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### Self-Identity and Moral Responsibility in the *House of Mirth*

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# Self-Identity and Moral Responsibility in *The House of Mirth*

by Joan Loslo

In her psychological study of women's development, *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan writes: "The essence of moral decision is the exercise of choice and the willingness to accept responsibility for that choice. To the extent that women perceive themselves as having no choice, they correspondingly excuse themselves from the responsibility that decision entails" (67). According to Gilligan, women's perception that they have no choice stems from the belief enforced by society that women are dependent on men for protection, support, and approval. Because of their dependency, women further surrender the initiative of making choices to men. And because they don't make the choices, women are also able to believe that they are not responsible for what happens. This may seem like a benefit to some, but along with the surrender of choice and responsibility goes the surrender of control. The woman who accepts this loss of control is fated never to reach true adulthood, and dissatisfaction and unhappiness will be the probable results.

In *The House of Mirth* (1905), Edith Wharton created in Lily Bart a character who, like the women Gilligan describes, is unable to make the choices which will determine the course her life will take and who is thus unable to realize her true identity and to assume responsibility for her life. Instead, she drifts between alternatives until disaster results, then makes secondary, delaying choices which further defer the necessary decisions which might have resulted in her development as a responsible adult. In so doing, Lily Bart provides an invaluable insight into Gilligan's themes regarding women's psychological and moral development.

Lily's background and the pressures of society have led her to this condition. Like many of the women Gilligan describes, Lily has been taught by her mother and by the world in which she lives that she must depend on men to provide the money (as well as the protection and

approval) that she needs. Lily has been highly influenced by her strong-willed mother whose sole goal in life was to be surrounded by as much luxury as possible. Her father was only a shadowy figure whose purpose was to provide the essential money of which there was never enough. Significantly, Lily's mother describes the alternative to her elegant and expensive style as to "live like a pig" (30). She believes that even wealthy people can be guilty of this disgraceful approach to life if they do not spend their money to purchase a life surrounded by beauty and elegance. When Lily's father loses his money he ceases to exist for Lily's mother; this was her husband's only meaning for her.

The society in which Lily has been living reinforces her mother's values. Because Lily is unusually beautiful and charming, she is able to spend much of her time being entertained by wealthy people; she has experienced proof that her beauty is a barterable commodity. But Lily knows two people who represent what she sees as possible alternatives to the role models offered by her mother and society: Lawrence Selden and Gerty Farish. In place of the materialistic values of the world around her, Selden represents the alternative of freedom and the moral development of one's own identity. He tells Lily that his idea of success is 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" (68). As to the possession of money, Selden informs Lily it is actually a disadvantage in this "republic of the spirit": "It's as hard for rich people to get into as the kingdom of heaven" (69).

However, Lily is intelligent enough to recognize that Selden's republic is not easily attainable for a woman. Unlike Lily, he enjoys many aspects of an elegant life even though he says he is free of the desire for money. Partly because he is a man, Selden is lucky enough to be able to live in his republic and to still enjoy the advantages of New York society when he feels like it. He is not wealthy – certainly not wealthy enough for Lily to regard as a possible husband – but as an attractive single man he is able to participate in the life of wealthy society whenever he wishes. Furthermore, no stigma attaches to him because he is single; if anything, he attractiveness is increased. Lily does not see Selden's life as representative of an option which would be open to her as a woman, if for no other reason than that she feels she must marry. A single woman is not free in the same way as a single man, even when money is not a problem. This Lily has learned from both her mother and society.

Gerty Farish, an independent woman who manages to get by on a

meagre income, is Lily's other alternative to the role models offered by her mother and society. Gerty lives alone in a small flat, devoting her time to charitable works such as aiding young women struggling to support themselves. She is, therefore, a closer model of the alternative Lily sees facing her if she were to drop her current manner of living. But though she envies the freedom Gerty has in living alone, Lily feels unable to make the necessary sacrifice of her life of luxury to gain it. When Selden presents Gerty as an example of an independent woman, Lily tells him: "But we're so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy" (7). Though Lily feels that her own life is selfish and lacking in freedom, and though she yearns to be "good" herself, she cannot accept what she sees as a loss of beauty in her life in order to live the free and selfless life of Gerty. Ironically, Lily uses Gerty's freedom as an argument against her own change: "And besides, she is free and I am not."

Unable to commit herself to a clear path, Lily avoids responsibility for making a choice. Implicit in the concept of choice are aspects of both loss and gain, even if the loss is only the sacrifice of the advantages of the alternative not chosen. Gilligan writes, "The only real constant is the process of making decisions with care, on the basis of what you know, and taking responsibility for choice while seeing the possible legitimacy of other solutions" (148). Lily, however, refuses to make a choice. Lily keeps persuading herself that a rich and desirable husband will soon appear; perhaps she will find someone so noble that she will be able to have luxury *and* the freedom *and* the selfless life which Selden and Gerty represent to her. Unfortunately for Lily, the pursuit of money is incompatible with freedom and selflessness, as Wharton makes very clear in the course of the novel. Thus Lily drifts among alternatives, clinging to her dependency on her wealthy friends but not taking any action to secure a permanent position in their society.

Lily's vacillation between following an independent path to wealth and retaining her self-image as an aspirant to the "republic of the spirit" is highlighted in her indecision over whether or not to use Bertha Dorset's letters. When Lily first buys the letters she tells herself that she does so only to protect Selden, the recipient. She smothers a quick vision of the tempting opportunities they offer and tells herself that she will burn them as soon as possible. This resolve quickly fades when she learns of Bertha's malicious gossip concerning her loss of Percy Gryce, and she tucks the letters safely away instead.

The very fact that Lily keeps the letters while telling herself that she will never actually use them is indicative of her inability to choose

between a selfish or a selfless course of action. She must have available to her the power that the letters represent, even though she believes that she could never be so base as actually to blackmail Bertha Dorset. In a sense, having the letters in her possession but not actually using them means that she can continue her attempt to avoid choice and responsibility. She chooses not to use the letters – a choice she will make twice again before the end of the novel. But she also chooses not to get rid of them. Those contradictory choices present another aspect of Lily's avoidance of responsibility. In fact, the seemingly moral decision not to use the letters which she retains in her possession represents a deferring action which delays the difficult but necessary primary choice of which course her life should take. Gilligan writes: "Although from one point of view, paying attention to one's own needs is selfish, from a different perspective it is not only honest but fair. This is the essence of the transitional shift toward a new concept of goodness, which turns inward in acknowledging the self and in accepting responsibility for choice" (85).

Like the women of whom Gilligan writes, Lily fails to become a responsible adult because she sees a limitation of her choices and because she fails to make a clear decision when other alternatives are presented to her. Instead, she makes secondary choices which allow her to postpone the difficult decisions necessary for moral and psychological development. Lily is punished more obviously than the women in Gilligan's book and the many other women of whom they are representative. Most women are allowed to drift through life without the heavy penalties Lily has to pay. But Lily's tragedy becomes symbolic of the unhappiness women suffer by deferring the choices which lead to a definition of their identity and to a true morality. In turn-of-the-century Lily Bart, Edith Wharton created a character who casts a great deal of light on the same problems of the submergence of self and the avoidance of adulthood that Carol Gilligan sees in present-day women.

### Works Cited

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