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Lily Bart and Isabel Archer: Women Free to Choose Lifestyles or Victims of Fate?

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Isabel Archer of Henry James's novel The Portrait of a Lady and Lily Bart of Edith Wharton's novel The House of Mirth were nineteenth-century characters struggling to assert their social and sexual independence in a male dominated society. Although Isabel inherits a fortune that allegedly enables her to have more autonomy than Lily, both characters are negatively affected by their inability to conceive of their lives outside of social convention.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchal society, independence, free will, marriage, money, sexuality, choice.

This thesis asks whether or not Isabel Archer of Henry James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady* and Lily Bart of Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* can be read as proto-feminist characters, looking particularly for evidence of independence, autonomy, and free will. Both characters exhibit highly spirited dispositions that contrast with the demands of the social conventions of the late nineteenth century, and both women are ultimately penalized for not adhering to those social conventions. To what extent, therefore, do Wharton and James envision "new women" with the ability to conceptualize fulfillment, even if their society will not allow it? Can these two novels be read as proto-feminist in their portrayals of upper-class women and marriage at the turn of the twentieth century? The issues of money, marriage, and sexuality are central to understanding to what extent Isabel and Lily can be read as individuals in charge of their own destinies or as victims of patriarchal society. As I will show, although the novels may critique nineteenth-century society for preventing women like Isabel and Lily from realizing their potential, the characters themselves cannot visualize their potential outside of their roles as wives in an upper-class social world. Both women are expected to marry, and both struggle to assert themselves, but both find themselves victims of a patriarchal society in which women do not have the same rights as men.

Section One: Marriage and Money

Was marriage the only option for women like Isabel Archer and Lily Bart? In her noteworthy article "Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution," published in 1898, Charlotte Perkins Gilman encapsulates what the state of matrimony meant to women of the leisure class: "Marriage is the woman's proper sphere, her divinely ordered place, her natural end. It is what she is born for,

what she is trained for, and what she is exhibited for. It is, moreover, her means of honorable livelihood and advancement" (291). Thus, women of leisure were expected to marry almost as a vocation. Gilman writes that if a woman does not succeed in receiving a marriage proposal, "she becomes a thing of mild popular contempt, a human being with no further place in life save as an attaché, a dependant upon more fortunate relatives, an old maid" (291), or in other words, a burden.

In her book, Elizabeth Ammons writes that Wharton "analyzes the purpose and price of marriage for women in the American leisure class" (345). Ammons suggests that Wharton's novel, for the first time, is "an essential criticism of marriage as a patriarchal institution designed to aggrandize men at the expense of women" (345). She explains that the woman's movement by the turn of the nineteenth century generated literature that "consistently focused on two issues: marriage and work" (346). Ammons claims that Gilman and Thorstein Veblen were the pioneers who "set the stage for Wharton's treatment of the subject" (346). For instance, Gilman writes that "pleasing a man therefore becomes a woman's job in life, which means that the married woman, viewed economically, differs very little from the prostitute; both exchange sexual service for support" (qtd. in Ammons 347). In his article, "The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions," Thorstein Veblen takes Gilman's argument one step further and suggests, in Ammons's words, that "though wives are dependent economically on men, they do fulfill a significant function in the marital economy: that of conspicuous consumer for the male" (347), which is a theory shared by Wharton. Ammons suggests that the upper class was the envied class and sums up succinctly what the beautiful figure of Lily Bart means to her social class: "brought up to be ornamental, [Lily] is valuable to them as a symbol, the Veblenesque female whose conspicuous leisure and freedom from sweated labor display her class's

superiority to ordinary economic exigencies" (348). Veblen insists that with her "huge hats, high heels, [and] voluminous skirts, render[ing] her unfit for exertion," the woman of leisure is obviously "label[ed] as some man's costly possession." She is "evidence of her husband's financial prowess" (qtd. in Ammons 348). Furthermore, Ammons suggests that Lily dies for one reason: "she refuses to marry" and that action "makes her useless to the society [and even] threatening" (348). By not marrying, Lily Bart opts out of the system and thus out of life.

Although Isabel Archer does succeed in marrying, both she and Lily Bart are products of a nineteenth-century patriarchal society with only one option for survival in their upper class level of society, namely to marry well. However, Lily and Isabel have different approaches to marriage. While Lily is expected to marry so that she can maintain her upper-class lifestyle, Isabel can choose whom she wants to marry after inheriting her fortune. Unfortunately, she marries a poor man who appears to have married her for her money. Upper-class women were not necessarily encouraged to further their education or to work at trades that required skills. They were encouraged to marry wealthy men who could provide for them and allow them to lead lives of leisure. As wives, they were expected to serve only as ornamental decoration for their husbands. Therefore, it was essential that upper-class women marry well because that was their best option for their survival. Women who did not marry were considered burdens to their families or simply failures at their most basic social role.

Lily Bart is considered an exceptionally beautiful woman by both men and women; however, she is no longer considered young. At the story's opening Lily is twenty-nine, well past what her society considers a good marrying age. Lily thus feels the intense pressure and need to marry soon, before she will no longer be an attractive marriage partner. Lily is confident in her

ability to charm men with her good looks and genteel manner. She knows that she is expected to be able to please men with her gifts of conversation and other behaviors, such as elegantly pouring a cup of tea while riding a crowded train. Her sole desire is to marry a wealthy man who will provide for her the kind of lifestyle to which she has grown accustomed. For instance, she tells her good friend Lawrence Selden, "You know I am horribly poor – and very expensive. I must have a great deal of money" (10), meaning that she needs to marry well. She also tells Selden, "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," or, in other words, marry (12).

Lily was raised in a household in which her mother tried to effect a style of living that was "much richer than one's bank-book denoted" (Wharton 26). Her father was simply regarded as the economic provider, a cash cow, whom Lily remembers as "a neutral-tinted father [who] filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks" (25). Her mother refused to "live like a pig," which meant being poorly dressed or not having a good cook. Therefore, when her father was financially ruined, he ceased to fulfill his purpose in their lives and Lily's mother ignored him as he died a slow and difficult death (28). After the Barts lost all of their money, Mrs. Bart fiercely began to treat Lily's beauty as a commodity and told her daughter, "You'll get it all back, with your face" (25). Lily's mother discouraged her daughter from marrying for love, as she had, and made her sole aim in life marrying Lily to a wealthy man. However, after two years of hungry roaming, Mrs. Bart died, along with her visions of a brilliant marriage for Lily (30).

