type of "death," where Lily's "meaning" is "killed" by the attempts of other characters (and possibly critics as well) to define her position, we as readers are still, ultimately, left with a dead female protagonist, who has

apparently overdosed on sleeping medication after a long battle with social failure caused by a type of slavery to appearances. Lily's peers believe she has had an affair with a married man and tried to break up at least one other marriage. While these allegations are unfounded, the appearance of their truth has been enough to "convict" Lily and sentence her to a social death which also becomes a physical death. Lillian Robinson juxtaposes Lily's actual innocence with the guilt of Lawrence Selden, who actually has had an affair with someone who is married, yet receives no condemnation whatsoever from the social set he shares with Lily. Robinson claims that Selden "not only benefits from the double standard that destroys Lily but he feels free. . .to judge Lily for the appearance of a relationship with a married man" (352). Again, this illustration points to a reading of The House of Mirth as first and foremost a depiction of woman's plight in a world which can dispose of her as it might a bauble that is no longer admired. So why, then, must Lily die? Why can't she simply marry and live out a life of "boredom," as she both longs for and flees from?

Tania Modleski notes that for a woman author writing a female character, "death. . .can serve a number of functions . . . it endows the woman with something like a 'tragic hero' status: What can a heroine do . . . [since] men have taken all the active plots? She can die. And in dying she does not have to depart from the passive feminine role, but only logically extend it" (Modleski 18). Lily's death as an alleged "accident" seems to support the view that she is a weak character and that her lack of definition and decision are flaws which lead, however

Copyright Angela R. Adams, November 27, 2000
http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/pdf/adamswharton.pdf

unintentionally, to her demise. But, Modleski also notes that "death can be a very powerful means of wreaking vengeance on others who do not properly 'appreciate' us" (18), which certainly seems to fit with the image of the weeping Selden at dead Lily's bedside. Modleski's use of 'appreciate' is particularly appropriate here for its double meaning of both personal value and financial worth (appraisal), since indeed Selden has ceased to "appreciate" Lily in both senses of the word. At what seems to be his only moment of epiphany into the nature of her double-edged existence as, primarily, an ornament, he muses "After all, what did he know of her life? Only as much as she had chosen to show him" (Wharton 304). But even in death, Lily remains appreciated only as a work of art, watched and hence defined by another: in this case, by Selden. The very depiction of her death scene suggests display: "on the bed, with motionless hands and calm, unrecognizing face, the semblance of Lily Bart" (302). The fact that in death appearance is still the only thing that matters may be Wharton's most devastating and final blow to readers of The House of Mirth because of the intimation that, at least for women, on both sides of the grave, there is no escape from commodification,

---

Works Cited

This paper is from the *Domestic Goddesses* Website, and is provided as a research tool.

Agnew, Jean-Christophe "The Consuming Vision of Henry James" The Culture of Consumption ed. Richard Wightman Fox. New York: Pantheon, 1983 pp 70-98.

Modleski, Tania. Loving With a Vengeance. New York: Rutledge, 1982.

Restuccia, Frances L. "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)" The House of Mirth: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism ed. Shari Benstock. New York: Bedford Books, 1994 pp 404-18.

Robinson, Lillian S. "The Traffic in Women: A Cultural Critique of The House of Mirth" The House of Mirth: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism ed. Shari Benstock. New York: Bedford Books, 1994 pp 340-58.

Wharton, Edith. The House of Mirth. New York: Bedford Books, 1994.