

**Artistic (mis)representation and commodity culture in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and
*The House of Mirth***

by

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ABSTRACT

“Artistic (Mis)representation and Commodity Culture in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The House of Mirth*” attempts to establish a trans-Atlantic connection between authors Oscar Wilde and Edith Wharton by considering the manner in which each author’s respective protagonist relates to art, commodities, and the society in which he or she lives. By reading Dorian Gray and Lily Bart through the lens of Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), the companion chapters show the extent to which each character’s reality is complicated by his or her illusory relationship with both fine arts and social artistry. The first of these chapters, “Portrait-Induced Madness: Artistic Representation and Simulation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” considers Dorian’s uncanny relationship with the portrait that bears the sins of his soul as a representation of double-simulation wherein Dorian’s unchanging appearance and the portrait’s grotesque transformations are the consequence of artist Basil Hallward’s departure from ethical artistic creation. The second chapter, “*Object d’art* for Sale: Lily Bart’s Self-Commodification and Simulation in *The House of Mirth*,” traces Lily’s social maneuverings through fashionable New York society in order to show how her supposedly artistic attempts to attract a suitor result in her treatment as a social commodity instead. The tragic fates of each author’s protagonist ultimately suggests that even though they are active participants in the consumer culture of their time, Wilde and Wharton experience and express severe anxieties concerning how anyone can remain unique or artful in a society that dictates an individual’s material desires.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

At first glance, Oscar Wilde and Edith Wharton make for a poorly matched scholarly pairing, but a deeper look shows that the two have more in common than what meets the eye when seen in the proper context. Wilde was an Irish author and playwright born 16 October 1854 to Dublin intellectuals and Irish nationalists, and he spent his formative collegiate years first at Trinity College in Dublin and later at Magdalene College, Oxford, where he learned from John Ruskin and Walter Pater about a new and rising aesthetic philosophy with which he became heavily involved. Despite his attraction to the socialist philosophies that came as part of his early upbringing, Wilde became an important member of London's upper class cultural circles as an aesthete and somewhat of a dandy following the conclusion of his education in 1878. Over the course of ensuing decades, Wilde embarked on an 1882 American lecture tour, married Constance Lloyd—the daughter of a wealthy member of the Queen's Counsel—in 1884, and wrote the majority of his important literary and theatrical works, chiefly his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), the political essay “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891), and his plays *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). During this time, Wilde began a homosexual relationship with a member of his aesthetic circle—Lord Alfred Douglas—that ultimately led to his 1895 trial for gross indecency and the 1897-1899 imprisonment that is commonly believed to have weakened his health and brought about his untimely death on 30 November 1900.

Wharton's somewhat more traditional life appears in many ways to be a counter to the one that Wilde led. She was born 24 January 1862 as Edith Newbold Jones, the daughter of a fashionable New York family known to spend its summers in Newport, Rhode Island and travel

abroad often. Although her family did not allow her to pursue a formal education, Wharton spent her early years learning from her various governesses and reading assiduously; as a teenager, she furthered her literary pursuits by taking up writing poetry and short fiction and even managed to get one of her poems published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Even so, it was still her family's expectation for her to marry and settle down with someone of the same relative social class, so in 1885 she married Teddy Wharton, a gentleman from Boston, whom she later divorced in 1913 after 28 years of marriage. Two years after her marriage, Wharton co-published a design guide—*The Decoration of Houses* (1897)—with Ogden Codman, which she later translated to a physical reality in the form of The Mount, her Massachusetts estate that served as the base-camp from which she wrote several of her most important literary works—chiefly, *The House of Mirth* (1905)—and entertained important cultural figures such as her good friend Henry James. Although she made it a point to visit Europe frequently, Wharton primarily resided at The Mount until the combination of her affair with Morton Fullerton and the degradation of her husband's mental state led her to seek a divorce and live out the majority of her remaining years in Paris. During that time Wharton published her 1921 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920), which made her the first woman to win the prestigious award. The final years of Wharton's life were spent writing and entertaining friends and intellectuals up until her death by stroke on 11 August 1937.

Considering the life of each author side by side, it is simple to see several key differences that presumably shape each individual's ideological outlook. Most notably, there appears to be a significant disjunction between Wilde and Wharton's respective upbringings. Whereas Wilde grew up in an intellectually radical environment that taught him the politics that inform the social commentary he made in his literary work, Wharton's family was quite affluent and her childhood

was traditional by comparison. In the same vein, Wharton's wealth and heterosexuality placed her squarely in the dominant social class, whereas Wilde's Irish lineage and homosexuality in many ways marked him as Other. Despite the similar aspects of their lives—such as their pursuit of knowledge, their extra-marital affairs, their love of fine things and, most importantly, their respective positions within the elite cultural circles of their time—it seems reasonable to expect that Wilde and Wharton possessed very different stances on the world in which they lived. However, close readings of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *House of Mirth* show enormous similarities, particularly as they express their views on commodity culture, art, and identity.

A striking parallel between the two novels that proves important in this project is the role that art plays within each narrative as a framing device. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* places fine art in a prominent position from the start of the novel when the artist Basil Hallward and his aristocratic friend Lord Henry Wotton spend almost the entirety of the first chapter commenting not only upon a portrait that the former is working on, but also about how he has come to consider the subject of that portrait—Dorian Gray—as his muse and, therefore, a living piece of art. Soon after, Wilde blurs the lines between the *object d'art* and what inspires it when Dorian makes the fateful wish to remain forever as young as his portrait while the image on the canvas ages instead. The remainder of the plot monitors the result of Dorian's desire as he remains outwardly beautiful and the portrait bears the hideous burden of his multitudinous sins until he finally destroys both the portrait and himself in a fit of passionate frustration.

Although the use of art as a framing device is not as overt in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, the *tableaux vivants* party that occurs roughly midway through the narrative makes the theme stand out. At the *tableaux vivants* party Lily Bart, who spends the entirety of the novel trying to snare a wealthy husband, and other high-society women work with a professional artist,

set-pieces, and fashionable design to create living versions of famous paintings for the delight of spectators. After looking at this moment, readers plainly see that Wharton almost always describes Lily in terms that suggest artistry and indicates that Lily pays a great deal of attention to how she can manipulate both her own physical form and her material surroundings to produce the most useful aesthetic effect within a given context. Hallward literally composes Dorian's image with paint on canvas and Dorian continuously re-composes his image through the medium of his social interactions; Lily, on the other hand, constantly works within her social and material context to enhance her desirability in the eyes of potential male suitors. Ultimately, both characters operate on multiple levels that align them simultaneously with both art and humanity, thereby considerably complicating how readers might interpret their identities.

Another parallel between the two works that adds to the complication inherent in interpreting their protagonists is the sense that Dorian's and Lily's respective identities are, to some extent, the products of outsiders who judge each character by applying the gaze. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian himself is not even present in the first chapter. Instead, the portrait that bears his likeness represents Dorian in absentia while Hallward and Lord Henry discuss not only who he is but also what he means within the artistic and social context of the story. Rather than allowing Dorian to dictate and define himself in the novel's initial scene, other characters take it upon themselves to tell who and what Dorian is within the novel. Wilde leaves the initial act of definition up to characters other than his protagonist and sticks to the same pattern throughout the rest of the novel by experimenting with the idea that within his social context Dorian's horrendous actions and unblemished appearance work against one another to determine his reputation and social standing in the eyes of his peers. Even at the novel's conclusion, the servants who find Dorian's dead body at the foot of the restored painting

have the last word on his identity and are unable to recognize him until they identify the rings on his hands.

In a similar fashion, an outside set of eyes defines Lily in the first sequence of *The House of Mirth*. As she waits for the train that will take her out of New York City to her friend's country estate, Lily arrests the gaze of Lawrence Selden from afar, and thereafter Selden's initial sense of Lily shapes the reader's perception. Although Lily tells her own story more directly from that point forward, the weight that she affords to others' perceptions of her complicate her position within her social sphere. Rather than act out her identity as the "real" Lily, she constantly shapes and re-shapes herself to adapt to what she believes other members of her social circle want her to be. Not only does Lily adjust her outer identity to appeal to those whose positive opinions she wishes to cultivate, but her identity is also similar to Dorian's in the sense that her appearance—or at least her ability to be fashionable—is often at odds with the sometimes unsanctioned social maneuvers that her enemies use to discredit her and destroy her reputation. In death, too, someone other than Lily has the final word on her story. Selden's interpretation of Lily's corpse leaves a much more positive impression of Lily than that which Dorian's servants leave of Dorian when they encounter his lifeless body, but even so both novels begin and end with outside eyes dictating identities of the respective protagonists.

In the cases of both Dorian and Lily, artistic inclinations and the opinions of individuals in their social spheres dictate who they are and how readers should interpret their identities. Something that complicates the matter even further is the way that each character relates to his or her material world through the medium of commodity fetishism and conspicuous consumption. Throughout his narrative, a yellow-bound French novel that Dorian receives as a gift from Lord Henry and that influences the development of his hideously decadent behavior. Not only does

the novel in question teach Dorian the finer points of an aesthetic philosophy that causes him to value sensation above morality and reputation, it also nurtures his love of the rare and valuable commodities that he amasses in a personal collection over a long period of years. Looking at the litany of articles that Dorian comes to possess, the reader can only imagine the various acts of exploitation he must commit during the period of their accumulation. Dorian's consistent tendency to cross-reference his physical reality with the state of his soul seen in the portrait suggests a problematic relationship between art, identity, and consumption that leaves the reader feeling uneasy. Lily, too, in an effort to maintain an appearance appropriate to the social status she aims to embody, has expensive tastes that require her to accumulate a hoard of expensive and fashionable commodities. In Lily's case, however, there is a small degree of variance from Dorian's narrative in that there is a more tangible sense of the sacrifice and exploitation that the production of commodities involves. The reader sees this dynamic most clearly when Lily falls out of favor with fashionable society and must labor in a workshop that produces hats for the upper class. All the same, these sometimes competing social, cultural, and material forces work to complicate each protagonist's respective identity.

Reading Dorian and Lily as characters is complex due to the intersecting and sometimes contradictory relationship each has with art, social opinion, and the consumption of material commodities. The multifaceted nature of the scales by which readers judge each character and the inability of these scales to account consistently for each character's respective value throughout both novels are thinly veiled hints that each character is subject to multiple, sometimes intersecting, realities at any given point within their narrative arc. By considering how Dorian and Lily relate to each of these realities through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), critics have a greater opportunity to

interpret the underlying issues of each protagonist's complex story and tragic demise. According to Baudrillard, simulation is a dangerous power that threatens the integrity of reality because unlike, for instance, faking an illness, wherein the faker *pretends* to have certain symptoms, simulation causes individuals actually to *manifest* a condition they do not really have. In the respective cases of Dorian and Lily, no force necessarily compels each to live artfully by the tenets of a learned aesthetic philosophy or through treating one's identity as performance within the marriage plot, as the case may be, but each character buys into his or her particular mode of living because the forces of simulacra preclude the ability of each to discern any of the other options that are available. In Dorian's case, it is perfectly feasible to lead a sensuous life without falling into the state of corruption and degradation that drives him mad; for Lily, the upper-class lifestyle is not the only option that offers happiness, comfort, and fulfillment. Yet each protagonist unknowingly walks a path to his or her own destruction believing that he or she truly is unique, when in fact the lifestyles of the aesthete and the society woman are just hollow recreations of a worn-out type seen plenty of times before and certain to manifest itself again countless times.

In spite of the different lifestyles that inform each author's point of view concerning the matter, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wharton's *The House of Mirth* betray severe anxieties about the forces that shape individuals found within social and cultural circles similar to those that Dorian and Lily inhabit. Each author's protagonist has artistic sensibilities of a sort and fancies he or she is unique, but ultimately aligns his or her respective identity more so with commodities than with art before coming to an untimely and tragic death. Put succinctly, imitation leads to the death of art. By considering the process by which artful living becomes trite and commodified in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The House of Mirth*, it becomes

possible not only to form an ideological link between Wilde and Wharton based on their disdain for what arises from imitation, but also to argue for a stronger trans-Atlantic literary exchange at the transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

CHAPTER II: PORTRAIT-INDUCED MADNESS: ARTISTIC SIMULATION AND SOCIAL OBJECTIFICATION IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

1.

Oscar Wilde's only published novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, begins in the exotically luxuriant setting of Basil Hallward's art studio as Lord Henry Wotton watches him work on his latest masterpiece. Surrounded by commodities that are at once both fine and sensuous—a “divan of Persian saddlebags,” “the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum,” and “long tussore-silk curtains” that produce what Lord Henry feels is an Oriental effect in the room—Basil paints a full-length portrait of a handsome youth who the artist believes embodies the ideal of beauty (Wilde 5). The subject of the portrait, Dorian Gray, inspires a Renaissance in Basil's art and has facilitated the production of what Lord Henry declares to be the best work of Basil's career. However, sitting for Basil on the afternoon of Henry's visit provokes a subtle change in Dorian after he listens to Lord Henry's flippant philosophies concerning the world, life, and the supreme importance of aesthetic beauty. Whereas before Dorian took youth and beauty for granted, listening to Lord Henry and gazing upon Basil's finished product leads to the realization that he is, in fact, beautiful and that time will necessarily ruin the value of his appearance as he ages. Dorian's realization that his good looks and the social advantages that come with them are destined to fade leads him to make the fateful wish “to be always young, and [for] the picture ... to grow old,” thereby electing to offer up his own soul in exchange for the portrait's eternal youth (28). Although the fulfillment of Dorian's wish allows him to live an increasingly corrupt life without serious sanction from fine society, Dorian's agelessness causes him to lose touch with his humanity and ultimately leads to his violent self-destruction.