The influences of her heredity and environment strongly affect Lily throughout her life. Early on in the novel, while looking around her lavish suite at Bellomont, she reflects on how

she believes that she should always be surrounded by beautiful things: “No; she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in” (Wharton 23). Lily shared her mother’s repugnance for people who “lived like pigs” (26). Therefore, early in her life Lily recognized lifestyle and class as a choice and vowed to never live as poor people lived. Even as a teenager, Lily remembered the “perpetual need – the need of more money,” and it always seemed as though it were her father’s fault that the family did not have enough money (26). Lily was proud of her mother’s management of their tight funds. To be poor, however, “seemed to her such a confession of failure that it amounted to disgrace” (29). With such negative emotions associated with poverty, it is no surprise that Lily was determined to live as a wealthy woman. Wharton writes that “[Lily] hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch ” (33).

At the story’s opening, Lily is able to live as an upper-class woman with the help of her friends for a while but ultimately finds herself in debt with no one to turn to. This is when Lily’s life starts a downward spiral from which she does not recover. Because Lily has been taught to use her face, body, and manners as commodities, she is rather self-absorbed and abhorrent of women in a lower class than she. Lily sees these women, such as the charwoman who will not stop scrubbing the steps to allow Lily to pass, as dingy and beneath her. Lily’s only act of altruism is donating some money to Gerty Farish’s group of underprivileged women at Gerty’s insistence and occasionally visiting them. She is contemplating buying an expensive piece of luggage when she runs into Gerty Farish and instead gives her a liberal amount of the money.

Wharton writes of her heroine, "Lily felt a new interest in herself as a person of charitable instincts: she had never before thought of doing good with the wealth she had so often dreamed of possessing, but now her horizon was enlarged by the vision of a prodigal philanthropy" (88).

However, Lily fails to realize this vision because she fails to marry a rich man. She does not love the various wealthy men who pursue her at the beginning of the novel; she knows she needs to go after them to secure an affluent lifestyle, but she cannot seem to bring herself to marry these mostly dull but rich bachelors. She is hunting for a wealthy man to prey upon, yet she seems to truly love her good friend Lawrence Selden. However, she refuses to consider him a viable marriage partner because he is not rich. Lawrence even teases Lily that marrying is her job: "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?" he asks as she sips tea in his bachelor's apartment (Wharton 10). Can Lily live freely without marrying in the patriarchal society of nineteenth-century America? On the face of it, it would seem that she does not have free choice. Lily had been groomed to serve as adornment for men and she had never been taught any other viable skills. For example, when Lily's reputation is unjustly soiled by Bertha Dorset, Lily is forced to work in a milliner's shop sewing spangles on hats. Yet Lily has never been trained to do manual labor, and thus she sews the spangles crookedly, resulting in her dismissal from the post. With no living relatives to take her in, Lily is doomed when she cannot find a wealthy man to support her in marriage, and she is too stubborn to marry a less affluent man. Ironically, when she is on the verge of receiving marriage proposals from wealthy men, she sabotages her chances. Thus it is questionable whether her demise is attributable to poor choices Lily made or simply fate.

Unlike Isabel and her plans for adventure, Lily is obsessed with finding a wealthy husband so that she might continue to live the life of leisure for which she has been trained. In

her early twenties, men proposed to Lily, but she invariably rejected them. She thinks to herself, "Was it only ten years since she had wavered in imagination between the English earl and the Italian prince?" (30). Lily always seems to sabotage her plans to marry well, about which Carrie Fisher says, "Sometimes I think it's just flightiness – and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study" (148).

Why does Lily always seem to sabotage her marriage proposals to wealthy men? It might be because she does not want to feel as though she is an object that a man possesses. Perhaps she is simply bored with the available bachelors in her society. For instance, while riding the train with Percy Gryce, Lily reflects on his limitations. She assesses that he lacks imagination and has "a mental palate which would never learn to distinguish between railway tea and nectar" (Wharton 18). She does not want to be bored with this man for whom she has no true affection every day of her life. Lily, whose looks are waning, is still stunning, and she thinks she can have any man she wants. Lawrence Selden takes in her beauty when he notices her at the train station: "Selden had never seen her more radiant. Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ballroom, and under her dark hat and veil she regained the girlish smoothness [and a] purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing" (Wharton 5-6). Just as Selden is taken with Lily, she has feelings for Selden. Wharton writes of her protagonist, "[P]oor Lily, for all the hard glaze of her exterior was inwardly as malleable as wax . . . She was like a waterplant in the flux of the tides, and today the whole current of her mood was carrying her toward Lawrence Selden" (44). She and Lawrence Selden enjoy a special repartee and understanding of each other. She seems to

have loving feelings for Selden that she does not have for any of her other suitors yet she never considers marrying him.

Henry James's Isabel Archer, is also an attractive young woman who has "a great deal of confidence, both in herself and in others" (James 26). As a child, she had no mother, no maternal guidance. She crossed the Atlantic Ocean several times, growing up with her sisters and father, who never secured a stable income. Like Lily, Isabel comes from a family without much money, but she was allowed to develop her mind and thus her future does not rest solely on her looks. Isabel has a curiosity about life, and she read widely as a child. She is mostly self-taught with little formal education. James writes of young Isabel, "the girl had a certain nobleness of imagination . . . she spent half her time in thinking of beauty and bravery and magnanimity; she had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action . . . she had an infinite hope that she should never do anything wrong" (54). When her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, finds her niece reading about battles in her father's library in Albany, she offers to bring her to Europe where she can experience England and Italy. Since Mrs. Touchett arranges for Isabel's travels, Isabel does not realize that she has no significant money of her own. Unlike Lily Bart, she is not in an immediate rush to marry. She is excited about having been discovered by her aunt and the novelty of traveling with her aunt around Europe.

Marriage means something different for Isabel than it does for Lily. Lily is looking for immediate salvation and while she entertains the idea of marrying an earl or a prince, Isabel is not looking to be extremely wealthy or to become the first lady of a manor. Early in the novel, Isabel is proposed to twice, by Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, but she declines both offers. Many literary critics wonder if Isabel is asexual given that she does not seem to be

attracted to either of her diligent pursuers. In his article "What Is a Kiss? Isabel's Moments of Decision," J. Hillis Miller writes that Isabel "is shown as resisting direct heterosexual approaches with a kind of fastidious distaste, as when she rejects, repeatedly, Warburton and Goodwood" (739). Indeed, those around her find it difficult to understand why Isabel rejects the proposals of such handsome, virile, and wealthy men. James describes Lord Warburton, for instance, as having a "noticeably handsome face, fresh-colored, fair and frank, with firm, straight features," and cutting a dashing figure in his riding gear (James 19). He is a wealthy Lord who holds a seat in parliament, and he is immediately taken with Isabel, proposing to her and offering her a variety of homes in which to live. Caspar Goodwood, who had courted Isabel and proposed to her in the states, flies to Europe to renew his proposal. Isabel does not find Caspar Goodwood particularly handsome, but instead notes that his jaw is rather "square" (136). Isabel could not be more dismissive of Goodwood's advances, and although she asks him to give her two years to think about his offer, she secretly hopes that he will forget about her and never ask her again.

