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L. Christine White
University of Northern Iowa

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Lily Bart: A Surfacing Inner Voice

by L. Christine White

In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), Lily Bart undergoes two conflicts: first, between freedom of personal expression and social role-playing, and, second, between personal and social moral codes. These conflicts, which interfere with Lily's attempted psychological and moral growth, are manifested in her struggle between private and public "voice," a term Mary F. Belenky and co-authors describe as being "a metaphor that can apply to many aspects of women's experience and development" (18). In order to analyze the effects of these conflicts on Lily's psychological and moral growth, one must first examine the makeup of her private and public voices.

Personal Expression versus Social Role-Playing

Lily's private voice is composed of two parts: her personal self, and the borrowed, masculine voice of Lawrence Selden's "republic of the spirit." It is Lily's private voice which reflects her personal dissatisfaction with the constraints of social role-playing: "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 structure of artifice?" (14). Her private voice, in yielding to social dictates, represents an initial psychological stage which is silent and powerless. Belenky calls this stage *Silence*, in which "... women believe that the source of self-knowledge is lodged in others – not in the self" (31).

Lily finds this "other" in Lawrence Selden because he possesses "a certain social detachment . . ." (51). She enjoys "scanning her little world through his retina" (51). In desiring to free herself from social constraints, Lily turns to his "republic of the spirit," which defines success as personal freedom "from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety . . ." (64).

In consciously seeking to strengthen her personal self with Selden's borrowed voice, her psychological development enters Belenky's second stage of growth, *Received Knowledge*. According to Belenky, "... women who rely on received knowledge think of words as central to the knowing process. They learn by listening" (36). So Lily listens, and learns Selden's conception of personal freedom. But membership in the

"republic" is mostly male and also requires financial independence which she can only achieve through marital "partnership" or inheritance. For Lily, that prerequisite, which must result in a sacrifice of her private voice, creates a conflict which confirms Lily's realization that now she is "beginning to chafe at the obligations [society] imposed, to feel herself a mere pensioner on the splendour which had once seemed to belong to her" (24). It is these two segments of Lily's private voice – her personal self and Selden's borrowed masculine voice of the "republic" – which begin the struggle to assert personal expression over the restrictiveness of social obligation.

Like her private voice, Lily's public voice is also composed of two parts: her mother's aggressive social values, and Lily's own more refined and aesthetic social tastes. Impoverished after her father's death, her mother teaches Lily that her beauty is "the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life [is] to be rebuilt" (32). In this manner Lily is groomed by her mother to become a desirable ornament in the marriage market. Lily, however, displays a more subtle intelligence in realizing that "beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success other arts are required" (32). By adapting her mother's ambitious guidelines to her own artistic social flair, Lily enhances her marriage marketability. Her social behavior represents a further stage of psychological development, *Subjective Knowledge*, which Belenky describes as a change "from passivity to action, from self as static to self as becoming, from silence to a protesting inner voice and infallible gut" (54). In effect, Lily quietly protests against her mother's "received knowledge" by adapting it to her own intuitive perception of sophisticated role-playing. Belenky notes that this is a stage in which "the predominant learning mode is one of inward listening and watching" (85). By listening to her "infallible gut," Lily can refine her social acting to an art.

It is in the context of Lily's private and public voices that the roots of her conflict between personal expression and social role-playing can be traced. Her desire for an open expression of her private voice conflicts with her designated strategy for obtaining financial security. The "republic's" unattainable masculine prerequisite of financial independence means that, unlike Selden, who "can move amphibiously from the world of money to the rarified heights of his elitist 'republic of the spirit,' . . . Lily [as a woman] experiences a much more polarized situation" (Shulman 13).