The complexity of Wilde's novel has provoked interpretations from all schools of literary criticism that deal with a wide range of subjects. Feminists most often focus on the absence of strong female characters in the novel while scholars who subscribe to queer theory consider the homoeroticism of Dorian's relationship with Basil. Psychoanalysts who write on the novel tend to explore the root cause of Dorian's madness and try to trace how the various parts of his psyche drive his degradation. Scholars who specialize in theater often compare the novel and its construction to that of Wilde's famous plays. Most recently, however, a great deal of scholarship is looking into the implications of how Wilde's body of work coincides with his definition of art and the ideas of the aesthetic movement he helped lead.

John Allen Quintus, for instance, writes about how Wilde's work differentiates his brand of aesthetic philosophy and his stance on what an artist needs to be and do from that of the French aesthetes who hold a position of prominence during the latter portion of the nineteenth century. Similarly, Houston A. Baker explicates how Wilde's definition of the artist as a figure with the ability to mould society through his work by attaining his self-realization in the creation of "an 'imaginative reality,' which can act as an ideal for the higher development of society" (352). The general notion in each of these essays is that because Wilde believes that art does, in fact, carry an ethical dimension, artists should use their talents to depict what is meaningful in the world instead of mimicking what is in front of them or creating simply because they can. Baker in particular argues that Dorian's demise would be wholly preventable if Basil continued to paint him in classical scenes instead of painting him as he really is through the practice of artistic mimesis.

Paul L. Fortunato disagrees, arguing instead that Wilde believes that art is necessarily reliant upon consumerism and a large audience that it can influence. Fortunato's argument

downplays the importance an ethical dimension of art and instead emphasizes the ability of the artist to reach the masses successfully through a commercial market, something that Dorian does to some extent as he moves through his social sphere, but only if the reader accepts his physical being as art. However, Dorian's uncanny relationship with his portrait and his ultimate demise makes it difficult to accept Fortunato's argument against the significance of ethics in a given work of art.

The preface to Wilde's novel contends that "there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (3). However, being the decadent aesthete he is, a common scholarly argument is that Wilde's inclusion of the preface in the novel's release in collected form following the conclusion of its serial run in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* is an afterthought that serves the purpose of deflecting outrage over the novel's sometimes questionable content. The depths of Dorian's corruption and his tragic demise, both of which come as a result of his personal objectification and problematic relationship with commodities, strongly suggest that Wilde uses the novel as a platform from which to criticize the tendency of commodity fetishism to distort the identities and values of those who live within consumer culture. While seeking to surround oneself with fine material commodities is ordinary for members of the leisured class, Dorian's role as the subject of Basil's art encourages those who know him to gauge his value in relation to other material objects. Interpreting Dorian's worth based on the things with which he is associated seems natural in an age where commodity ownership to a large extent dictates one's class position, but because Dorian is both an actual person and the subject depicted by an *object d'art*, he occupies a liminal space between humanity and thingdom that is blurred in the aftermath of his wish. In fact, this line begins to blur even before the result of Dorian's wish is fully understood because Dorian

feels from the first as though the portrait “is part of [himself]” and since, when he describes what is left to be done with his work, Basil says to Dorian, “as soon as *you* are dry, *you* shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home. Then you can do what you like with *yourself*” (29, emphasis added). Even the language here is slippery: Dorian has some agency, but he and Basil speak of the portrait as if it is partially human and of Dorian himself as if he is part-object. If this is the case, then one must consider the ways that Dorian’s relations to both things and people contribute to where he lies on a spectrum between humanity and object.

The notion that Dorian exists to some extent in multiple realities that span humanity and thingdom is troublesome because it leaves his identity in a state of constant flux in which he is not wholly one or the other but is always somewhere in between instead. *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard’s treatise on objectivity, provides a useful philosophical framework for readers to dissect the various levels of reality in which Dorian exists and consider the social and material illusions on which each of these levels relies. According to Baudrillard, “to dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have” (3). Whereas the former “leaves the principle of reality intact [sic]” because masking something does not banish it from reality, the latter creates a reality from nothing and thereby “threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (3). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian’s status as human being or material thing is perplexing most notably because of his relationship with commodities in general and specifically with the portrait that over time comes to bare his soul. Whereas readers typically expect a novel’s protagonist to treat other human beings with at least some degree of respect for their agency and irreparability and commodities as mere objects, Dorian seems to do the opposite; Dorian’s practice of commodity fetishism throughout the novel betrays his fascination

and respect for the world of material goods and disregard for the majority of the people with whom he crosses paths. To Dorian, the people in his life are mostly replaceable and therefore matter little to him whereas the commodities he collects are rare and worthy of veneration. The two individuals who most directly influence the development of Dorian's hedonistic lifestyle, Basil and Lord Henry, consistently attempt to recreate Dorian in their own images throughout the narrative. Each man's goal differs in that Basil wishes for Dorian to be the subject of art and Lord Henry desires for Dorian to live his life as if it were art, but both men treat Dorian as something more than a normal person as they try to turn him into the embodiment of their life philosophies. Dorian's beauty and hedonism are products created in equal parts by Basil's painting and Lord Henry's guidance, so the influences of his friends effectively turn Dorian into a fashionable object within society who is deceptively beautiful yet inexplicably seems to ruin the reputation of anyone who befriends him.

Dorian's objectification at the hands of these men—and indeed, at the hands of others whom he comes into contact with later in the novel—facilitates the growth of his view that other people are also objects who may be useful or amusing for a time but are ultimately replaceable. Dorian's progressively more cynical attitude toward relationships enables him not only to harm the people around him—most notably Sibyl Vane and Basil—but also to do so without social reprimand because of the act of simulation he is able to accomplish with the help of his portrait. Since the portrait bears the physical evidence of every sin that Dorian commits while his own person remains unblemished and simulates youth, kindness, and, above all else, innocence, no one will believe the rumors about him until they have personal evidence. The relationship Dorian has with other people and with commodities is reminiscent of Marx's assertion in *Capital* that commodities on the market exist in a constantly fluctuating state of value relative to the

value of other commodities. Dorian's ever-changing portrait acts as a narrative device that works to dramatize the extent to which he has ruined his soul in comparison with his outer purity. Dorian's fetish over the painting's gradual transformation contributes to a repeating cycle wherein he commits evil acts that will alter the portrait simply for the sensation of seeing the change, which further encourages him to continue acting evilly.

Kostas Boyiopoulos reads the drama of Dorian's life, his relation to the portrait, and his relationship with Sibyl as examples of stage-like simulation within the narrative that simultaneously echo Shakespearian tragic romance. Boyiopoulos argues that "the [yellow-bound decadent novel] is a simulacrum [that doubles] Dorian just like the portrait does" and makes Dorian "unsure whether he experiences actuality or fiction" to such an extent that he is driven mad by the power of the simulation he experiences (21). Although Boyiopoulos's argument is convincing, there is still more to say about how the simulation of Dorian's ideal outer beauty after Basil finishes the portrait also significantly skews his objective perception of reality.

Writing of the relationship between religion and simulation, Baudrillard asks:

But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination—the visible machinery of icons substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? (4)

In many ways, Dorian represents something much more than ideal beauty as he plays the role of artistic muse for Basil, who recreates one objective form of beauty at another level of reality by pouring his soul onto the canvas through painting. The resulting portrait is at first an icon depicting Dorian's divine beauty, but grows grotesque as a result of Dorian's sins and wish to

never age. As Dorian simulates innocence, the painting performs its own simulation as it depicts the content of his soul instead of the outer appearance that originally appears on the canvas. Through this double-simulation, Dorian becomes an objectified icon that reproduces itself in social copies, eradicates his creator, and finally self-destructs when he attempts to rid himself of the object that simulates his sins. In Dorian's narrative, social objectification and artistic simulation both work to create the oppositional forces that lead to his madness and demise.

2.

The opening scene of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* matters deeply to the rest of the novel because even though the protagonist is absent, the conversation his friends have as they admire Basil's latest portrait both establishes the novel's competing philosophies—that one should be beautiful and that one should live beautifully—and lays the groundwork for the themes of objectification and simulation that shape Dorian's social and ideological movements throughout the novel. Basil starts off his work in the proper direction toward artistic self-realization, but he laments to Lord Henry that “[he has] put too much of [himself] into” his most recent portrait and has thereby corrupted the ideal that his art means to represent (Wilde 6). Rather than paint Dorian as he had in his earlier paintings, in which Dorian took the form of “Paris in dainty armour, and as Adonis with huntsman's cloak and polished boar-spear,” among other figures, Basil's latest portrait paints Dorian as he truly appears in real life instead of being “what [Basil says] art should be, unconscious, ideal, and remote” (110). Choosing to paint Dorian in his natural form seems relatively innocent since “his personality [suggests] to [Basil] an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style [that causes Basil to] see things differently,” but Basil worries that Dorian's influence over him causes him to overstep his bounds as artist by

“[putting] too much of [himself]” into this particular portrait (13, 14). Rather than create the portrait as something that is born of an imaginative reality, Basil incorporates an element of reality and raw emotion into the portrait by including that part of his personality that overtly idolizes Dorian. The problem with the portrait is not that it portrays Dorian ideally, but rather that through its expression of Basil’s emotional affection, the portrait causes Dorian to recognize and fetishize his beauty, which in turn creates the basis for the corruption of his soul.

Basil’s creation of Dorian’s portrait becomes the first of many instances of commodity fetishism that occur throughout the book. By worshipping Dorian’s physical form through the medium of painting as Dorian sits for his portrait, Basil is effectively objectifying his subject as he recreates that subject on the canvas. In accordance with Wilde’s stance on art, Basil’s idolatry is defensible when his subject is in costume because there is a clear abstraction between the subject of the portrait and the identity of the model that occurs through the artist’s creative re-thinking of the subject. However, when Basil paints Dorian in his own clothes as he truly appears, his work does not meet the necessary requirements to be true art and instead is a work of mimesis that reveals Dorian to himself while also objectifying his person. The classical scenes in which Dorian appears are perfectly in line with artistic creation because Dorian is only the model of these paintings and Basil’s artistic skill and the form he re-imagines on his canvas is the actual product. However, when the Dorian on the canvas is not only the same Dorian who poses for Basil, but also the real-life Dorian of the present, the overall balance of the system shifts in such a way that Dorian as a person is inseparable from the Dorian in the painting, which also comes to be Dorian’s privately owned property. Unlike the costumed and abstracted recreations of Dorian that occur in Basil’s other paintings, Dorian effectively turns into an object when his true being is translated to a material form. In the first of several moments of simulation

that blurs the line between Dorian himself and the object that embodies him, Dorian takes on the aesthetic aspect of the portrait and enters the market in the painting's stead through the medium of society.

Although Basil's talent and idolatry are contributors to the metaphysical link between Dorian and the portrait, Lord Henry's subtle influence over Dorian's values creates the desire that provokes Dorian's wish. When Lord Henry attends Dorian's next sitting in Basil's studio, he captivates Dorian with whispered lectures on influence and Beauty. Of the first subject, Lord Henry claims that "to influence a person is to give him one's soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone [else]. The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly" (20). Lord Henry's thoughts on this subject are interesting because they initially suggest that Dorian's influence over Basil's art means that on some level Basil possesses Dorian's soul. By the same line of logic, since Basil and Lord Henry influence how Dorian acts within his social context, his actions are to some extent an outward expression of their souls. Lord Henry takes advantage of the nature of this social transaction in order to espouse an irreverent philosophy of decadence that he has no intention of personally pursuing.

In the same sitting, Lord Henry extends his musing and says that:

[He believes] that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream—I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget the maladies of mediævalism and return to the Hellenic ideal ... the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. (21)

In this particular quote Lord Henry implies that Dorian's youth and beauty place him at a moment in time when the achievement of these various sensations is feasible. Prior to meeting Lord Henry, Dorian is unaware of his beauty and its potential power. However, after listening to Lord Henry's theories on life and seeing his image in the finished portrait, Dorian recognizes his gift and makes his fateful wish. Basil's decision to paint Dorian in his natural form and Lord Henry's lecture on the benefits of beauty and sensation work together to create an inanimate double of Dorian and his desire never to age. Although his friends and the tutelage they offer are what initially influence Dorian, Basil and Lord Henry hold less sway over Dorian's actions as the narrative progresses. As Dorian devotes himself further to the pursuit of beauty and sensation, comparing his ageless figure to that of his ever-changing soul within the painting begins to motivate his day to day conduct. Basil's lack of artistic re-imagination in his creation of Dorian's portrait not only enables Dorian's narcissistic obsession with the final product but also triggers Dorian's transformation from a person to an ageless, material, *object d'art*. Dorian does not yet know the effect of his wish, but the desire to trade places with his double makes his visage static in the same nature as other inanimate objects. On the other hand, Basil's portrait of Dorian has become something more than a mere object in the sense that its appearance is a dynamic reflection of Dorian's true humanity and the innermost secrets of his soul. Dorian's body does not change as he commits his various wicked acts, but the portrait itself visually manifests the sins that Dorian's own body will not publically betray; Dorian's cruelty changes the portrait's expression, his tendency to keep unconventionally late hours makes the portrait's face gradually age and wrinkle, and his tendency to indulge in depraved sex acts and opium cause the portrait to appear diseased while the living Dorian remains the same. Basil's irresponsibility as an artist and Lord Henry's philosophical irreverence result in Dorian

becoming covetous of his outer beauty. Their respective influences act as the initial spark that allows Dorian to become the painting outwardly and spurs him onward toward his pursuit of sensation and hedonistic pleasure.