Why does Isabel put up such resistance to these attractive men? Before Isabel had met her aunt, she had had no notions of traveling; she was content to read about different countries in her huge library in Albany. She had entertained visits from Caspar Goodwood and even given him hope that she might accept his marriage proposal. But everything changed once she gained the freedom to travel. The reality is that Isabel does not want to lose her independence by marrying these men. For example, she tells Warburton, "I don't think I should suit you; I really don't think I should," and then later she says, "I'm not sure I wish to marry any one" (99). Isabel is determined to see more of the world by traveling around Europe. She tells her cousin Ralph, "I don't want to begin life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do" (133).

In fact, it is Isabel's cousin, Ralph Touchett, who wants Isabel to truly believe that there are other options to marrying well. That is why he arranges for Isabel to inherit 70,000 pounds from his wealthy father, Daniel Touchett, so that she can live any way she chooses. However, after she travels for only a few years, Isabel decides to marry the least attractive of her three suitors, Gilbert Osmond. He has no fortune, no visible means of income, and he thinks very highly of himself. However, she is taken in by his knowledge, subtlety, and delicacy. She finds him to be "a specimen apart," and thinks to herself she "had never met a person of so fine a grain" and with "a consulted taste in everything" (James 224). Isabel, who previously had been determined to travel before marriage, settles down in Rome with her husband. She marries him because, she tells Ralph, Osmond has "the kindest, gentlest, highest spirit" that she has ever known (293); later she ruminates that Osmond has "a mind more ingenious, more pliant, more cultivated, [and] more trained to admirable exercises" than any she had ever encountered (359).

Isabel does not care that her future husband is not wealthy and that some consider him a snobbish aesthete. Moreover, she is relieved that Gilbert Osmond does not own a position in society. She does not want to play the role of a public figure. Her desire to be an unattached, independent woman is one of the reasons she refuses Lord Warburton's attractive proposal. Ellen Morgan writes that " it is no accident that [Isabel] allows herself to love only where a modicum of liberty seems most likely to be hers and chooses a marriage which she believes will encroach as little as possible on her autonomy" (25). She believes that Osmond will put her fortune to good use and invest it wisely in beautiful art, thereby making Isabel feel useful and still somewhat independent. In retrospect, she realizes that she had been completely charmed by Gilbert because "there had been an indefinable beauty about him – in his situation, in his mind, in his face" (James 357). Isabel realizes that if she had not had a fortune to give to Gilbert

Osmond that she would not have married him: “but for her money, as she saw today, she would never have done it” (358). She is, of course, hideously deceived by Osmond’s conspiring ways with Madame Merle. Isabel soon finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage that she feels obligated to honor.

Isabel is expected by society to marry, but her choice of suitors is vast. Did Isabel have options other than marrying? Could she act of her own free will? Isabel is not like her journalist friend Henrietta Stackpole who is able to pay her own bills. Isabel’s family expects her to do something special with her life, namely marry well. Her older sister, Mrs. Ludlow, frequently notes to her husband that she wants to see Isabel safely married (James 37). James makes it clear that the only alternative Isabel had besides marrying was traveling with her aunt or a female companion. He wants to impress upon the reader the limited life choices available to women in Isabel’s social class.

But after Isabel realizes that her marriage is a disaster, why does she return to Osmond? Lee Clark Mitchell suggests in his article “Beyond the Frame of *The Portrait of a Lady*,” that there are several reasons why Isabel returns to her dead marriage: “her promise to Pansy to return and protect her; her proud refusal to proclaim her mistake or to shrug off a sacred vow; her constitutional regard for decorum and appearance . . . and her fear of the annihilating sexuality aroused by Caspar Goodwood’s kiss” (11). I would add that from the beginning of her relationship with Osmond Isabel had seen something special in him, something that set him apart from all the other men who tried to win her affection. She tells Ralph, “Mr. Osmond’s simply a very lonely, a very cultivated and a very honest man – he’s not a prodigious proprietor” (293), which may explain why she rejected her other suitors. Later in the novel, after her marriage has begun to fail, she ruminates about characteristics that initially attracted her to Osmond: “It was

because a certain ardor took possession of her – a sense of the earnestness of his affection and a delight in his personal qualities. He was better than any one else" (358). Perhaps it is for these reasons that she feels compelled to return to her broken marriage or it could be that Isabel, unlike her friend Henrietta Stackpole, does not believe in divorce. Isabel prefers to remain private while Henrietta is a more public person. Isabel tells her friend, "I don't know whether I'm too proud. But I can't publish my mistake. I don't think that's decent. I'd much rather die . . . it seems to me I shall always be ashamed. One must accept one's deeds. . . One can't change that way" (407). Theorist Annette Niemtzow argues that it is Isabel's sense of privacy that forces her to reject divorce as a possibility (382). Isabel has made her commitment and believes the decent action to take is to honor it and to adhere to her marriage vows.

One of the most powerful scenes in the novel is when James allows the reader to have insight into Isabel's private, intimate thoughts as she sits in her room and reflects on how her marriage to Osmond is failing. She admits to herself that she had conceived a deep mistrust for her husband. She thinks to herself:

> [T]his mistrust was now the clearest result of their short married life; a gulf had opened between them over which they looked at each other with eyes that were on either side a declaration of the deception suffered . . . Instead of leading to the high places of happiness . . . [their marriage] led rather downward and earthward, into realms of restriction and depression where the sound of other lives, easier and freer, was heard as from above, and where it served to deepen the feeling of failure. It was her deep distrust of her husband–this was what darkened the world. (James 356)

Neither person had shown the other his or her entire personality. When they reveal their entire selves to each other, Isabel and Osmond find they do not love each other in their entirety.

Fairly soon in the marriage, Isabel believes that her husband hates her. She ruminates that she did not show her entire self to Gilbert during the one year they courted. Isabel reflects that "she had effaced herself when he first knew her; she had made herself small, pretending there was less of her than there really was" (357). Perhaps she means that she had not shown Gilbert what a truly independent thinker she was, that she had her own opinions and stood by them, which infuriated Osmond, once he could see her full personality. As for her being deceived by him, Isabel realizes that his charm had won her emotions, and she recognizes that as the marriage progressed, she came to see her husband's true character: "She saw the full moon now – she saw the whole man" and realizes that "she had been under the extraordinary charm that he, on his side, had taken pains to put forth" (357). He had convinced her that "she was the most imaginative woman he had known" (357). Osmond and Isabel had tricked each other. Ironically it was Isabel's cousin Ralph who had wanted her inheritance to provide Isabel with complete freedom, and instead it indirectly caused her to be caught in Gilbert Osmond's cage.