Psychological Growth

Lily exhibits psychological growth during the Brys' *tableaux vivants*, in which costumed participants silently present staged scenes from old pictures, relying "not only on the happy disposal of lights and the delusive interposition of layers of gauze, but on a corresponding adjustment of the mental vision" (128). Lily, in her artistic portrayal of Reynolds' "Mrs. Lloyd," uses the social occasion as her backdrop. By unifying her personal and public voices to represent Reynolds' work, she creates a new powerful voice. Lily, according to one critic, "remains Miss Bart at her own insistence. Lily creates herself as a work of art and thereby takes on authority" (Bauer 97). It is in the unified voice that Selden sees "the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world . . ." (129). Her endeavor reflects a further stage of psychological growth described by Belenky as *Procedural Knowledge*, which is divided into two segments: *Separate* and *Connected Knowing*. This position, asserts Belenky, "Is the acquisition of the power of reason and objective thought, which provides women with a sense of control and competitive potential. . . ." However, "There is no sense of an authentic or unique voice, little awareness of a centered self" (134). Although Lily has created a new voice, her appearance as Mrs. Lloyd reflects the fact that her identity is still borrowed and inauthentic.

Lily's gradual social slide, however, gives her a new perspective and a more authentic voice. In her final conversation with Selden, Lily's private voice reveals intense self-scrutiny. She represents what Lindberg describes as an individual who sees herself and her "life in an ever-enlarging context" (59). In her perceptive state, Lily recognizes Selden's awkward attempt at conversation, and finds it "incredible that anyone should think it necessary to linger in the conventional outskirts of word-play and evasion" (294). Her private voice urgently explains to Selden: "I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else" (296).

Lily's private voice reveals her progression to Belenky's final stage of growth: *Constructed Knowledge*, in which she is "weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought and of integrating objective and subjective knowing" (134). In objectively analyzing her life, Lily creates contextual knowledge for herself, and takes a firm step into that final stage of psychological growth.

Personal Voice and Moral Growth

Gilligan states that the "essence of moral decision is the exercise of

choice and the willingness to accept responsibility for that choice" (67). Lily can only sacrifice her own social aspirations when, in acknowledging her strengthening private voice, she accepts responsibility for her moral growth by resolving to repay Trenor with her inheritance. In a conversation with Rosedale, Lily displays an urgent need to explain her debt to Trenor: "She had a passionate desire that some one should know the truth about this transaction, and also that the rumour of her intention to repay the money should reach Judy Trenor's ears" (280). In rejecting Rosedale's monetary offer, Lily's moral growth passes out of the stage which Gilligan says "has an initial focus on caring for the self in order to ensure survival" (74). By destroying Bertha's letters, and using her inheritance to repay Trenor, Lily demonstrates a hope "that in morality lies a way of solving conflicts so that no one will be hurt" (Gilligan 65).

Lily's psychological and moral growth reach a decisive culmination when she visits with Nettie Struthers and her baby. Lily finds strength in their poor but pleasant domestic life which has "the frail audacious permanence of a bird's nest built on the edge of a cliff - a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss" (307). In facing her own destitute situation, Lily resolves not "to pamper herself any longer, to go without food because her surroundings made it unpalatable. Since it was her fate to live in a boarding-house, she must learn to fall in with the conditions of the life" (304). This resolution recalls her last conversation with Selden in which she acknowledges, "Once - twice - you gave me the chance to escape from my life, and I refused it: refused it because I was a coward. Afterward I saw my mistake - I saw I could never be happy with what had contented me before. But it was too late. . . ." (296). It is Lily's strong personal voice which, by telling her to destroy Bertha's letters, and by accepting responsibility for her actions and her life, assures moral and psychological growth.

But death halts the completion of her growth. Would Lily have maintained the moral determination necessary to mail Trenor's check? Would she have psychologically adapted to her impecunious circumstances? Could she have sustained the voice she had developed? For Lily to have successfully continued her personal growth seems unlikely to us, and to Lily, who herself has once admitted "there had been nothing in her training to develop any continuity of moral strength" (251). We can only glean hope from Selden's conviction at her deathbed that the "real Lily" remains in spirit, despite her "delicate impalpable mask" of social and physical death. It is the "real Lily" who grows from

Belenky's psychological stage of "selfless and voiceless" silence to a stage of weaving "strands of rational and emotive thought." And it is the "real Lily" who progresses from Gilligan's moral stage of "caring for the self in order to ensure survival," to the stage in which, by exercising moral choice, she assumes a "willingness to accept responsibility for that choice." Despite Lily's death, the results of her psychological and moral growth remain alive, for Selden and for us.

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