Following the completion of Dorian's portrait, his wish to never age, and later Basil's bestowal of the portrait to him as a gift, Dorian feels he must stop sitting for Basil and instead begins to spend a great deal of time in the company of Henry, who continues to use his life-philosophy to encourage Dorian to take up a new mode of living that revolves around the experience of sensation. To these ends, Dorian's ennui and desire for new experiences lead him to frequent "an absurd little theater" in an unknown, grimy sector of the city, run by a "hideous Jew, in the most amazing waistcoat" who stands in the entrance "smoking a vile cigar" (49). Even though Dorian finds the unnamed theater entirely by chance, he falls in love with Sibyl Vane—a young, working-class actress—as he watches her play the lead female role in Shakespeare night after night from the vantage of his cheaply acquired box seats.

Despite their incongruent social strata—Dorian runs in fashionable social circles and is the grandson of a lord, whereas Sibyl's family is in debt to the owner of a small, shabby theater—Sibyl allures Dorian because of her innate ability to bring the roles she plays to life before his eyes. In Dorian's eyes, Sibyl is a genius in her art despite Lord Henry's assertion that "no woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly" (47). Lord Henry's irreverent expression of misogyny—especially concerning a girl Dorian purports to be smitten with—should warn Dorian of the insincere and typically degrading nature of his other philosophies on life, but it is a hint that he misses because of Lord Henry's charm and influence over him. To hear from his friend that something decorative cannot possess genius should alarm Dorian since the sentiment seemingly contradicts

what Lord Henry says about the utter importance of Dorian's outer beauty, but the possibility that he is being taken in on one front or another never seems to occur to him in the slightest.

Dorian, however, is not nearly jaded enough at this point to recognize the nature of the slight or its possible application to himself, and in Sibyl he continues to see an ideal woman who is able to produce an infinite variety of aesthetic sensations through her ability to transcend her historical identity and transform into a different person every night. Dorian remarks to Lord Henry, "one evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. . . . Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. . . . But an actress! How different an actress is'" (51). Later in the same conversation, Lord Henry asks Dorian, "when is she Sibyl Vane," to which the latter replies, "never" (54). Dorian appears to value Sibyl chiefly because she has no history or identity of her own. She is effectively a spectacle who exists to be consumed by the theater's patrons but, even so, Dorian's infatuation with Sibyl's talent and what her amorphous identity represents to him is so intense that he proposes marriage after only their second ever face-to-face meeting. In the same way that Basil loves Dorian for the way Dorian's physical form assists in his creation of fine art, Dorian loves Sibyl for the way her presence on the stage creates lovely sensations; both, ultimately, are relationships that center on shallow and superficial simulations of true emotion.

Dorian's descriptions of what he sees in Sibyl help to explain how he comes to be so smitten with the actress in the first place and firmly entrench Sibyl's performative ability squarely within Wilde's definition of true art as an imaginative recreation. When Dorian first watches Sibyl play Juliet, the contrast she creates when one compares her to the rest of the theater's cast and crew is the primary aspect of the performance that draws his attention.

Whereas Dorian describes the theater owner as a grotesque man, the orchestra as talentless, and the male leads as old and unprofessional, he finds that Sibyl is “the loveliest thing [he has] ever seen” and that the emotional quality and control of her voice as she progresses through her scenes are unforgettable (50). From his retelling of his first impression of the actress alone, it is clear that Dorian believes Sibyl is wildly talented and performing in a venue that is beneath her status as an artist.

After attending several of her plays in a row, the theater owner finally induces Dorian to come backstage to meet Sibyl and he finds that she is “so shy, and so gentle,” that she seems “quite unconscious of her power,” and that she regards him “merely as a person in a play. She knows nothing of life” (53). Rather than interact with Dorian on a person-to-person basis when they meet backstage, Sibyl remains—in Dorian’s eyes, at least—in the mode of a thespian even when her plays are over. In other words, Sibyl is always performing. The reader learns later that Sibyl comes from a family of actors, so she knows no other form of existence than that of the stage. When Dorian recounts his engagement to Basil and describes kissing Sibyl backstage, he says, “lips that Shakespeare taught to speak have whispered their secret in my ear. I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth” (74). Once again, Dorian’s shallow love for Sibyl does not revolve around her but whom she portrays on the stage; herein Dorian betrays his tendency to affiliate with and feel only for those things—both living and non—that have natures similar to his own artistic objectification.

The world of acting is all that Sibyl knows and therefore the mode of being typical to stagecraft bleeds over into her everyday life so that, at least in Dorian’s eyes, she always embodies the status of artist through her pattern of speech and mannerisms. In reality, however, Sibyl’s characteristics are not her own: they are patterns and sentiments she learns from the plays

in which she acts that translate to her life off-stage through sustained imitation. Sibyl exists in a constant state of abstraction from the real and seems to be synchronic with Wilde's definition of art because the influence of theater fuels her creative re-imagination of the world both on stage and off. However, she is more appropriately part of the medium of the art of theatre since she derives her words from playwrights and her blocking from directors. Dorian's proposal is an event of particular significance because it marks a *real* event in Sibyl's life (instead of one that she experiences second-hand while playing a role) that breaks through her simulated reality. The moment when Sibyl becomes aware of Dorian's love is the moment that ruins her as an actress because her experience of real emotion is so powerful that she can no longer simulate emotion on the stage when she acts. Where once Sibyl is able to re-imagine both emotions and characters creatively in order to captivate audiences, the way that her real emotions shine through following the proposal makes her stagecraft vulgar and worthless in Dorian's eyes.

In the figure of Sibyl, the reader encounters someone whose role on stage creates and forms her identity in real life as well. As Paul Sheehan puts it, the performing person brings a certain level of "confusion, uncertainty, ambiguity, and ... unknowability" to any performance in which she takes part (333). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—a story in which the realms of life and art constantly overlap—the theatrical self is overtly observable in Sibyl, but also implicitly present in Dorian as well in the sense that the gradually increasing visual disjunction between his portrait and person is a source of ambiguity in itself. The presence of a theatrical self typically indicates some degree of falsehood that the actor perpetuates, but Lord Henry's comment, "I love acting. It is so much more real than life," gives the reader pause (Wilde 77). The fact that the job of the actor is to represent someone other than herself indicates deceit, but, within the context of the stage, the identity she projects through her role is tangibly real. Even though Sibyl is

objectively not herself when she plays a character on stage, to say that she is someone else is not entirely true either. At any given moment in a play Sibyl is simultaneously herself and the character, but the audience will perceive her only as her role if she performs it ably. By the same token, Dorian is no longer wholly the person he presents himself as during the process of the portrait's influence leading to his corruption, but he convincingly plays the role of youthful beauty and thereby tricks society into believing that he is indeed just that. Public identity, then, is little more than an aesthetic illusion that individuals achieve by shaping social perception.

Following his engagement, Dorian invites Basil and Lord Henry to watch Sibyl perform her next show as Juliet. Unfortunately, because Dorian's profession of love brings her into the realm of the real for perhaps the first time in her life and ruins her ability to act, Sibyl is able to move through her blocking "like a creature from a finer world," but "she [shows] no sign of joy when her eyes [rest] on Romeo" and "the few words she [has] to speak ... [are] spoken in a thoroughly artificial manner" (81). The discovery that Sibyl's talents have abandoned her first prompts Lord Henry and Basil to depart early from the theater, then leads Dorian to break off his engagement harshly despite Sibyl's explanations and protestations. The cruel words Dorian uses to denounce Sibyl and abandon her lead to Sibyl taking her own life. Although he is not yet aware of the consequences of his actions backstage, Dorian surprises himself when he awakens the following morning, looks upon Basil's portrait, and discovers that "the expression looked different. One would have said that there was [an added] touch of cruelty in [his] mouth" (87). At first, Dorian thinks that the change must be some sort of trick of the light or his own imagination, but when Lord Henry calls upon Dorian later in the day and tells him the news of Sibyl's untimely death, Dorian is confronted for the first time with the realization that his actions change how his physical form appears in the portrait. The change is minimal at first, but as the

portrait's influence grows and Dorian commits more heinous acts the alterations become more drastic.

Although the light of morning and Dorian's recognition of the portrait's change had prompted him to seek out reconciliation with Sibyl, Lord Henry not only is able to soothe Dorian's conscience but also buffer him from the initial shock with which he responds to news of her death. Dorian feels aghast over his treatment of Sibyl, yet Lord Henry convinces him that the heartbreak and guilt that he feels after her death are nothing more than beautiful sensations to bask in until the feelings fade. The discussion that Dorian and Lord Henry have over Sibyl's death even mimics the language of the theater. Dorian ultimately comes to the conclusion that the end of his brief romance seems “to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which [he] took a great part, but by which [he has] not been wounded” (98). Dorian's interpretation that Sibyl is useful only for her ability to produce dramatic sensations ultimately indicates that he sees her as disposable. Despite her important role in this episode of Dorian's life, he discards Sibyl her when she no longer appeals to his sensibilities. Although Lord Henry only advocates—but does not really participate in—a hedonistic lifestyle, he guides Dorian toward hedonism by structuring his interpretation of Sibyl's death so that Dorian would see it as an experience of a new aesthetic sensation that has no real bearing or consequence on his own life. In an attempt to cultivate further Dorian's hedonism, Lord Henry gives Dorian a nameless, yellow-bound, French decadent novel that scholars commonly recognize as a stand-in for Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*. In so doing, Lord Henry contrives to introduce Dorian more thoroughly to a lifestyle that centers on the pursuit of an aesthetic that is only achievable through personal indulgence and materialism.¹

¹ Within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde describes the book as “a novel without a plot ... simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize ... all the passions and modes of thought that

Although the novel mostly concerns itself with the creation of Dorian's portrait and his romance with Sibyl Vane up to the point of Lord Henry's gift, commodity fetishism plays a prominent role in Dorian's pending degradation. Fortunato argues that, for Wilde, the "ornamental [surface] is more substantial than the substance" of art itself and that "it is not the genuine interior life of a person that matters, 'not the reality that lies behind the mask,' but rather 'the mask that each one of them wears'" (42; Wilde qtd. in Fortunato 43). In essence, Fortunato argues that Wilde places little emphasis on the individual and focuses more so on their form and the objects they use to define themselves. While this argument appears to fall perfectly in line with the general practice of commodity fetishism, it fails to account fully for the role of Dorian's portrait. Although Dorian wears a mask of youth, the painting's existence complicates the overall issue because it is simultaneously Dorian's genuine interior and an object that outwardly defines his being. Even so, Dorian's conspicuous consumption of other fine commodities serves to define him as well, only in a far less explicit sense that he has no need to hide from the people in his life.

In Dorian's case, Lord Henry's gift of the yellow-bound book contributes to his decision to seek out a life characterized by the "new Hedonism" Lord Henry has outlined earlier in the novel (Wilde 126). Wilde's re-telling of the several years that follow Sibyl's death depicts the steady progression of Dorian's obsession with material commodities as he buries the guilt he feels in consumption and sensation. Dorian collects perfumes, exotic music and musical instruments, rare gems and jewelry, exquisite tapestries from around the world, and even taboo Catholic vestments and symbols. For Dorian, the collection of commodities which he uses as "modes by which he could escape" from the reality of the painting effectively allow him to

belonged to every century except his own ... [loving] those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions wise men still call sin" (121). Dorian's attempt to emulate the book's protagonist guides him down his path of hedonism.

surround himself with fine materials that will allow him to look valuable by association in spite of his commodity fetishism (134). Meanwhile, Dorian's social life begins to take on the tint of scandal as he becomes more decadent as well as insincere in his dealings with other people. Whereas once Dorian valued his friends and is almost shy in his social dealings, he becomes more extravagant over time and brings about the ruin of many a man's reputation; in his escapades, Dorian cultivates social copies of himself, but his social followers ultimately meet social sanction since—unlike Dorian—they bear the burden of their misdeeds. Dorian, meanwhile, is unrepentant for his bad influence and comes to “[look] on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful” (140). Since Dorian now cares so little for morality in general, it comes as no surprise that he commodifies his associates when he treats them as disposable and replaceable according to his needs.

As Dorian seeks out new sensations and fine commodities to possess, the moral integrity he possesses prior to the linkage between his soul and the portrait degrades beyond recognition and he becomes more and more paranoid that someone will learn of the secret connection between his soul and the painting. In his efforts to conceal his secret, Dorian goes so far as to elevate his fascination with the portrait to the level of fetish when he instructs a frame-maker he employs to remove the portrait to a long-since abandoned room at the top of his house that is “hidden away [where none] of his friends [has] access” that will serve as the venue wherein he may observe the portrait's changes (113). After some time of Dorian putting him off socially and denying him access to view his work, Basil expresses his concern about Dorian's aloofness and the unsavory rumors he hears about Dorian's character before he embarks for the continent. When the two chance to meet in the street, Basil asks why it is that Dorian's friends ““seem to lose all sense of honor, of goodness, of purity”” and are instead filled ““with a madness for

pleasure” after they associate with him, yet none of his ill-conduct appears on his own countenance (145). Rather than explain, Dorian tells Basil that he will take the artist to view his soul and “look on [corruption] face to face” (146). Basil is incredulous at first and believes that Dorian’s words are the product of madness, but he follows Dorian to the portrait’s storage place all the same.