Isabel does what society dictates she should; she marries. However, she does not completely engage in the societal game expected of her. She does not act as an ornamental object for Gilbert Osmond, and she refuses to be completely passive and docile. Isabel has a mind of her own and her own intelligent thoughts. In fact, her independence in thought is a major source of tension in the marriage. However, suffering a fate similar to Lily's, when Isabel refuses to comply with societal norms, her marriage fails miserably and is irreparable.

Section Two: Sexuality

In addition to lacking autonomy in choosing whether to marry or how to support themselves, Isabel and Lily also lack sexual autonomy. In his article "Love, Marriage, and

Divorce: The Matter of Sexuality in *The Portrait of a Lady*," Robert White cites Michel Foucault, who argues, "that our accepted notions about the place and valuation of sex in the Western world from the seventeenth century on are quite misleading" and that this was "not so much a period of repression and censorship" but rather "a veritable discursive explosion" with regard to sexual matters (qtd. in White 59). Michel Foucault argues that rather than hide sexual matters, Victorians created numerous devices for talking about, recording, and transcribing them (White 59). However, the discussion could be conservative and even prudish. For instance, White writes that "during most of the nineteenth century, most commentators on sexuality insisted that marriage was the only legitimate outlet for passion, and most were agreed that offspring were the legitimate object of sexual union" (59). One researcher concluded that in advice manuals "sex is viewed . . . as a means to an end rather than an end in itself; nonprocreative sex is never fully accepted throughout most of the nineteenth century" (qtd. in White 59). Apparently it was recognized that men's sexual urges were strong, "but it was also believed that strong men could control their passions" (60). As for women, they were considered to be lacking in sensuality and not troubled by desires similar to the ones that haunted men. White writes that historians agreed "that by the mid-nineteenth century the doctrine of female passionlessness was subscribed to throughout middle-class culture" (60). In fact, an advice-giver of the period "informed his readers that women had little to no sexual feeling and were . . . indifferent to or frightened by the sexual side of marriage" (White 60). Furthermore, the advice consultant wrote, "Many of the best mothers, wives, and managers of households know little of or are careless about sexual indulgences. Love of home, of children, and of domestic duties are the only passion[s] they feel" (qtd. in White 60).

As an unmarried woman of nineteenth-century America, Lily is presumably a virgin. Indeed, the single woman Lily does not take lovers as do other characters in the novel, such as the married Bertha Dorset. Lily only seems to have romantic feelings for Selden Lawrence. Otherwise, she simply enjoys playing the mating game, the chase. She flirts with wealthy single men, but just as they are about to propose she does not follow through with her flirtations and the relationships disintegrate.

Although Lily is conscious of her lovely figure when she shows herself to her best advantage, there is no evidence that she is solicitous of sex. In fact, Lily is quite careful about not compromising herself and, unlike other characters in the novel, refuses to engage in extramarital relationships. Lily is chaste and passes up opportunities to have affairs with wealthy men, including George Dorset, Sim Rosedale, and even Gus Trenor, the man who gives Lily $9,000 pounds in hopes that she will have sexual relations with him. She appears to believe that she is in control of her sexuality until her seemingly innocent flirtations almost lead to her being raped by Gus Trenor, the husband of her good friend Judy Trenor. It is this physical threat that forces Lily to seriously analyze her behavior towards men.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman reduces female sexuality to simple economics: "woman's economic profit comes through the power of sex-attraction" (Gilman 290). Lily knows that she is sexually appealing. Wharton describes Lily's thoughts as she comes across a rustic seat on the grounds of Bellomont: "The spot was charming, 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" (Wharton 49-50). Lily also knows she cuts a lovely figure even when she is doing the most mundane of tasks. Mr. Gryce enjoys watching her pour tea on the crowded

train they are riding: “When the tea came he watched her in silent fascination while her hands flitted above the tray, looking miraculously fine and slender in contrast to the course china and lumpy bread” (Wharton 18). Lily Bart is well aware of her sexuality and its effect on men. She knows that men find her attractive and she is not afraid to use that fact to her advantage. She allows men to visually enjoy her beauty and sensuality, but she does not allow them to have physical control over her.

Literary critic Lois Tyson writes that Lily fashioned herself to resemble an object d’art not only in the tableau vivant but in life (4). Tyson explains that “Lily’s desire to be an art object reflects her desire to be admired from afar, to be viewed without being touched” (4). This theory makes sense as Lily allows her many male admirers to observe her but not touch her, especially Gus Trenor. Lily particularly makes the most of her sensual figure when she agrees to appear in the tableaux vivants show held by Mrs. Bry. Wharton writes of Lily, “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” (106). Lily is thrilled at the unanimous “Oh!” that greets her as the curtain rises and she poses in the tableau vivant. She is wearing a rather shear sheath for a costume and it apparently reveals intimate details of her shape. Ned Van Alysten probably expresses the thoughts of the majority of the men at the party when he says, “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!” (Wharton 106). Lily realizes that she is sexually alluring in the form fitting sheath; she recognizes that she is put quite literally on display. But while most men are entranced by Lily, including Selden, he is also contemptuous of the sexual objectification of her. He is indignant that other men should be allowed to see Lily in such a vulnerable state. It makes him even more protective of her: “It

was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out suppliant hands to him 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" (107).

Although Lily will not allow other men to touch her, she does kiss Selden, revealing her sexuality in a scene in which she is fully partaking in a romantic relationship. For once, she is not merely the object of desire, but rather she desires someone else. Lily knows that she has been successful in tantalizing the men who have witnessed the show, and, thus, she waits in a drawing room for the audience to pour in and inundate her with compliments. Selden's sexual attraction to Lily forces him to seek out Lily and stand alone with her after the show. Wharton writes of her heroine, "Lily felt the quicker beat of life that his nearness always produced" (108). She reads triumph in his gaze and "for the moment it seemed to her that it was for him only [Lily] cared to be beautiful" (108). Selden leads her to a garden, as if the two are in a dream. The couple sits on a bench and Lily accuses Selden of thinking hard things of her (108). She chastises him and asks why they can't be friends. Selden tells her, "The only way I can help you is by loving you" (109). At that moment, their lips meet and they kiss. They might have kissed longer, but Lily quickly pulls away. She tells Selden, "Ah, love me, love me – but don't tell me so," realizing the impossibility of their situation, and she hurries back to the party. Lily denies herself this romance with Selden because she is too consumed with the thought of marrying a wealthy man, one she has no romantic feelings for. Thus, this is the most intimacy ever expressed between the two.

