

Draftings In

Volume 6
Number 3 *Draftings In Voices, Costumes and
Mirrors: Feminist Theory and New Concepts of
the Self in the American Novel*

Article 10

1991

The Commodification of Self and the Undermining of Lily Bart's Identity

Kitty Kau Burroughs
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/draftings>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright © 1991 by the Board of Student Publications, University of Northern Iowa

Recommended Citation

Burroughs, Kitty Kau (1991) "The Commodification of Self and the Undermining of Lily Bart's Identity,"
Draftings In: Vol. 6 : No. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/draftings/vol6/iss3/10>

This Part II is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Draftings In by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

The Commodification of Self and the Undermining of Lily Bart's Identity

by Kitty Kau Burroughs

In her quest "to get as much as one can out of life" (68), Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* encounters various societies and financial exchanges. Her personal development can be described as a female identity formed out of relationships and connections such as that discussed in Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (8). Her quest for material wealth, in contrast, can be interpreted in terms of individual achievement. However, Matina Horner has pointed out that women have a problem with competitive achievement, and their strivings produce anticipation of certain negative consequences (15). Throughout Wharton's novel, abundant evidence exists to support this conclusion. As Lily pursues material wealth, her financial exchanges with the new capitalistic American society eventually undermine the evolutionary self that slowly matures.

Money has never been present in sufficient quantities in Lily's family. Her mother has always been materialistic and extravagant. According to Mrs. Bart, they are not to "live like pigs" and they need to be decently dressed at whatever cost (30). Such living standards set by her mother help to foster Lily's natural lively taste for splendour. To be poor is a disgrace to Lily; it constitutes failure. Mrs. Bart also brings Lily up to see her beauty as a valuable commodity. She says to Lily, "But you'll get it all back – you'll get it all back, with your face" (28). Indeed Lily learns that her beauty is her only asset. After her parents' death, she begins building her new life the only way she knows how, by trading her beauty and her style for material comforts. Lily said, "... I am horribly poor – and very expensive. *I must have a great deal of money* [emphasis added]" (10).

Lily understands, however, that beauty is only the raw material of success, and that to convert it other arts are required. Thus, her social manners are measured and calculated with precision. Wharton writes:

[Lily] liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste. (35)

Lily knows her beauty serves as her sole advantage. She understands her value and knows how to sell herself at the highest price. Indeed, she cleverly advertizes her beauty; the climax of her self-advertisement comes with the entertainment of *tableaux vivants*. Under Morpeth's guidance, Lily is able to display "her own beauty under a new aspect: of showing that her loveliness was no more fixed quality, but an element shaping all emotion to fresh form of grace" (131). Her beauty is unmistakably displayed as though "she had stepped not out of, but into, Reynold's canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace" (134). At this moment, Lily is the expert, the one with the charisma, and the "complete of her triumph gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power" (136).

The shifting of lights and shadows at the *tableaux vivants* provides Lily the opportunity to present herself through a falsified image. The delusive layers of gauze serve as masks requiring adjustments of the audience's mental vision. Such are the tricks of advertisement. She is fated to be measured like a portrait and is the victim of the civilization which has produced her. However, at this very moment, Selden sees through Lily and realizes the world in which she lives:

In the long moment before the curtain fell, he had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life. It was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out suppliant hands from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overmastering longing to be with her again. (135)

The consequence of Lily's efforts to meet the demands of financial exchange is evident. Her willingness to take the risk in material gains is similar to her risking her life with drugs. Monetary gain slips from her fingers and her so-called "friends" turn their backs on her. And finally, the very life in her slips away. Like the wealth she craves, darkness is the last desire "she must have at any cost" (322). The extreme of her risk taking eventually leads her to "a sleep without waking" (322). The commodification of the self has gone too far to be reversed.

Works Cited

Gilligan, Carol. *In A Different Voice*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.

Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1985.