In the upper room Dorian shows the creator of his portrait what has become of his soul. Upon seeing what has become of his painting, Basil tries to rationalize the changes as the result of some material condition that would alter the *object d’art* itself. Grasping at straws, Basil supposes that it must be some flaw of the room that houses the portrait or an imperfection in the paints themselves that causes the color to degrade over time, but he is unable to come up with a suitable explanation for the appearance of such dramatic alterations from his original creation. In this moment the material consequence of idolizing\ Dorian confronts Basil for the first time and forces him to realize that his departure from true art is the cause of the painting’s grotesque mirror effect and influence over Dorian. Unwilling to believe the worst, Basil urges Dorian to seek redemption through prayer and repent for his sins in the hopes that he might reverse the damage to his soul, but Dorian says that it is far too late for him to seek forgiveness because of all that he has done. While Basil tries to reason with him, Dorian “[glances] at the picture, and suddenly [experiences] an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil” (151). Under the impression that the figure in the portrait imparts this strong sentiment of odium to him, Dorian soon seeks out the knife that he had brought up several days ago and, upon stealthily retrieving the knife behind Basil’s back, uses it to murder the artist in a fit of passion (151). At this point it is clear that Dorian’s relationship with the portrait is no longer a matter of reflection alone. Rather, Dorian’s obsession with the portrait and its gradual change directly influence his actions.

In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Wilde makes the important claim that “no artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style” (3). However, Wilde’s claim seemingly contradicts the plot since Basil appears to be a profoundly ethical character. While some part of this inconsistency may be due to Wilde adding the preface to the full novel as an afterthought so as to defend himself from social backlash to his satirization of the superficial nature of contemporary English society, the impetus behind including this particular line remains unclear. Even though Basil seems to have ethical concerns, it is possible that Wilde judges Basil’s attempts to steer Dorian down the path of righteousness to be nothing more than didactic teaching. Therefore Wilde would likely consider Basil’s personal influence to be unethical since it is ultimately another form of mimesis. Basil is attempting to be an ethical character, but does so through a false ethic that relies on personal influence. Basil’s tendency to involve himself in the ethical concerns of his friends is not only the force that brings him to Dorian’s home, but is also the indirect cause of his murder. Had Basil not shown concern for Dorian’s career of debauchery, then he never would have worried over the state of Dorian’s soul, he never would have seen the bastardized portrait, and Dorian would not have had any particular desire to murder him. In this way, Wilde’s aesthetic ideal remains consistent in its message because the character who unethically tries to impress his chosen form of consciousness onto Dorian dies violently before the embodiment of a layer of simulation he has helped to create.

After Dorian murders Basil, he continues to live in much the same manner, albeit with an added touch of guilt. For most things, Dorian can rely on his various servants to take care of his needs, but he refuses to seek aid from his household staff in any matter concerning the portrait for fear that behind each servant’s “placid mask of servility” lurks treachery that will lead to the

revelation of his secret (114). Therefore, in order to dispose of Basil's body, Dorian blackmails a former acquaintance into helping him. Although the young man who comes to help is Dorian's peer, Andrew Goldstone's argument about the aesthetics of the laboring class in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* still accurately captures the power dynamic Dorian is able to utilize. Specifically, Goldstone says that "the use of servant characters shows, dialectically, how the attempt to affirm the dominance of aesthetic form can be the means to an awareness of literature's participation in the systems of social hierarchy and labor exploitation" (Goldstone 616). Even though the man who disposes of Basil's body feels nothing but odium toward the murderer, Dorian is able to compel him to help because his own outer form is pure whereas the other man's form shows his misdeeds despite their co-participation in the same social debauchery. Even though both are of the same class, the lack of outer marking allows Dorian to exploit his acquaintance's labor because no one knows his outer purity is the product of simulation; therefore society is less likely to believe anything ill of him. The power of simulation is so great by this point that Dorian can even commit murder with total impunity.

Following the destruction of Basil's body, Dorian hides out in an opium den until he regains his nerves and feels the ordeal has sufficiently blown over. By chance, Sibyl Vane's brother, James, finds himself in the same locale as Dorian that night and attempts to kill Dorian after coincidentally hearing him referred to by the name Sibyl used to call him: Prince Charming. However, when he convinces James to look at him more closely underneath a street lamp, the false reality of Dorian's beauty works to his advantage because his face bears no signs of age. Dorian's agelessness allows him to convince James that he is too young to have been romantically involved with Sibyl. It is only after he lets Dorian go that Vane learns from a woman who had been inside the ill-reputed tavern Dorian had left that "it [had been] nigh on

eighteen years since [she had] met him” and that “he [hadn’t] changed much since then” (183). In this instance, the ability of simulation to create a misleading reality cheats Vane of the revenge that he rightly deserves. Following his near brush with death, Dorian avows his wish to reform himself and turn over a new leaf, but the sense of repentance he feels for his atrocities is, at most, superficial.

By the novel’s conclusion, Dorian has driven a young woman to suicide, brought about the social ruin of numerous young upper-class men and women, killed one of his dear friends, blackmailed an acquaintance to hide his crime, and watched all the while as his portrait changes. In light of the atrocities and vanities Dorian’s morbid fascination with the portrait seemingly compels him to take part in, his exact relation to the portrait is a point of interest. In his assessment of Wilde’s essay “The Decay of Lying,” Quintus explains that one of its principle notions in the work is that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life and . . . that art tells beautiful untruths, that it ‘lies’ in not mirroring reality but altering it” (566). Even though Basil’s portrait initially reflects Dorian’s physical reality at a certain point in time and therefore its creation is an act of mimesis, the alterations in the portrait that Dorian’s actions produce transform the portrait into art that, to an extent, is of his own making. However, the issue is not that simple because even though the portrait no longer mirrors Dorian’s physical form, it does reflect the reality of his soul whereas his body logically must be an “untruth” since it bears none of the wear and tear of Dorian’s life. The portrait is mimetic in the way it initially imitates Dorian’s physical form, but it becomes a creative re-imagination as it changes to reflect his soul; Dorian is a creative re-imagination in the sense that his body is unnaturally ideal despite his escapades, but he is also mimetic because his actions mimic the nature of the soul his portrait

portrays. Both Dorian and the portrait occupy a liminal space between the realm of the real and that of art.

Supposing that Wilde is right about life imitating art more often than the reverse, the fact that Dorian and the portrait are both art and also both real indicates that their relationship and influence over one another might best be understood as dialectic. Although Dorian's perfect youth transforms his mode of living into art that the portrait expresses when it morphs to imitate the true nature of his soul, the image in the portrait is not the only agent subject to outside influence. The material state of the portrait as *object d'art* undermines Dorian's agency through the process of reversing the relationship and compelling Dorian to actions that are not wholly his own. Dorian's exploration of hedonism undeniably begins as a product of curiosity to see how his actions change the representation of the real, but Dorian's tendency to behave heinously in order to create even more dramatic changes—and therefore more powerful sensations upon viewing the portrait—becomes habit and he is swept up in the vicious cycle that guides his degradation. Dorian not only causes each change on the canvas but also voluntarily mimics the newfound state of the painting by performing worse and worse deeds throughout the book. The cycle is entertaining to Dorian at first—he falls into the habit of comparing himself to the portrait with mirror in hand, finding that “the very sharpness of the contrast [quickens] his sense of pleasure. He [grows] more and more enamoured with his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. . . . He [mocks] the misshapen body and the failing limbs” as conditions that he would be subject to if not for his wish—and he believes himself immune from any serious social consequences, but as he becomes more compulsive in his actions Dorian begins to worry and try to break free from the image's influence (Wilde 124). Unfortunately, every time Dorian attempts to break free and be a good person, he ends up sinning again.

Dorian's final attempt at reformation—embodied by the “good deed” of not breaking the heart of his most recent admirer out of the sheer curiosity of seeing if doing something good would reverse some of the ugliness of the painting—ends in utter failure. Even though Dorian hopes that his self-denial will create a positive change in the portrait, he is instead met with a new look of hypocrisy and vanity. The cycle ultimately ends only because, when Dorian finds that nothing happened to the painting, he resolves to destroy it and in doing so destroys himself as well.

The doubling that characterizes Dorian's relationship with his portrait both in terms of the physical form that each takes and the influence that each wields over the other indicates that multiple layers of simulation are at work in the narrative. Christopher Craft explicates various occurrences of double imagery that appear throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, specifically in the form of mirrors that act to “counterpose images of his enduring beauty against those of his emerging ugliness” (109). In the novel, both literal mirrors and the portrait of Dorian, which functions as a figurative mirror, exhibit both true images of reality (the portrait that shows the actual condition of Dorian's soul) and images of a false reality (the mirrors that show his ageless visage) to the effect that actual mirrors are portrayals of the false reality that Dorian's body represents. In the many instances in which Dorian examines the portrait throughout the novel, Dorian most often acts out his fetish for the portrait with an actual handheld mirror close by to examine how he really looks in comparison to the ever-changing portrait. The level of attention Dorian pays to his appearance and the portrait's indicates that he is entirely aware of the role simulation plays in his existence, but deliberately chooses to hide the truth of his soul in order to remain within the “real” of simulation rather than face the real.

By embodying an objectified and simulated form that allows him to remain young and outwardly beautiful, Dorian is able to get away with things that would lead the public to condemn any average citizen. In chapter eleven of the novel, Wilde describes Dorian as:

[T]he true realization of a type of which [young men] had often dreamed in Eton or Oxford days, a type that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world. (125)

It is primarily due then to his deceptive outward appearance as a societal ideal of sorts that Dorian's corruption goes undetected by most until it is too late for those whom he associates with to escape with their reputations intact. Wilde adequately illustrates the power of Dorian's appearance on the night of Basil's murder when Basil questions Dorian about the young men who he leads astray and ruins. During this exchange, Basil tells Dorian that "one has a right to judge of a man by the effect he has over his friends. Yours seem to lose all sense of honor, of goodness, of purity" (145). Yet earlier in the same conversation Basil says, "Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvelous untroubled youth—I can't believe anything against you" (143). Even when all evidence points to Dorian's corruption, the power of the simulacra evident in Dorian's corrupt yet unfading beauty is so strong that even those who know of his sins find themselves unable to implicate him decisively.

Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains a number of false realities throughout the course of the novel that ultimately serve the function of killing three individuals and dominating or ruining the lives of countless others. The different degrees of simulation that each of these false realities creates can be seen in several different forms such as Dorian's agelessness, the poisonous French decadence novel, and the influence that Lord Henry, Basil and the portrait all

exercise, since these band together to corrupt Dorian and lead him into a life that commodity fetishism dominates. Living a life of decadence that follows the tenets of aestheticism and values sensation, beauty, and the finer material things over all else, Dorian dehumanizes those around him by relegating them to the status of disposable, replaceable objects and, in the same breath, degrades himself through his grotesque relationship to his portrait. Meanwhile, the portrait itself shows the horrible reality of Dorian's inner being that he hides behind the façade of his physical form. Unable to cope with the awful truth that the painting holds, Dorian destroys the portrait and in doing so eradicates himself. In that instant the painting returns to the ideal form that it originally embodied while Dorian's body takes on the form that the painting depicted just moments before, thereby completely reversing the effect of the simulation in which he has taken part and bringing the novel to its conclusion.

CHAPTER III: *OBJECT D'ART* FOR SALE: LILY BART'S SELF-COMMODIFICATION
AND SIMULATION IN *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*

1.

During his 1882 lecture tour of America, reporters frequently asked Oscar Wilde about his thoughts on all things aesthetic. In response to a question that became a fixture in interviews with the Irish aesthete, Wilde explained time and time again that, for his tastes, “‘there’s no flower [he loved] so much as the lily. That, too, is perfect in form, and purely decorative. How graceful, how pure, how altogether lovely its shape, its tender poise upon the stem’” (*Oscar Wilde in America* 27). To Wilde, the lily represented the achievement of an aesthetic ideal in design that no other flower—save perhaps the sunflower, another bloom he doted on—can match. What Wilde says in his interviews exposes a subtle trans-Atlantic connection that feels too uncanny to qualify as mere coincidence: there is a serious possibility that his frequent mention of lilies during his interviews was influential in Wharton’s decision to name *The House of Mirth*’s protagonist Lily Bart. Although it is impossible to know for sure whether or not Edith Wharton attended any of Wilde’s speaking engagements while he was stateside or even if she was aware of the aesthete’s opinion of the flower for which her protagonist was named, the mostly decorative function Lily Bart serves in the novel as she makes her way through the marriage plot implies an ideological connection between the two authors. Even if Miss Bart’s name has no direct connection to Wilde or his aesthetic sensibilities, Wharton’s protagonist appears, at times, to be an echo of characters found in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As one who possesses a deep appreciation of material commodities and loves to experience the world’s various pleasurable sensations, Lily mirrors Dorian in a variety of ways, but her gender

and the social opportunities she is afforded make her a counterpart, too, to the unfortunate Sibyl Vane.

As a possible allusion to both Wilde's aesthetic concept of lilies and his actress, Sibyl, the station Lily occupies requires her to adorn her social surroundings and play the character who is most likely to snare a wealthy husband by creating sensations that appeal to her target spouse. Just as Sibyl experiences in Wilde's novel, Lily learns, too, that she derives value within her social context from her ability to please others, but as soon as she presumes to be herself her value diminishes. Even though Wharton publishes her novel fifteen years after the Wildean work that may have been a source of inspiration to her, the inclusion of her own Lily as a vessel through which she re-thinks Wilde's themes of performed identity and social decadence serves as a major imaginative link between the two authors.