At this time, women were encouraged to grow up oblivious to and ignorant about their sexuality until they encountered men interested in marriage. This mentality may help to explain why Isabel comes off as prudish and even asexual. In order to be the perfect Victorian lady, she is discouraged from enjoying and exploring her sexual feelings. Because Warburton is described

as “frank, with firm, straight features” (James 19) and Goodwood is described as “tall, strong, and somewhat stiff,” it is no wonder that Isabel “shies away from their sexual potency, their phallic energy” (White 65). Perhaps because Osmond is described as delicate and non-aggressive, Isabel does not feel sexually threatened by him and thus chooses him as her spouse. Robert White argues that Osmond charms Isabel “because he is so unlike her other wooers, because his appeal is seemingly non-assertive, non-aggressive, almost, it would seem, non-masculine” (66). Annette Niemtzow offers a plausible summation of Isabel’s chaste behavior:

> While the novel begins as a study of a single woman, searching for options other than marriage, who must control her sexuality because it could shatter her and society’s notion of what is “decent,” it ends as a study of the same woman, now married, who continues to control her sexuality because it threatens her respectability, morality, and marriage. (383)

Thus, Isabel feels obligated to control her sexuality as it was not proper for a lady to express such passionate emotions.

Kurt Hochenauer asserts that Isabel Archer has a divided sexuality, comprised of a passionate and an inhibited side. If that assertion were true, it seems as though Isabel prefers to show her inhibited side. However, Hochenauer appears to be more correct with his assessment that it is too simple to see Isabel’s sexuality as “limited by the mores and standards of her time” (20). Hochenauer writes that when Caspar Goodwood leaves Isabel after one of their heated discussions, she is having a sexual experience as evidenced by her trembling and shaking (21). Indeed, Goodwood’s visits often result in Isabel becoming emotionally agitated, as in the following scene:

> She was not praying; she was trembling--trembling all over. Vibration was easy to her, was in fact too constant with her, and she found herself now humming like a

> smitten harp. She only asked, however, to put on the cover, to case herself again in brown Holland, but she wished to resist her excitement, and the attitude of devotion, which she kept for some time, seemed to help her to be still. (James 144)

This passage supports the idea that Isabel has a sexual side that it is aroused by Goodwood, one that she tries to suppress.

Although White believes that Isabel is attracted to Osmond sexually, most critics disagree. Most find their relationship asexual and do not believe that Osmond arouses any sexual feelings in Isabel. James writes that Isabel "had not been mistaken about the beauty of his mind; she knew that organ perfectly now" (James 358). She appreciates his mind, but there is no evidence in the text that suggests Osmond arouses sexual feelings in his wife. There are no scenes that compete with the heated kiss she shares with Goodwood. Much has been written of the potentially sexually arousing kiss that Caspar Goodwood gives to Isabel at the end of the novel in a final attempt at persuading Isabel to leave her husband for him. Hochenauer writes that Isabel is aroused by the kiss but also threatened (24). In the original publication of the novel in 1881, the kiss is tepid and lasts one sentence: "His kiss was like a flash of lightning; when it was dark again she was free" (qtd. in Hochenauer 23). However, the 1908 New York Edition of the novel depicts a more sexually charged kiss:

> His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. (James 489)

Just like the kiss Lily and Selden share, this kiss also takes place in a garden, but I would argue that it is initiated by Goodwood whereas the kiss between Lily and Selden seems mutual. Isabel is adamant that she does not want to have any romantic feelings for Goodwood and as she does repeatedly throughout the novel, she begs him to go away. Both women react the same way to their passionate kisses; they flee. Both women run from the scene seemingly afraid of what will happen if they allow their true feelings, their sexuality, to overtake them. In fact, Niemtzow argues that Isabel is determined to be independent and yet she is aware of her sexuality and fears being considered a "loose woman" should she give into her sexual feelings for Goodwood (385).

Although Isabel is apparently aroused by Goodwood's masculinity, she still returns to her husband, Osmond, by a "very straight path" (James 490). She reacts against this hard form of Goodwood's sexuality because it would mean his "possession" of her, and she does not want to be owned by any man. Thus, Isabel's aggressive rejection of heterosexuality can be read as an attempt to retain her independence. Yet, she returns to Osmond. Isabel is essentially returning to the confinement and sexual repression of a quasi-convent by returning to her marriage, probably out of fear of the unknown, fear of living as a single woman, and an overwhelming sense of duty to her husband and to Pansy. Thus, both Isabel Archer and Lily Bart have sexual urges that they suppress perhaps because they believe, according to societal standards, that they their sexual urges are meant to be suppressed.

Section Three: Choice or Fate

The question remains, are Lily and Isabel able to make choices in their lives, to exert some autonomy, or are they victims of fate who have no control in determining what happens in their lives? One of the few choices that Edith Wharton presents for her heroine instead of marrying is to work at a vocation, as her friend Gerty Farish works. Gerty does charitable work for common working women by providing them with a lodge where they can rest during the day or even by sending these underprivileged women to sanatoriums to improve their health. Gerty is quite other-oriented and enjoys this selfless, altruistic, philanthropic type of work. Lily is entirely different from her thoughtful friend. Lily has been raised to be selfish, self-centered, and self-absorbed. She inadvertently helps Nettie Struther by giving Gerty a small amount of money for the women she helps, and Lily laughs to herself when she realizes that the money she gave Gerty came from Gus Trenor. Later, when Lily is forced to support herself, she quickly learns that her efforts to work are disastrous. She has not been taught any sort of marketable skills. Lily finds that she cannot sew spangles neatly on hats at a milliner's shop and is fired from that position. She also attempts to work as a secretary for a woman with a questionable reputation and leaves that job when it falls apart. The most taxing work Lily has ever done is helping her friend Judy Trenor make seating arrangements for lavish parties. Thus, Lily's attempts to work are disastrous and she becomes frustrated and ultimately decides that she is not meant to work. After her dismissal from the milliner's shop, she thinks to herself, "It was bitter to acknowledge her inferiority even to herself, but the fact had been brought home to her that as a bread-winner she could never compete with professional ability" (Wharton 232). So, she will leave that sort of work to the likes of Gerty Farish. Lily quickly decides that she is only equipped to be a wealthy married woman.

Selden also recognizes how impossible it would be for Lily to try to live as Gerty does. Lily has only been groomed to serve as an ornament, an objet d'art. As he watches Lily delicately pour tea, he thinks, "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" (8). Wharton expresses her heroine's dilemma in Darwinian terms in the novel:

> Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast? (Wharton 234-235)

Lily has been groomed her entire life to be a wealthy man's wife and she has no purpose outside of that function. Later Wharton reiterates the same idea in different words:

> But, after all, it was the life [of pleasure] she had been made for; every dawning tendency in her had been directed toward it, all her interests and activities had been taught to center around it. She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty. (246-247)

Lily can only serve as a rich man's wife because she is not trained for any other purpose.

However, Lily never really comes to a decision about whom she will marry. She is sexually attracted to Lawrence Selden but will not to marry a man without wealth. Still, marrying Selden would be a better option than working as a commoner and dying. However, Lily fights to avoid the dinginess that her mother spoke of so fiercely and frequently. Lily knows that the best option for her survival is to marry well. So even though she is impoverished by the story's end, she makes one last effort to encourage Sim Rosedale to marry her, but her reputation has been too tarnished. Her lack of choice of suitors gives the reader pause. Throughout the novel, Lily

seems to sabotage marriage opportunities to wealthy men. For example, when Lily has the opportunity to charm the wealthy Percy Gryce, she intentionally chooses not to go to church with him and further develop their relationship. Her behavior not to pursue relationships with wealthy bachelors seems to be a matter of choice, but why? Perhaps she comes to realize, after chasing single wealthy men for so long, that she does not want that dream after all. Perhaps she wanted to make a quiet life for herself with Selden, but she had lived the role of the wealthy, exuberant, stunning Lily Bart for too long. She did not know how to live any other way.

She seems to genuinely have loving feelings for Selden, and she probably wants to see him truly happy with a woman unlike herself, less difficult to care for. To truly set him free and have no one know of his love letters exchanged with a married woman, Lily burns the letters. It is as if she is cutting her last tether to Selden and freeing him to live an enjoyable life with a less complicated woman and free from any kind of blackmail. She is also ruining any chances she has of re-entering high society when she burns the letters, her last piece of leverage, which suggests that she would not prostitute herself by marrying any wealthy just for his money.

Another reason she sabotages her chances at marriage is that she finds the wealthy, single men in her social circle to be physically unattractive and dull. She notices Sim Rosedale's fat fingers or contemplates whether she will allow Percy Gryce "the honor of boring her for life" (Wharton 23). Helge Normann Nilsen makes the astute observation that "the tragic aspect of Lily's fate is that her strong personality and intelligence cannot find adequate outlets in an environment where nobody can imagine anything else for her to do than to marry a rich man as quickly as possible" (29). Since she cannot seem to bring herself to marry available wealthy men, it is possible that she plays a role in causing her tragic demise. Nilsen recognizes that "Wharton seems to vacillate between a direct attack upon society for the way in which it maims

women by restricting their options, and an inclination to give Lily Bart, the heroine, considerable blame for her own downfall" (26). In other words, both Lily and society are to blame for her unfortunate demise.

Lily's character changes throughout the novel. She realizes that perhaps she would not have been happy living the life she was pursuing, trying to marry well, and she thanks Selden for loving her once and making her aware of that reality. She tells Selden, "I remembered your saying that such a life [of wealth and high society] could never satisfy me; and I was ashamed to admit to myself that it could. That is what you did for me–that is what I wanted to thank you for" (Wharton 240). She no longer wants to be the shallow, gold-digging, useless Lily, but she is striving to be a more compassionate and useful person, and she credits Selden with helping her see that.

In the end, Lily makes a final "choice" to die. During their last visit, Lily seems to be saying goodbye to Selden in words and gestures. As she cries steadily, she gathers her courage and offers Selden a realistic yet troubling assessment of her life:

> I have tried hard–but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. 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. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap–and you don't know what it's like in the rubbish heap! (Wharton 240)

This "new" Lily recognizes that she is not a good worker, that she was only raised to be ornamental. She is trying to relay to her friend what a difficult time she has had living outside of her wealthy social circle, "in the rubbish heap." She is preparing a major change in her life, but

she will not confess to Selden what she intends to do. She frightens Selden with her gaunt look and nervous behavior. He finally tells her, “Lily, you mustn’t speak in this way. I can’t let you go without knowing what you mean to do. Things may change–but they don’t pass. You can never go out of my life” (241). Selden acknowledges that their relationship has changed from a possible romantic connection to a simple friendship, but he will always care for Lily. Lily tells him that she is glad they are friends and that thought will make her feel safe, whatever happens. These words of finality, the fact that she tells him goodbye twice, and the kiss she plants on his forehead suggest that she does not plan to see Selden again and that she will choose to end her life by intentionally taking too much sleeping potion.

Another reason supporting the theory of suicide is that Lily does not know how to live in the real world without money. Carol Miller suggests in her article that “[Lily] is brought down by the internalized conflict between the real and the ideal, between fate and freedom, and by the confusion these contraries engender in her about how to live” (84). Lily has enormous difficulty living without money, and her life seems to plummet when she tries to work like the average middle-class women of the nineteenth century. She has difficulty living in the “real” world, in which people are compensated for doing various types of work. She only knows how to function as a beautiful ornament and live an idealized existence.

Lily often ruminates about how it would be simpler to live life as a man, to have more choices. She envies the spaciousness of Selden’s bachelor’s apartment and claims, “How delicious to have a place like this all to one’s self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman” (Wharton 8), she says, believing that single women in the upper classes of society are not allowed to have apartments of their own. Lily tells Selden that she could never have an apartment like Gerty Farish does because “[Gerty] is free and I am not” (Wharton 8), meaning

that Lily considers herself marriageable and Gerty quite the contrary. Furthermore, Lily is not free to marry whomever she wants; her social standing suggests that she must marry well whereas Gerty is an unattractive career woman who is not expected to marry well but to support herself at a job. Lily considers Gerty's function in society just before Lily does the tableaux vivant: "Of course, being fatally poor and dingy, it was wise of Gerty to have taken up philanthropy and symphony concerts" (Wharton 71).