The narrative arc of Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* follows the life of Lily Bart, an orphan of the petit-bourgeoisie who continues to act as a lady of high society—despite the deaths of her parents—mostly thanks to her elderly Aunt Peniston's begrudging hospitality and generosity. Miss Bart's narrative commences as her thirtieth year approaches, a time when she is in the good graces of high society and on the lookout for a wealthy suitor who, through marriage, will help guide her ascension from marriageable woman to full-fledged peer of the social elite. However, lies told about her conduct and a series of social miscalculations damage Lily's reputation in the eyes of her wealthy friends and make her desire to ascend beyond her present status to the strata of the bourgeoisie a practical impossibility. The decline of Lily's social worth leads to the deterioration of the likelihood that she can successfully carry out the marriage plot and accompanies the gradual decline of her economic capital and social class. The termination of Lily's narrative arc finds her in the social nadir of her life as a disgraced former

member of high society who is let go from her job in a millinery workshop and resides in the smallest room of a shabby working-class boarding house. Even though Lily has the option to repair her reputation and rejoin high society if only she will trade on her enemy's name, she ultimately destroys her sole means of doing so and tragically dies of an implicit suicide by means of an overdose just hours before the two people who care for her most—Gertie and Lawrence Selden—arrive to offer her aid and support.

While contemporary reviews tend generally to dwell on the manners, mores and gratuitous luxury of Lily and her associates, the actual reactions of the individual reviewers run the gamut from *The Independent's* mild condemnation of the vulgarity of the characters' values to E. E. Hale, Jr.'s awe at the sense of tragedy the novel provokes. A 1906 issue of *The Saturday Review*, meanwhile, praised Wharton's book as "one of the few novels that can claim to rank as literature" ("Review of *The House of Mirth*" 209). Modern critical essays published shortly after Wharton's death probe *The House of Mirth* more deeply than the contemporary reviews had and include research into such facets of the novel as Wharton's personal role in its commercial success² and an explication of the implications of Lily's necessary, but ultimately empty labor in the marriage market³. Essays from the last ten years have expanded the scope of scholarship even more to consider the agency of architecture and place⁴, implications of the depiction of addiction to risk and various psychoactive substances in high society⁵, Lily's problematic

² Bell describes Wharton's emerging role as a businesswoman after she achieves popular success with *The House of Mirth* and elevates herself to a position where she has real bargaining power when dealing with her publishers.

³ Ammons considers the state of leisure class marriage within *The House of Mirth* and the relative inability of upper class women to achieve independence without the condition of ownership by a husband.

⁴ Stephenson writes about Wharton's stance against unnecessary ornamentation in *The Decoration of Houses* and how that stance relates to the decorative function of leisure class women. Fraiman juxtaposes the neat and tidy homes of *The Decoration of Houses* with the messy domestic situations within her novels.

⁵ Goldsmith reads addiction to tobacco, caffeine, gambling, and prescription drugs within the novel as indicative of the rise of consumer capitalism. Shinbrot writes about how the theme of risk within the novel relates to Lily's aesthetic and social value as a marriageable woman.

hybridity as an older marriageable woman⁶, and the tension between the natural and artificial aspects of Lily's life and surroundings⁷.

Throughout her entire life, Lily staunchly believes that she is cut from a different cloth than other women of her class and that her ability to manipulate her surroundings to convey a certain tone or achieve a specific social goal elevates what she does within society from mere participation to a mode of living that is unique and artistic. However, the validity of Lily's belief is somewhat suspect because even in her later years on the marriage market she is still unable to attract a suitable mate and see the marriage plot through to its conclusion, whereas numerous peers who she feels are beneath her have already wed and are enjoying the benefits and security of upper-class matrimony. As she continues her attempts to increase her social capital through marriage to a wealthy suitor Lily fancies herself as an *object d'art*, but the fact that she fails where other young women of a similar upbringing and social position find success indicates that her status is more appropriately in line with that of the commodity. In other words, even though Lily is more than willing to sell herself on the marriage market and thinks that the deft touch behind her attempts to do so give her an aura that her peers lack, her consistent failure to find the right buyer indicates that she possesses less cultural capital than she perceives.

Lily's falling out with society and her ultimately tragic demise is a direct result of her own misperceptions of what she is worth and what mode of living counts as meaningful. Regarding the former, Lily consistently fails to see how similar she is to other women of her class and social ambitions, and failing to recognize that therefore elevates the value of her charm and elegance above what they deserve, when in reality she is just one person among an entire

⁶ DiCicco considers Lily's desire for autonomy and freedom as a freakish form of hybridity that is incongruous with her social station and the cause of her expulsion from society.

⁷ McEntyre explores the differences between freedom and formality by looking at naturally and artificially created spaces in *The House of Mirth*.

society of upper class women who possess similar social skills and tendencies. There are moments when Wharton describes Lily in terms that imply artistry, but these become hollow and commodified when Lily's only use for her art is to sell herself on the marriage market. As to the latter, Lily spends the majority of the novel pursuing the favor of wealthy bachelors solely for the luxurious lifestyle their millions stand to offer. Meanwhile, she never truly considers the possibility of marrying Selden—someone she actually has deep emotional feelings for—until it is too late because the middle class lifestyle he can provide is irrelevant to the social goals she is taught to pursue from her youth. Although Selden is not wealthy, he is the only character in the novel who could have made Lily happy through marriage because he sees her for who she truly is rather than for the commodified form she projects.

Lily Bart's inability to see how similar she really is to her peers and her decision to pursue wealth through marriage instead of settling for the match who would make her happiest should be read as the product of the illusory forces of simulacra and simulation that shape her perception of her social position. As Lily navigates the world of high society and luxury, there is often a nagging sense that things are not as they should be. Lily lacks any true motivation to follow through with the marriage plot, social agents may easily obscure the truth of any given situation, and the real means of material production that drive the world are conveniently ignored by a leisure class who get by through the investment of their inheritances. In short, the conditions of the upper class very closely mimic Baudrillard's conception of Disneyland in the sense that the whole of their lives seems to take place in an "imaginary world" that is created through a "sufficiently excessive number of [social diversions] used ... to specifically maintain the ... [rose-colored] affect" as they block out the "veritable concentration camp" that is working class life (Baudrillard 12).

However, there is a key difference between the two: Disneyland is acknowledged to be and marketed as an imaginary place to visit, where one escape from the real, while Lily has been raised to believe that the world of the upper class *is* real when in fact it is comprised of the same level of fantasy. Since this is the case, Lily is not so much a visitor to that sphere as she is the equivalent of one of the animatronics found in the theme park. While Lily is a pleasant diversion within society, she learns that she is all but useless anywhere else. By reading Lily's narrative in a manner inspired by Baudrillard's writings on simulated realities in *Simulacra and Simulations* and, to a lesser extent, Pierre Bourdieu's argument that class position is inherently connected to taste in commodities as well as potential aesthetic worth, Lily's pursuit of her aesthetic ideal by literally and metaphorically turning herself into a living *object d'art* is seen as unattainable, dehumanizing, and lacking in productive value within her material context.

2.

Curiously, Wharton's novel does not begin with the narrative's heroine in the midst of some display of empowering social agency. Instead it begins with Lawrence Selden in the process of spotting Lily Bart, who stands passive and alone in the middle of the crowded rush of Grand Central Station. As Selden gazes at Lily from afar, he finds himself perplexed by "her desultory air" and the way "she [stands] apart from the crowd" as it "drifts[s] by her," yet simultaneously believes that her "air of irresolution" may "be the mask of a very definite purpose" meant to obscure "that her simplest acts [were] the result of far-reaching intentions" (Wharton 5). Even in this brief moment of Selden's observation and thought, the narrator provides the reader with descriptions of Lily that are at odds with one another. On the one hand Lily is bored, indifferent, immobile, stoic, and reflexive as the crowd mills about in all

directions, yet at the same time she is also outwardly unique enough for Selden to spot her in the throng of travelers and he implies that even her otherwise languid appearance may in fact have some hidden function.

In his own interpretation of these brief introductory remarks Michael Mayne writes that even though Lily is unaware that Selden observes her from another part of the station, “[t]he absence of recognition does not negate agency; it subsumes agency into another mode of action, into a different kind of response” that shifts from a passive to an active articulation when Lily becomes conscious of Selden’s gaze and presence (4). Although Mayne’s argument that even a reflexive reaction to stimuli counts as an action and is in accordance with Selden’s thesis of Lily’s invisible agency, the way Selden interprets Lily during their ensuing direct interaction with one another suggests that the issue of her status as agent or object is considerably more complicated.

In order to initiate a possible discourse with Lily—a woman who, Selden admits, falls outside of his usual social circle—Selden contrives to walk past and allow Lily to hail him should she have any interest in a social exchange. Lily’s recognition of Selden and her choice to engage with him when he enters her vicinity is enough to suggest some level of her personal agency to Mayne, but she is reflexive rather than active and the terms Selden uses to describe her solidly entrench him as spectator and her as a rare and unusually beautiful sight, which suggests that Lily occupies a particularly objectified position. Selden’s impression of Lily as she approaches him is of how “[h]er vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room” and focuses especially on “the purity of tint” she possesses even after eleven years on the marriage market (5). That Selden would notice Lily’s outer appearance is in no way out of the ordinary, but he goes far beyond normal itemized

descriptors (e.g. what one wears) and instead returns multiple times to the word “tint” as if he stood before an aesthetically pleasing artistic composition and not an ordinary person. Selden’s brief consideration of the time gone by since Lily entered the marriage market at this moment in the text is also worthy of note because it suggests that Lily’s appearance is mostly unchanged and static despite the fact that her station as a young marriageable woman of high society requires her to keep up a tireless social schedule of balls, benefits, galas and the like that should have otherwise caused her to age.

Selden takes his objectified notion of Lily and her body even further later in the scene when the two of them depart the station on foot in search of a quiet place to take tea while Lily waits for the next train to Bellomont, the Trenor family’s country estate. As the pair stroll through the streets of New York City, Selden occupies himself with thoughts such as whether or not her hair is “ever so slightly brightened by art?” the “confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must ... have been sacrificed to produce her,” and that the appeal that distinguishes Lily from other women is like “a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness [that] had been applied to vulgar clay” (7). The choice of these particular descriptors that both specifically and implicitly allude to art, fashion and finely crafted pottery, respectively, implicitly serve to classify Lily in the realm of saleable commodities instead of personhood from the novel’s very beginning. However, because these descriptors are read by Selden as ameliorative when drawn in comparison to “[t]he dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood (at the station) [that] made [Selden] feel how highly specialized she was,” the novel seems initially to establish Lily as something more important than any ordinary commodity (6). Selden describes Lily in terms that establish her as a living, breathing *object d’art*.

Although Mayne emphasizes the opulent qualities of Lily's social strata and considers her semi-successful maneuvers as a social-artist in his scholarship, there is still more to say on the subject of how Lily relates to her material world through her pursuit of an aesthetic ideal wherein value is all but solely determined by one's outer charms. Far from truly being an artist or producer in her own right, Lily Bart has a very limited level of agency and is, more appropriately, a product of an aesthetic vision taught to her by her mother, particularly, and, more generally, reinforced by bourgeois social norms and values. Lily's development encourages her to imitate art through the medium of her life and she truly believes that she is of a finer cloth than her peers in this respect, but her missteps within the context of her various social and material relations lead to the decline of her class status and aesthetic worth. Quite contrary to her inclination toward social superiority throughout the narrative, Lily's pursuit of her aesthetic ideal neither entirely nor successfully raises her personal value to that of *object d'art* because her social maneuvers insist that she be perceived as a product to be acquired by an eligible bachelor for the right price and thereby place her solidly within the realm of the commodity.

Multiple levels of reality are at play in Lily's story. Objectively, Lily is little more than a commodity because her definition of success puts her personal value in direct relation to the values of other commodities, the various forms of capital possessed by other socialites in her circle, and her ability to sell herself on the marriage market. However, Lily remains under the impression that there is a certain amount of grace and aesthetic manipulation inherent in the sale of her person that heightens her pursuit of a husband from a transaction of personal commerce to another episode within an artfully lived life. This proves to be highly problematic in Lily's case because her life is characterized in many ways by Baudrillard's concept of simulacra. Despite

Lily's obvious aesthetic appeal in Selden's eyes, her existence within her social sphere relies on her ability to mobilize a certain amount of educational, cultural, and economic capital that she can only minimally possess until she accumulates a much larger amount of capital through marriage or inheritance. Lack of capital notwithstanding, conspicuous consumption becomes part of how Lily tries to keep up with the fashions of her friends as she cultivates the illusion that she belongs in the upper class. In reality, Lily's attempt to sustain an upper-class standard of living well beyond her means proves disastrous and leaves her unable to weather the gradual decline of her social station or cope with the conditions of a millinery workshop when she finally finds herself all but ruined both financially and socially.

Throughout *The House of Mirth* Wharton describes her protagonist in highly materialistic terms that emphasize Lily's status as a beautiful commodity much more so than as a human being. Although the moment in which Lily most overtly identifies as *objet d'art* occurs on the night of *tableaux vivants*—which also turns out to be the moment at which she hits her social apex before everything crumbles—most critics agree upon the utter necessity of using Wharton's first chapter as a point of departure in order to analyze Lily productively. Those who write about *The House of Mirth* commonly divide the chapter into three phases that include Selden and Lily's chance meeting at the train station, Lily's decision to go up to Selden's bachelor apartment for tea, and the lie Lily tells Simon Rosedale when she meets him on her way out of the apartment building. While each of these events helps to characterize Lily and establishes a sense of the strict personal conduct expectations an unwed woman of her class faces, particularly when men of a similar rank are involved, it is the actual gaze of each character—beginning when Selden spots her from afar—and the descriptions the narrator uses to paint a picture of Lily that are of interest in the context of this study.