Were upper-class women socially marginalized and expected to be only ornamental decoration for men? Literary theorist Frances Restuccia examines *The House of Mirth* through feminist lenses and calls it a "story [that] may be read as a social fable that indicts fashionable, fin-de-siècle New York society for producing human feminine ornaments that it has no qualms about crushing" (223). Restuccia argues that Wharton's novel "conveys the feminist social message that women bred to be frilly decorations run risks of various sorts of death" (224). Blake Nevius credits Lily with recognizing the sexism of her society by acknowledging the difference between a rich man and a rich woman when Lily tells Selden, "Ah, there's the difference – a girl must [marry], a man may if he chooses" (qtd. in Restuccia 226). Literary critic Judith Fetterley also credits Lily with understanding and rejecting the way she is reduced to an object: "[Lily] cannot project herself as a wife, she cannot imagine life after the plunge because she cannot finally face the price she would have to pay for it: acceptance of a system which makes of her an object and treats her as a possession" (qtd. in Restuccia 229). There are several references in the novel that suggest if she were to marry well that Lily would indeed be a beautiful, ornamental possession of her rich husband to be put on display at parties and the opera. Lily wants to be admired by men and considered beautiful, but she also wants her independence, by refusing to marry any wealthy bachelor, and to have the same equality as that of men in her

society, which, given the times, was not possible. Restuccia writes that "the society of *The House of Mirth* either forces women into its limited slots or rejects them" (236). Lily is obviously rejected or she rejects them [eligible bachelors] and pays the ultimate price with her life. However, she did not want one of the only options made available to her – a marriage in which she is treated as a possession.

Another major choice Lily faces is deciding how she will live after her aunt, Mrs. Peniston, significantly reduces her inheritance. Lily could use the $9,000 she has coming to her to continue living lavishly, but she makes the mature decision to pay Gus Trenor the money she owes him even though that decision forces her to live as a middle-class, working girl living in a boarding house. She also chooses to burn the love letters between Lawrence Selden and Bertha Dorset, an act that ruins any possible chances for Lily to regain entrance into high society. These two choices enable Lily to retain her self-respect, but they doom her financially. She chooses self-respect over money which is a clear indication that Lily would not have been able to prostitute herself in marriage or, in other words, to marry a wealthy bachelor whom she did not love.

Just as a working woman, Gerty Farish, is contrasted to heroine Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, working woman Henrietta Stackpole, a journalist, is contrasted to heroine Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Henrietta is a fiercely independent character who is self-sufficient and self-supporting. She does not need a man to make her life complete or to support her financially. But Henry James dismisses this lifestyle for Isabel Archer. The reader never sees Isabel as a fiercely inquisitive, curious young woman who would be comfortable traveling independently in order to write travel pieces for magazines. Isabel likes to imagine that she is able to exert autonomy in her life and act of her own free will, but in reality she is not that independent. When

she travels it is with either with her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, or her extremely confident friend Henrietta. Even the decision to travel to Europe in the first place is made by her aunt. Isabel was waiting in her library for something to come to her. She did not go out and seek it.

Isabel's one arena for exerting free will, then, is in choosing to accept a marriage proposal. Ironically, Isabel believes that she exerts her free will and independence when she chooses to marry Gilbert Osmond instead of Lord Warburton or Caspar Goodwood. When these men pursue her, she makes the conscious decision to decline their offers of marriage. Isabel's life would have been so simple if she had married either one of those rich suitors; her every need would have been tended to and her every wish met. Goodwood tells her she will be freer if she marries him. She would not have had to exert autonomy in any situation; but that is what Isabel wanted, a challenge and opportunities to exert her independence. Isabel believes she defies everyone's expectations of her when she chooses to marry Gilbert Osmond, the least attractive of her suitors, as he has no money, no title, and no high social standing. Isabel convinces herself that in choosing to marry this poor art collector that she has at least exerted autonomy in choosing a husband and not having one chosen for her. Isabel also chooses Osmond because she believes that he allows her the most freedom. James writes of the married Isabel, "She could come and go; she had her liberty" (360). Isabel chose the suitor that the others objected to, so she must have perceived her choice as an act of free will. In fact, she tells her friend Henrietta Stackpole, "One must accept one's deeds. I married [Osmond] before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate" (James 407).

Ralph Touchett believes that Isabel's freedom will be curtailed if she marries Gilbert Osmond. He worries that Isabel is making a severely poor choice. He tells his cousin, "You were the last person I expected to see caught," referring to Isabel's imminent wedding (288). Isabel

tells him, “I don’t know why you call it caught” (288). Ralph retorts, “Because you’re going to be put in a cage” (288). Isabel sassily responds, “If I like my cage, that needn’t trouble you” (288). Ralph can tell that Osmond does not truly love Isabel. He reminds his cousin that only one year earlier Isabel claimed she valued liberty and said she wanted to see life. Isabel responds, “I’ve seen it. It doesn’t look to me now, I admit, such an inviting expanse” (288). Whereas before the only liberty Isabel could envision was traveling the world, she now feels that marriage to Osmond would be one way she could exert her independence , by marrying the man of her choice and allowing him to invest her fortune in his art collection. Isabel wants to believe that she can choose her fate, but she cannot. She becomes a victim of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond when the scheming couple forces Osmond on Isabel. She also becomes a victim of her own ideals when she tries to choose the best husband for herself without completely knowing the true Gilbert Osmond.

When Isabel’s cousin Ralph is confounded by her refusal of Lord Warburton and she tells him, “There are other things a woman can do” (133), Ralph cleverly retorts, “There’s nothing she can do so well” (133), suggesting that marrying is the ideal occupation for upper-class women of the nineteenth-century. James may be making an indictment against Isabel’s repressive, patriarchal society, or he may be tacitly supporting the status quo. Since Henry James does not present Isabel as a working woman, her major choice seems to be whom she will marry, not whether she will marry. Isabel wants to be a fiercely independent woman, but the reality is that she does not have control over her fate, as James shows by revealing that even her one act of free will – to marry Osmond – was in fact orchestrated by Madame Merle.

Ironically, Isabel wants independence and yet desires security at the same time. Ellen Morgan argues, “[T]here are pretty obviously two mutually antagonistic drives in Isabel--the one

for liberty, self-determination, responsibility, selfhood, and the other for this kind of security" (22), namely the security provided by a husband. Morgan writes that while Isabel wants the elation of liberty, she "is both intrigued with and afraid of the challenge of freedom" (23). For example, when she first inherits the money from her uncle she tells Ralph that she is afraid of having the power to act. It is later in the novel that Isabel realizes that she "would be Osmond's providence" and that "it would be a good thing to love him" (James 358). So, ironically, Isabel feels more impetus to marry after she becomes rich rather than before, the opposite of Ralph's intentions. In reflecting about her fortune, Isabel thinks "at bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience, to some more prepared receptacle" (358). Isabel wants to be relieved of her fortune, and she cannot imagine a better way to invest it than to give it Osmond, the man she believes has the best taste in the world.