Being equated with the *object d'art* seems to endow Lily with a higher social value than those who are described in objectified—rather than artful—terms. However, even though Lily's value is elevated through her relation to art, the narrator and Selden still consign Lily to the status of thingdom and thereby establish the importance of her ornamental function and probable lack of real agency within her social context. Despite the negativity that critics normally associate with thingdom, however, it is an association that Lily has come to appreciate and a cultural context in which she feels comfortable. While Selden's apartment is the somewhat shabby home of a bachelor and beneath the level of luxury Lily is accustomed to, her initial thoughts about his residence still immediately hone in on the quality of his material possessions. Before the two even exchange any dialogue, Lily takes an interest in the "hall hung with old prints," the "small library, dark but cheerful," a "pleasantly faded Turkey rug," his "muslin curtains," and the "fresh scent of mignonette and petunias from the flower-box on the balcony" (8). Aside from Lily's momentary notice of the size of Selden's entryway and some of the clutter around the room, the narrator hardly mentions the actual nature of Selden's space or the quality of his personal effects. Instead, for Lily, who thinks of herself not as an "expert, but [as who finds] pleasure in agreeable tones and textures," it is the material and aesthetic quality of Selden's decoration that draws her attention (10).

In this scene Lily is an appraiser of commodities in the same way her would-be suitors are appraisers of her, a tendency that Selden fleetingly exhibits once while he and Lily prepare tea and again when the conversation turns to Gryce's collection of Americana. Although some may argue that Lily's ability to appraise commodities establishes her agency and makes her more than a commodity, it should be noted that her interaction with things—both in her own perception and in the way others perceive her—is actually typical of relationships between

commodities. Commodities are constantly poised in relations of value based on exchange with any and every other available commodity on the market. Lily finds herself in a similar situation where her social value is determined by the commodities with which she is literally and symbolically associated. Not only do Lily's acquaintances use fashion and consumption to determine her social value, but she also uses her ability to appraise commodities to gauge her exchange value on the marriage market. Ergo, her relationship with commodities as *object d'art* is more closely akin to a sort of commodified self-awareness than actual human agency.

During the first such interaction in this scene, Selden is struck by "[Lily's] hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist," an observation that juxtaposes part of Lily's body with an exquisite commodity in such a way that the jewelry and her physical form are materially on par with one another (8). Although Lily consistently derives pleasure from all of the finer commodities she encounters throughout the novel, Selden's relationship with the commodity is more complex. Selden is in a position where he is in tune with bourgeois values to the degree that he recognizes the appeal of commodities thanks to his own relatively privileged upbringing, but distanced from upper-class values by his occupation as a middle class lawyer who lives in a comfortable, yet frugal manner. He can therefore recognize the inherent fault in the lifestyles of those who practice a more pure form of commodity fetishism through conspicuous consumption.

Later in the same paragraph Selden thinks of Lily as a "victim of the civilization which had produced her" and regards the "links of her bracelet" as "manacles chaining her to her fate" (8). In spite of his perception that Lily's lifestyle and values are superficial and fleeting, Selden also recognizes that the suggestion that Lily practice a more ascetic lifestyle is unrealistic because it will only fall on deaf ears. From his vantage point it appears that Selden's most viable

option is to enjoy the rare and beautiful picture Lily's life presents, something he does as Lily browses his library and he thinks how "pleasant [it is] to sit there looking up at her, as she lifted now one book and then another from the shelves ... while her drooping profile was outlined against the warm background of old bindings" (11). Here, Selden again demonstrates the tendency of characters in *The House of Mirth* to see Lily in terms of the composition of her physical form juxtaposed against fine backgrounds within the frame of their perception. While this is a way of seeing that Lily personally tries to cultivate in those who behold her, it is also one which ultimately detracts from her humanity. This moment doubly commodifies Lily because she trades the social and aesthetic value of her presence in Selden's apartment for tips on Americana that she plans to trade in the future in order to heighten her own potential exchange value on the marriage market; Lily's maneuvers here to make herself more valuable overtly resemble the cycle of commerce.

After Lily receives her talking-points about Americana from Selden to use on Gryce at Bellomont, she rushes out of the Benedick and is subject to the gaze of others two more times before the chapter's conclusion. First, Lily must gather up her dress in order to pass a charwoman who silently stares as Lily passes her on the way down the stairs. Although Lily initially feels troubled about the look she receives since she is accustomed to looks of appreciation and admiration, not blankness, she rationalizes the incident by supposing that the charwoman is only "dazzled by such an unwonted apparition" on stairs that lead to bachelors' quarters (13). Then, in contrast to the gaze of the working class charwoman, Lily also exposes herself to the gaze of a fairly wealthy businessman, Simon Rosedale, as she exits the building. As Rosedale "[stands] scanning [Lily] with interest and approval" with his "small sidelong eyes which [give] him the air of appraising people as if they [are] bric-a-brac," Lily feels significantly

less assured of her position and, because Rosedale owns the building, is caught in a lie about seeing a fictional dressmaker when she attempts to justify why she is at the Benedick (13).

Later, after she hails a hansom and escapes her encounter with Rosedale, Lily admonishes herself for both the indiscretion of her lie and the stupidity of leaving Rosedale at the entrance of the Benedick. As Lily's cab drives away to the station, she is under the distinct impression that her snub will likely "cost her rather more than she could afford. ... [If she had] let Rosedale drive her ... the concession might have purchased his silence. He had his race's accuracy in the appraisal of values, and to be seen walking ... in the company of Miss Lily Bart would have been money in his pocket, as he might himself have phrased it" (15).

Wharton's inclusion of this brief exchange between Lily and Rosedale is important for a number of reasons, first of which is the meaningful contrast that she draws between the two characters. Whereas Lily is genteel yet in need of money, Rosedale is both crass and fairly wealthy. Each character has what the other needs to become a permanent fixture of upper class society, but Lily's snub of Rosedale indicates that she is unwilling to facilitate any meaningful change to the composition of the upper class. Rosedale's ethnicity alone already marks him as Other, but his tendency to "appraise" value rather than possessing an innate sense of what things are worth separates him even further from Lily and other members of her class. Another key aspect of the exchange outside the Benedick is that not only does Lily's excuse rely on fashion—something that is exceptionally revealing in terms of Lily's values and the limited number of socially acceptable reasons for why an unmarried woman of her class may be out alone—she also believes that the only immediate way she can pay off Rosedale is to be *seen* in his company. Hence, one must understand fashion as a medium that Lily uses to recreate her image in an aesthetically pleasing manner in accordance with current tastes and as a source from which Lily

derives part of her cultural capital. To allow individuals of lower social standing, such as Rosedale, to be seen in her company is one of the ways Lily may mobilize these types of capital to her advantage. What is most essential to an understanding of Lily's value seen through this perspective, however, is that both she and other members of society judge her worth on the basis of her relative youth, beauty, and other aesthetic traits rather than by other, more comprehensive and humanistic measures.

While the application of the gaze of others to Lily is especially important in this chapter, it is equally necessary to focus on the specific aspects of Lily that the gaze highlights and Lily's own interpretation of what it means. Considering this trait of the gaze in *The House of Mirth* in tandem with Bourdieu's work in *Distinction* (1979) is helpful because even though the works were published nearly eight decades apart, Bourdieu's work theorizes that social class—which is directly related to the nexus of an individual's ability to mobilize economic, social, and educational capital at any given point—dictates the various values an individual is likely to hold and his or her relative ability to influence taste and social trends. The focus on materiality in the first place implies the role of economic capital in a fairly obvious way that relies on the cost of the commodity invoked, but the gaze also possesses equally important cultural implications. Selden, for instance, is an educated lawyer who lives as a member of the professional sector of the petit-bourgeoisie, a class that Bourdieu describes as in possession of a somewhat above average amount of economic capital, but also a large amount of cultural and educational capital that he earns through the nature of his career and that appears in his frequent invocations of outline, profile, and art when he thinks of Lily. On the other hand, a reading of Rosedale in accordance with Bourdieu places him in the ranks of one who has risen above the bourgeoisie

economically, but still lacks the level of social and cultural refinement necessary to ascend to high society.

Although Rosedale also recognizes Lily's potential value, the terms of his recognition ("bric-a-brac" rather than "art") are unsophisticated in terms of cultural capital and are instead reminiscent of a more vulgar aesthetic that suggests the influence of his previous (un-moneyed) class. While the gaze that Selden and Rosedale fix on Lily are important because of how they indicate her value relative to men of respectable social rank, the gaze of the charwoman is arguably the most important of the chapter because it is the only gaze that Lily interprets for herself. Despite the fact that Lily finally decides that the charwoman's silent stare is a product of her own intimidating splendor, the brief moment when the gaze perturbs her indicates that Lily is not as self-assured as she outwardly claims. This, in turn, brings the reader to one of Lily's key hurdles in *The House of Mirth*: her parents raise her to take stock in the values of the bourgeoisie, but because of her liminal social status as a woman of high society who has neither married nor come into her inheritance, Lily does not know what value to place upon herself. Lily overrides the voice of the dominated working class with her own for the time being, but she will only be able to do so for as long as she retains enough social, cultural and economic capital to remain in the sphere of the social elite.

In the same way Bourdieu argues that "social class is not defined solely by a position in the relations of production, but by the class habitus which is 'normally' ... associated with that position," so too is it true that the measure of one's value is not determined by how much cultural, social, and economic capital he or she possesses in full, but instead by how much of that capital an individual may mobilize in any particular context or scenario (373). While the amount of economic capital Lily possesses, her fashionable consumption, and the company she keeps all

tentatively place Lily in a distinctly bourgeois social context. Her full membership and participation in that particular circle necessarily involve a successful marriage that will supplement her already great amount of social and cultural capital with the economic capital of a wealthy husband's fortune. The implication that Lily's ascent to social power relies on her ability to snare a husband through the use of her many charms explains her delight when she spies Percy Gryce board the train she is taking to Bellomont. The coincidence that Lily and Gryce are on the same train to the same destination is fortuitous because it provides Lily with the opportunity to spend time more or less alone with Gryce in a socially acceptable yet unchaperoned environment where she will be able to test the extent to which she can use her social capital to charm him into marriage. However, Gryce's conservative social sensibilities are well known and he is likely to be scared away if Lily initiates contact with him of her own volition. Therefore, in order to attract the wealthy yet inept Gryce on their ride to the country, Lily must "devise some means of approach which should not appear to be an advance on her part" or else wait until they arrive at the Trenor's estate and hope that someone else does not monopolize Gryce's time (Wharton 17).

To claim that Lily carefully calculates each of her social maneuvers with a definite goal in mind is especially bold in light of the blunder she commits when she leaves the Benedick, but it is not at all unbelievable. In reality, Lily goes to great lengths to adapt any given social situation to her advantage, something that characterizes Lily as a social-strategist who makes use of even the most minute details, perhaps picked up in conversations weeks or months in advance, to move her closer to the goal of successful matrimony. Lily's continuous effort to mobilize her various forms of capital as effectively and as beautifully as possible suggests that her navigation of the social world is far from the standard *modus operandi* of her set and that Lily practices an

art of living that is distinctly different from that of other society women. However, because of Lily's relationship to commodities, her attempts to increase her value within her social set do not necessarily denote possession of any considerable agency because she is ultimately the product for sale. In order to approach her latest target, Lily concocts an elaborate but effective plan that involves her getting out of her seat at the next train station so that she may be in the aisle when the train begins to move again. This is something that, in turn, causes her to lurch into the back of Gryce's chair and thereby creates an opportunity for the two to have a seemingly coincidental meeting and conversation. The measure of control that Lily exercises over the course of her interaction with Gryce is especially obvious in the way that she continuously reads, analyzes, and appropriately responds to the disposition of her companion. For instance, because an acquaintance of Lily's has made her aware that Gryce is incredibly devoted to his mother, Lily "[resolves] to impart a gently domestic air to the scene" in order to put him at ease and distract him from the socially deviant nature of traveling alone with a beautiful, marriageable young woman (18).

To create the comfortable, domestic effect that she feels Gryce desires, Lily takes it upon herself to order and prepare tea for the two of them, something that Gryce watches her do "in silent fascination," admiring the grace of her hands as they "[flit] above the tray, looking miraculously fine and slender in contrast to the coarse china and lumpy bread" as they "perform [the task] with ... careless ease" (18). Wharton's portrayal of Lily's onboard tea ceremony, meant to be an obvious parallel to the tea Lily helps Selden make no more than an hour or two prior to the train ride, gives Gryce the opportunity to align Lily with commodities as well, albeit in a far less sophisticated fashion. Just as Selden makes it a point to focus on the materiality of Lily's hand and even likens it to ivory, Gryce also considers her hands within their aesthetic

context, but the narrator betrays Gryce's lower level of cultural capital through the indication that he focuses much less on their beauty than on their utility in making the tea in such a way that does not draw attention to himself. The parallel between these two particular moments continues when Lily observes that, despite the poor quality of the railway tea in contrast to Selden's, Gryce savors the tea she prepares as if it is nectar. The commodity in this situation is itself of a low quality, but Lily heightens its value in Gryce's eyes through the social ceremony of sharing tea. Even so, the notion that the tea is any better is an aesthetic illusion cultivated by Lily's charms.