Ultimately, can Isabel conceive of her future without marriage? Goodwood, makes it clear that Isabel has few options: "An unmarried woman – a girl of your age – isn't independent. There are all sorts of things she can't do. She's hampered at every step" (James 143). In the states, Caspar Goodwood pursues and proposes marriage to Isabel before she even arrives in London with her aunt. She tells Caspar Goodwood that she is not interested in pursuing marriage: "But I really don't want to marry, or to talk about it at all now. I shall probably never do it – no never" (139). Isabel tells him firmly, "I like my liberty too much. If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of, it's my personal independence" (142). Goodwood, however, tries to convince her that he would not limit her freedom by marrying her. He asks Isabel, "Who would wish less to curtail your liberty than I? . . . It's to make you independent that I want to marry you" (142). Isabel smiles and responds, "That's a beautiful sophism" (142), because, to her,

being independent and being married are mutually exclusive. However, Isabel's situation changes completely once she inherits her fortune. She should have the ability to exercise her free will, but Henry James does not construct the novel to truly allow her to exercise it.

Although Isabel freely chooses her husband Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady*, and even after she realizes that her choice was a poor one, she feels the need to accept her decision and live with it: "There had been no plot, no snare; she had looked and considered and chosen. When a woman had made such a mistake, there was only one way to repair it – just immensely to accept it" (340). Because Isabel is so desperately unhappy in her marriage to Osmond, she is faced with one final choice. She must decide whether she will remain in this unhealthy marriage with Osmond and try to protect her stepdaughter Pansy or run off with her old suitor Caspar Goodwood. Even after all these years have passed, Goodwood is still ready to rescue Isabel from her poor marriage choice. Goodwood makes Isabel an incredibly appealing offer. When he travels to Gardencourt after Ralph's death, he tells a visibly distraught Isabel, "You don't know where to turn. Turn straight to *me* . . . Why should you go back – why should you go through that ghastly form? . . . The world's all before us – and the world's very big" (James 488-89). Critics believe that Isabel knew she had to immediately and directly return to Rome and her husband, Gilbert Osmond. However, James does not explicitly write such an ending. He leaves his character "en l'air," and it is up to the reader to decide what Isabel would have done.

To be true to the character Henry James wrote, Isabel probably returns to Osmond although she cannot anticipate living a comfortable life with him. According to Isabel, Osmond hates her; he told her that she had too many ideas and that she needed to get rid of them (359). She ruminates that he hates her because she has a mind of her own whereas he would prefer that

his wife be completely submissive to him like his daughter Pansy. As a reader, I yearn to have Isabel break away from vicious Osmond and start a new life with Caspar Goodwood. However, some critics such as J. Hillis Miller disagree. Miller writes, "Yielding to Caspar would be a subservience worse than marriage to Osmond. The freedom she has, within the imprisonment of her marriage is, among other things, the freedom to torment Osmond by her independence of mind" (741). Miller contends that returning to Osmond "is the cruelest thing Isabel can do to him because her presence in his house, silently judging him all the time, is a mortal affront to him" (742). Morgan writes that Isabel is never offered an easy choice about her future: "At no time does this woman, given by her society so little opportunity and encouragement for action, and by her own needs for love and security so little psychic room to nurture a spirit of independence, permit herself an outright choice of the easy and agreeable over her own liberty and selfhood, despite the fact that James has given her the ultimate excuse to do so" (27). In other words, her society does nothing to support her; it offers her few other choices than marrying well and does not foster her independent spirit or intelligence. She does not opt for the easy options, such as marrying Warburton or Goodwood, marriages in which she would have the least autonomy. Other scholars, such as M. Giulia Fabi, who writes of the reluctant patriarch, suggest that Isabel returns directly to Osmond because "[her marriage] is well-known and offers the relative comfort of a familiar prison" (Fabi 7). I, too, believe that Isabel will return to Osmond for this reason. She appreciates the familiarity and safety of her unusual situation with Osmond.

Both Isabel and Lily are forced to make moral choices in their respective novels. For example, while Lily must choose whether she wants to live or die, Isabel agonizes about returning to Rome to protect her delicate stepdaughter, Pansy, whose father has made sure that she cannot marry after he forces her to return to the convent where she was raised. Isabel

promised Pansy that she would return to rescue the young girl, but that would also involve returning to Gilbert Osmond.

Both novels end with unanswered questions. For example, does Isabel return to Osmond to honor her marriage vows, or does she believe she has to keep her promise to Pansy to return to Rome? Does Isabel consider running off to America with Caspar Goodwood? Did Lily take her own life? It is not made explicitly clear if Lily chooses to overdose on her sleeping medication; the reader only knows that the pharmacist warned Lily about the dangers of taking too much of the sleeping potion. However, Lily does have that farewell scene with Selden, and she manages to pay her bills before she goes to sleep on that final night, so perhaps she wanted to end her existence as a working girl if she did not anticipate positive events happening in her future. What is clear is that Lily Bart makes poor choices that are directly attributable to her tragic end, whereas Isabel Archer is more a victim of two evil, self-serving individuals and her own ideals. Isabel does not see herself as a victim, however, because she openly and freely chose Osmond as her husband and must feel obligated to honor that mistake.

In conclusion, Lily Bart and Isabel Archer are nineteenth-century characters who are unable to realize their own desires because they have difficulty fulfilling them in the context of such a restrictive, patriarchal, and almost suffocating society. Both characters want independence and the ability to act of their own free will; however, the regulations and mores of their nineteenth-century society do not allow them to have the economic or social freedom and equality that men in their society enjoyed. Ultimately, they are not in charge of their own

destinies, but are victims of a society in which they do not enjoy the same social, financial, or sexual equalities as men.

Ellen Morgan defines a non-feminist character as "[t]he heroine of the non-feminist novel [who] does not try to break out, to free herself from the constrictions her society's value system imposes on women. She may disobey the system, but she does not take a genuinely critical stance outside it, and thus she does not transcend it" (17). Therefore, I would argue that Lily Bart and Isabel Archer cannot be read as proto-feminist characters possessing independence, autonomy or free will. The pressures of their repressive, patriarchal, nineteenth-century society did not allow them to exert any type of autonomy, be it social, economic, or sexual. Every time these highly spirited characters tried to exert some sort of autonomy, they were ultimately penalized for not adhering to the social conventions of the time period. Lily pays the ultimate price, her life, while Isabel resolves to live in a quasi-convent for the rest of her life where she will live symbolically as an object in her husband's art collection. This non-feminist description aptly fits both Lily Bart and Isabel Archer who disobey the system but are ultimately unable to transcend it. Because these characters are not successful in asserting their autonomy, I would argue that neither novel can be read as proto-feminist. Both novels depict the lives of non-feminist characters who cannot envision a more liberating alternative lifestyle to the lives they have chosen.

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