Moments later, Lily allows Gryce yet another outlet with which to express his taste for the bland when she incorporates her talking points about Americana into the conversation. Doing so helps Gryce loosen up some but is odiously boring for Lily. Even though Gryce possesses the social and economic capital necessary to rank among the bourgeoisie thanks to his family name and wealthy relatives, Lily characterizes him as stuffy and utterly devoid of an appreciation for culture. Even when Lily thinks of the expensive Madison Avenue home in which he and his mother live, she is unable to focus on anything other than how it is an "appalling house, all brown stone without and black walnut within, with the Gryce library in a fire-proof annex that looked like a mausoleum" and no decoration in the drawing room other than a "gilt album in which letters of thanks [from the clergy] were pasted" (20). Although Lily expresses her desire to organize her own space to Selden, the pole of her personal tastes is so nearly opposite that of the Gryce family's that she goes to the extreme of describing the space in crypt-like terms as if someday living there will be the death of her own decorative sense. The death of her decorative (aesthetic) sense upon marriage to Gryce is, by analogy, Lily's social death as well since her change in station would doubtlessly come with new social expectations,

values, and mores related to her class elevation. Wharton makes it rather apparent that Lily has no love for Gryce or the boring, tasteless lifestyle he leads, yet Lily continues to find the prospect of financial security more enticing than fulfilling her social and cultural needs and feels certain of her ability to secure a marriage proposal by the weekend's conclusion.

Despite Lily's initial success in her attempts to attract Gryce, two individuals manage to derail her scheme at Bellomont and deter her attempted class ascension for the remainder of the novel. The first of these—Bertha Dorset—is a woman who not only has the social and financial security of a wealthy husband but is also comparable to Lily in terms of the cultural capital she possesses. Even though Bertha's marriage to her husband George signifies her own successful completion of the marriage plot in which Lily is currently embroiled, her match with George is unsuitable on the level of cultural capital and Bertha continues to act the part of Lily's rival in high society as she pursues extra-marital affairs to supplement the company of her exceedingly boring husband. The second of the two meddlers is none other than Lawrence Selden, the man who initially applies the commoditizing gaze to Lily, but who also suggests a potentially more meaningful alternative to the marriage plot that would require Lily to reassess her personal values. In spite of the different approaches they take to remove Lily from high society—Bertha through scandal and discredit, Selden through logic and love—both Bertha and Selden have the important function of gradually revealing to Lily the simulacra-tainted nature of high society. Lily's interactions with these characters help her come to understand the manipulative nature of upper class relationships and the extent to which friendships and alliances in that context exist almost exclusively for material advantage rather than any sort of deep emotional bond they pretend to manifest.

Bertha's first appearance in the novel—the moment when she forces her company onto Gryce and Lily during the trip to Bellomont—seems innocuous enough, but one cannot help but notice the signs that foreshadow the role she plays in Lily's fall. In the first place, upon her entrance to the carriage they are riding in, Bertha produces the same “turning of heads and general sense of commotion” that Lily is also apt to create wherever she goes and is described as possessing a “restless pliability of pose ... like the sinuous draperies she affected” (21). Here, Lily makes use of the same commoditizing gaze that others usually apply to her and likens Bertha to something that is both associated with the aesthetically pleasing materials used in successful interior design as well as a sort of graceful flexibility. Wharton's initial depiction of Bertha places her and Lily on the same level in the sense that society defines each with terms typically reserved for aesthetically pleasing materials. However, likening Bertha to pliable draperies suggests a much greater degree of freedom than the more static image of Lily's manacled ivory as seen in Selden's apartment. Bertha's relative freedom, of course, is apparent in her “self-assertive tone and gestures” as she takes up the entire aisle while she waits for room to be made next to Gryce and Lily (22). Unlike Lily, who must create an elaborate scheme in order to approach Gryce, Bertha's marriage places her in a scenario where is able to exercise the amount of social capital necessary to be both pushy and conspicuous in her social movements without the looming threat of any serious sanction from her peers.

Comparing Bertha's approach to Gryce on the train to Lily's, it is apparent that Bertha's husband not only provides her with added cultural and economic capital, but also that their marriage opens up a wider range of social options for her. Even if Bertha acts immoderately, she does not have to face the same social sanctions that Lily might because, if her husband does not interpose, then the standard is to assume that he must tacitly approve of Bertha's actions or he

would do something about them. On the one hand, Bertha's greater degree of freedom indicates that she is less of a commodity than Lily because her value has already been determined to a large extent by her husband, yet she also remains a commodity by choice because she continues to manipulate her exchange value through extramarital affairs. Although Bertha has not yet done anything more than force her unwelcome presence upon Lily, the end of the chapter strongly hints at her future treachery. When she finally gets settled, Bertha asks Lily for a cigarette and is initially shocked when Lily denies her, but she ultimately comes to realize that Lily has simply adjusted her social behavior to comply with Gryce's more conservative moral sensibilities. Even though Bertha lets Lily's lie slide for the time being, afterward she wears a smile that "[makes] Lily wish there had been no vacant seat beside her own" and suggests that the issue of Lily's lie is far from being over (22). Like Lily, Bertha stockpiles information and tips about society that she may deploy to her advantage when the time is appropriate, but she collects mostly unflattering information meant to ruin the image and esteem of her rivals.

In order to secure Gryce's marriage proposal at Bellomont, Lily works within her given social context to compose what she believes will be the most favorable possible image of herself in the eyes of Gryce. Through her practice of the art of living—or, put another way, by using her physical form and charm as means through which to create a deliberate aesthetic effect—Lily attempts to read her subject's values so as to use their interactions to inspire feelings of desire and perhaps even love. Since it is understood that Lily in particular and, more generally, the women of high society are given value in accordance with their ability to entertain and act the part of living ornament both in and out of the home, the particular aesthetics of Lily's social situation at any moment are an especially important component of her effort to create a specific vision of herself in the eyes of Gryce.

After several days at Bellomont Lily offers some insight into her condition as *object d'art* as she reflects on her ongoing pursuit of Gryce. While Lily generally finds that “[t]he surrounding atmosphere [is] propitious to the scheme of courtship,” Wharton pays particular attention to the moments at Bellomont when Lily advantageously manipulates the placement of her form within her surroundings as if she were using her social movements to compose the scene of a painting that augments her desirability (39). On one such occasion while Lily sits apart from Gryce on the terrace as Carrie Fisher monopolizes his time, Lily recognizes the “agonized glances” Gryce gives her and her “only response is to sink into an attitude of more graceful abstraction” meant to enhance her image through the “contrast [created by] throwing her charms into relief” of Mrs. Fisher’s (39). Here Lily relies on Gryce’s capacities as an observer who is able to take in the image of Lily and judge its worth accordingly. Wharton later describes the scene with an even greater degree of detail:

Seating herself on the upper step of the terrace, Lily leaned her head against the honeysuckles wreathing the balustrade. The fragrance of the late blossoms seemed an emanation of the tranquil scene, a landscape tutored to the last degree of elegance. In the foreground glowed the warm tints of the gardens. Beyond the lawn, with its pyramidal pale-gold maples and velvety firs, sloped pastures dotted with cattle; and through a long glade the river widened like a lake under the silver light of September. Lily did not want to join the circle around the tea-table. (40)

This brief passage is worthy of note because Wharton’s use of an artistic vocabulary to give readers insight into how Lily understands herself within the context of society is quite similar to the way Selden describes her in the train station in the first chapter. The way that Lily sees herself involves visualizing herself part of a landscape scene of her own mental creation where

the objects that make up her background do not just happen to be features of the area that surrounds Bellomont, but are instead seen as “tutored” and carefully composed in such a way that they create a specialized aesthetic affect that works to enhance Lily’s own beauty. Lily and each of the visual elements that make up her context come together to form a living art to which Lily relates as both creator and participant. Rather than join the other members of her set, Lily demonstrates a preference for her status as *object d’art* and, in doing so, remains separate from everyone else.

Although the exercise of the art of living that Lily displays on the terrace makes her appear aloof and disinterested—characteristics Bourdieu directly links to the bourgeoisie—Lily’s apparent ease is a façade that hides the care and effort she puts into her social exhibitions. The Sunday of Lily’s stay at Bellomont, for instance, shows the great thought and strategic preparation that normally goes into her production of a desired aesthetic effect. In yet another of her attempts to convince Gryce of their moral compatibility, Lily fabricates a story about how she takes it upon herself to ensure that the Trenor daughters attend morning church services every week and even convinces them to break their usual Sunday routine of sleeping in like the rest of their family so that her lie will appear to be truth. Not only does Lily’s strategy work exceedingly well up to this point—Gryce is convinced, despite the “very materialistic society” represented at Bellomont, that “Miss Bart, for all her self-ease and self-possession, [is] not at home in so ambiguous an atmosphere” even when she is one of the most materialistic members of the group—but she is also sure that “the sight of her in a grey gown of devotional cut, with her famous lashes drooped over a prayer-book, would put the finishing touch to Mr. Gryce’s subjugation, and render inevitable a certain incident which she had resolved should form a part of the walk they were to take together after luncheon” (43-44). Through the creation of a false

devotion she affects with beauty, a modestly fashionable dress, a well chosen prop, and the illusion that she is the pious and spiritual warden of two young souls, Lily is so confident in her art of living that she all but predetermines when and how Gryce's proposal will take place. However, a series of crucial mistakes sabotage Lily's prospects and force her to begin anew her search for a wealthy husband.

In spite of the work she has done and her otherwise good intentions to close the deal with Gryce, Lily makes the first of several mistakes when she chooses to investigate Selden's recent arrival to Bellomont and thereby causes herself to miss the departure of the omnibus the household takes to church services. While this lapse of judgment does not foil Lily's plan by itself, Lily's ensuing choice to see if she can lure Selden away from Bertha—whom he has implicitly come to visit—instead of walking to the church in time to catch the end of the service and ride back to the estate with Gryce constitutes the beginning of the chain of events that drives Gryce away from Lily into the arms of another marriageable girl. Selden's decision to pursue Lily—just like she hoped he would—leads to her absence from the end of the service and prevents her art of living from producing its final effect on Gryce. In turn, the brief time spent with Selden before luncheon leads to Lily's decision to feign sickness so as to excuse herself from the rest of the day's activities. While the rest of the Trenor party is away at another family's estate, Lily and Selden sneak off for a walk in the more remote reaches of the Trenor property. The time Lily spends apart from Gryce gives Bertha an opportunity to seek revenge upon Lily for stealing Selden that morning by replacing the image Lily has created of herself in Gryce's head with one that paints her in tones that are more realistic but less appealing to his moral sensibilities.

Although Lily feels she is more adept in her practice of the art of living than other women of similar rank—including Bertha Dorset—her execution is far from flawless because she is short-sighted in terms of her ambitions and often underestimates the amount of social capital that others may mobilize in a given situation. Lily predicates her choice to run off from Gryce and spend the day with Selden on her fondness for Selden’s personality and confidence that her charms had earned her a day off from her courtship of Gryce. However, Lily neglects to account for Bertha’s ability to practice her own rendition of the art of living to the tune of chasing away Lily’s wealthiest suitor and effectively lowering Lily’s value as *object d’art*. While the loss of Gryce and access to his millions as Mrs. Gryce is undoubtedly a major economic and social defeat for Lily, the afternoon she spends with Selden represents an important victory for her humanity. Lily and Selden’s private moment occurs within the context of a background that Marilyn McEntyre describes as far more natural than Bellomont and other loci of the upper class, yet which I argue is also still compatible with Lily’s art of living as it is understood within its standard high society context because Lily continues to be described through distinctly aesthetic terms that indicate she is never free from being defined by society.

Even though Lily and Selden supposedly escape society and enter the realm of nature, Lily’s thoughts indicate that “[she] had no real intimacy with nature, but she had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background to her own sensations. The landscape outspread below her seemed an enlargement of her present mood, and she found something in its calmness, its breadth, its long free reaches” (51). While there is a temptation to argue that being out in the natural world with Selden represents Lily’s ideological separation from society, Lily’s actual relation to that space is no different than her relation to any other space she encounters within society. Although art and the art commodity are

diametrically opposed to nature and Lily's time spent in nature is certainly a displacement from her normal context, Lily maintains the values that society cultivates in young women of her class while using Nature as yet another backdrop for her aesthetic arts. Lily's relationship with the scenery of the natural world is superficial to the point of her descriptions hinging on pathetic fallacy. The narrator does not describe the landscape in terms that indicate a deep appreciation of the space itself, but instead in a manner that is purely idyllic as if what Lily sees is the subject of a painting and as if what surrounds her is art rather than life.

Even so, Selden's description of what he calls the Republic of the Spirit plants a seed of doubt in Lily's mind whether the desire for wealth and leisure is worthwhile. The unaccustomed context of Nature is what allows the seed of Selden's idea to germinate and proves to be significant throughout the novel. Despite Lily's enjoyment of her time spent with Selden, she soon finds that their foray creates more trouble than it is worth in that their supposed separation from society is illusory in nature; though the two are out of sight, they are not out of mind. Bertha uses Lily's absence to foil Lily's designs with Gryce before she has a chance to finalize their union. Although Lily's art of living is well-executed, her failure in this respect forces her to start over a rung lower on the social ladder.

Following her failure to seal the deal with Gryce at Bellomont, Lily finds herself in a somewhat less opulent social station in which she chiefly accompanies the *nouveau riche* Wellington-Brys instead of the upper-class Judy Trenor. During the time Lily spends with the Wellington-Brys, she plays a crucial role in an overtly commodifying social gathering called *tableaux vivants*. The term *tableaux vivants*, which translates directly from French to "living pictures," indicates that the party's theme revolves around literally recreating famous paintings, sculptures, and historical scenes through the medium of "expensive music ... [and] a dozen

fashionable women exhibit[ing] themselves in a series of pictures” expertly organized by the distinguished painter Paul Morpeth (103). Although seemingly harmless, given how women of the upper class loved to dress up in the latest fashions and throw galas to cut through the ennui of their lives of leisure, a more sinister symbolic message lurks below the party’s surface. Unlike the stereotypical social get-togethers of the upper class—epitomized by Judy Trenor’s leisurely Bellomont gatherings—that involve little more than bridge, lavish meals and idle conversation, the evening of the *tableaux vivants* is different in the sense that the women who participate are not subjects who consume the evening’s entertainment but rather objects of entertainment for all other attendees.

The objectification of each participant is most clearly apparent during the actual performance of the *tableaux vivants* in front of a live audience, but Wharton’s use of symbolic language to describe Lily even as the women plan the event strongly hints at Lily’s status as a social commodity and *object d’art*. As Lily participates in what surely guarantees to be the event of the season, Wharton describes her as both “in her element” and in possession of a “vivid plastic sense . . . nurtured on no higher food than dress-making and upholstery” (103). This description dehumanizes Lily from the very beginning of the event first in the way her “element” is not one of personhood, but rather one of “plastic.” Defined at the time of *The House of Mirth*’s publication as “able to be moulded or modified; impressionable, pliable; susceptible to influence; fluid, flexible,” the link made between “plastic” and Lily acknowledges her ability to adapt flexibly to different social contexts, but also strongly suggests that others find her identity to be malleable as well (OED). The parallel that Wharton draws between Lily and plastic frankly suggests that Lily and the way she chooses to live are elastic, yet superficial. This makes a great deal of sense when one considers that Lily’s entire upbringing involves her fulfillment of

goals that were set by her mother's expectation that Lily use her looks to regain her family's lost fortune. Lily's mother presumably contends with the same demands of the high society marriage market as Lily up until she weds Mr. Bart, so it is likely that Lily's mother predetermines her path through life even before the family's bankruptcy since the older generation tends to hand down their culture to those of the generation who follow. In her pursuit of these expectations, Lily occupies the role of a living plastic molded first by her mother to accept the values of the upper class and, consequentially, is easily used by her high society friends to advance their own schemes and social agendas.

Even with her desire to abstain from the shallow social existence that has chewed her up and spit her out of its inner-circles and ever-changing alliances, Lily has remained unchanged in form and ambition, just like plastic that has set. The relation that the word "plastic" has to the idea of an unchanged form is even more curious when the language of the passage "nurtured on no higher food than dress-making and upholstery" is taken into further consideration. The implication that Lily's sustenance is the art of sewing and nothing else gives the impression that Lily is not actually eating during the course of planning and putting on this event. In this way it would appear that Lily is starving herself in order to fit a standard of beauty she feels she must convey at the *tableaux vivants* if she is to achieve her desired position in society. Here it seems that Lily equates her beauty with her social value. By symbolically starving her own desires to attain personal fulfillment, Lily's thoughts and actions show that she continues to follow the false ideology that her mother instills in her during her youth. Raised to consider her beauty and social graces as her primary marketable assets, Lily has carefully calculated how to use the *tableaux vivants* party to attract a suitably wealthy husband and thus improve her social rank.

Lily's attempt at social manipulation, however, is an indication of her rejection of the more grounded lifestyle that Selden promotes and that she secretly desires.

In the same way that Lily is able to control and manipulate her social environment, most of the high society women have learned how to use the talents and proclivities of their rivals to their own advantage. Even though Lily has fallen somewhat out of favor with her social set by the time she begins to help plan the *tableaux vivants*, the upper-class women who are the event's hostesses warmly welcome Lily's participation because her abilities in "dress-making and upholstery" endow her with added value and simultaneously provide the event itself with a source of free labor (Wharton 103). Unlike the other women, Lily does not earn her place as a member of the *tableaux vivants* cast through social capital but instead because of her ability to work with her hands. Although the ability to perform meaningful work with one's hands stereotypically aligns Lily with members of the laboring class, the painting she chooses to pose as betrays her ambition to steal the show with her beauty, attract the attention of another wealthy suitor, and thus traverse the social classes to obtain a far more advantaged state.

The painting Lily chooses for the *tableaux vivants*—Sir Joshua Reynolds's portrait *Joanna Leigh, Mrs. Richard Bennett Lloyd (b.1758) Inscribing a Tree* (Fig. 1.)—is by no means an accident. Lily's decision to pose as a voluptuous, cleavage-baring female subject caught in the act of carving her husband's name into a tree sends a clear message to the audience that Miss Bart no longer wishes to be unwed. The form-fitting cut of the dress, the strong lines accentuating the legs, and the display of skin around the feet and ankles purposefully means to create a sense of sexual desire in the male observers. Lily's careful selection of this painting in particular, as opposed to her initial "impulse to show herself in a splendid setting ... [such as] Tiepolo's Cleopatra"—a choice that would have required her to exchange her normally fair

complexion for something darker, duskier, and less in line with her normal representation of self—once again indicates the strategic manner in which Lily attempts to achieve her goal of marriage (106). Reynolds’ portrait is especially appropriate to Lily’s purpose because of how it places her within a context that is familiar rather than exotic, which allows Lily to highlight the aesthetic appeal of her beauty with a minimal level of background distractions. While Lily’s rivals choose to pose within the context of scenes that are busy and garish by comparison, Lily’s identification with a simpler *objet d’art* is a calculated move meant to help her stand apart in the eyes of the audience.



Fig. 1. Reynolds, Sir Joshua. *Joanna Leigh, Mrs. Richard Bennett Lloyd (b.1758) Inscribing a Tree*. 1775-1776. The Rothschild Collection, Waddesdon Manor.

Just as Lily has planned, the scene she contributes to the *tableaux vivants* is the one that generates the greatest reaction. Everyone in the audience of the *tableaux vivants* knows both that the name Mrs. Lloyd was caught in the act of carving into the tree was her husband’s and that Lily herself was looking for a husband. By putting two and two together, the men in the audience were sure to spare at least a brief moment indulging in the fantasy of what it would be like for Lily to carve their name instead of Lloyd’s. The “unanimous ‘Oh!’ of the spectators” that arises from the audience as they see Lily’s pose and later lines murmured by onlookers such as “I never knew till tonight what an outline Lily has” indicate that she has expertly displayed her beauty (106 and 109). There is, however, a major problem inherent in Lily’s temporary moment of triumph: in her attempt to emulate a standard of beauty found in an idealized piece of

art with no other purpose in mind than to improve her already superficially-inclined marriage prospects, Lily overtly aligns herself with the commodity and shows that she is a victim of an ideology that detracts from what makes her human. Even though the compliments Lily receives flatter her, they have everything to do with her outer physical appearance and betray in the men a sense of ownership over the sight of her person. Additionally, by taking such unhealthy measures—implicitly starving herself—to live up to an upper class standard of beauty for the sole purpose of improving her already superficially inclined marriage prospects, Lily further demonstrates that she sees herself as little more than a commodity. The *tableaux vivants* ultimately function as a symbolic representation of the way that women of the upper class in general and Lily in particular are, for all intents and purposes, nothing more than objects in the eyes of high society.

Now, as a fully realized *object d'art* in the eyes of her upper class friends, Lily's denial of the experience of real, deep human emotion is both more apparent and demonstrative of her dehumanized condition. Utterly awestruck by Lily's performance in the *tableaux vivants*, Selden is determined to speak to Lily at his first available opportunity and finds her as she basks "in a warm atmosphere of praise, in which her beauty expanded like a flower in sunlight [and] she cared less for the quality of the admiration she received than for its quantity" (108). Here the reader sees that Lily derives her happiness indiscriminately from the empty compliments and flatteries of her admirers instead of from her own individual merit. For Lily to feel as if her social success is real, other members of society must sanction it first. In the afterglow of the *tableaux vivants* Lily is unconcerned with *who* expresses their admiration for her as long as she is admired and has another chance to secure a suitor: "If Selden had approached a moment or two sooner he would have seen her turning on Ned Van Alstyne and George Dorset the look he

had dreamed of capturing for himself. . . . finding the expected look in her eye, he had the satisfaction of supposing he had kindled it” (108). The superficiality of Lily’s social interactions may be seen here in how whatever “look” Selden thinks he sees Lily giving him—whether he thinks it is love, desire, pleasure, or something else entirely—is one which she has given to numerous other male acquaintances no more than a moment or two earlier. Lily’s ability to so freely share an expression of intense passion through her employment of a “look” that one typically reserves only for the most intimate of moments cheapens the overall affect of Lily’s emotions. Lily’s “look” does not faze members of high society like Van Alstyne and Dorset who already look at Lily as a commodity, but to Selden, one of the few characters in the novel to interact with and recognize Lily as an actual person, the expression she shows represents an intensely personal emotion that connects the two of them.

Once Selden makes a connection between Lily’s “look” and the feelings he supposes she has for him, he escorts Lily to the garden where they stand and accept “the unreality of the scene as a part of their own dream-like sensations” (108). Yet again the *tableaux vivants* event and the scenes that surround it are described in terms which make the occasion seem illusory and fake; Wharton’s use of the word “unreality” is a recognition of the situation’s overtly superficial nature, which makes high society itself unreal because of the way it endows appearances with greater importance than the material realities of the people themselves or their actions. Whereas commodities are most often symbols of superficial values, natural settings tend to imbue scenes with a sense of realness and sincerity. During the weekend at Bellomont when Lily had ruined her chances with Gryce, she and Selden had gone for a long walk into the country where they could be away from everyone else and speak freely to each other. In this moment Selden attempts to recreate that initial encounter by drawing Lily away to the garden, a location which is

as close as he can get to a natural landscape. It is in this location, which serves as a liminal space between the natural realm and the carefully maintained and organized commodified realm, that Selden tells Lily that “the only way [he] can help [her] is by loving [her]” (109). After a moment of silence their lips meet and they kiss, but Lily pulls away and catches “[Selden’s] hand and [presses] it for a moment against her cheek” (109). Lily obviously feels some attraction toward Selden as well as a latent desire to inhabit a more natural realm with him, but her following response demonstrates that she is too firmly entrenched in the world of high society to take the necessary step to be with him. Lily replies, “‘Ah, love me, love me—but don’t tell me so!’ ... [and disappears] in the brightness of the room beyond” (109). This moment connects Lily’s lack of human feeling with her place in the material-centric world of high society. She rejects the love of someone she really does seem to care for in favor of the commodified realm in which she hopes to find her version of success.

Part of Lily’s reluctance to break free of the mold her mother prescribes has legitimate reasons which relate to her prospects in the world as an unmarried woman without the independent financial means capable of providing for all of her wants. Although Lily could feasibly follow the example of Selden’s cousin—Gerty—and lead a simpler life where she consumes less and does not follow the dictates of fashion, she has been part of high society for so long that she believes she is incapable of independent living and its inherent shabbiness. The reality, though, is that even if Lily could reconcile herself to living a simpler life, the time which she has spent as a member of the high society crowd has left her poorly equipped to deal with and handle the world of ordinary people. Because Lily has always had servants to light her hearth, make her meals, wash her clothes and so forth, to her, the thought of life without luxury is unfathomable. While the ordinary denizens of the world have to make products or perform a

useful service to make ends meet, the only skills Lily has are her ability to manipulate social situations and what she supposes to be her knack for creating fashionable items. Lily's lack of marketable skills leaves her extremely ill-equipped for the moment when she runs out of money and can no longer rely on her society friends for help.

When Lily's circumstances finally force her into the world of the working-class, she discovers that she is all but unable to cope with her new conditions: "after anxious enquiry and much deliberation, Mrs. Fisher and Gerty ... united in their effort to help [Lily] ... and [placed] her in the work-room of Mme. Regina's renowned millinery establishment [after] considerable negotiation [since] Mme. Regina had a strong prejudice against untrained assistance" (222). Even though Lily's friends help her secure respectable employment, her life of leisure is replaced by daily drudgery. Lily's entry level position at Mme. Regina's well regarded workshop at least implies the ability to perform semi-skilled labor, yet Lily, who has never worked a day in her life, obtains the position through Mrs. Fisher's influence alone. Despite Lily's friends always admiring her skillful hat-trimming, she soon finds that she is entirely unsuited to the trade of millinery—or any other trade—and is unable to keep up with the demands of her work. While Lily begins her new job with a somewhat elitist attitude where she "hoped to be received as [her co-workers'] equal, and perhaps before long to show herself their superior by deftness of touch," she most often receives critique from her supervisors who make remarks such as, "'Look at those spangles Miss Bart—every one of 'em sewed on crooked'" (222 and 219). Lily enters her tenure at the workshop fully expecting to put the finishing touches on hats, but finds that she is unable even to do preparatory work. When she is not asked back to work the following fashion season, Lily feels as though she is effectively out of options and has nowhere else to turn for meaningful employment.

Lily's story begins when she is at her social apex, certain of her marriage prospects and ability to live comfortably. However, Lily finds her upper-class upbringing renders her useless when she is forced to work to support herself. At the point of her narrative when she loses her job at Mme. Regina's, Lily has depleted all of her options because society will not take her back unless she unwillingly blackmails another woman at Selden's expense and she cannot perform profitable work because she has never taken the time to develop any productive skills. Lily's pride, moreover, will not allow her to rely on the charity of what friends she has left any longer, so she finally decides to commit suicide with what she knows to be an overdose of laudanum that will most probably give her "a sleep without waking" (250). Lily's early introduction to the values of high society teaches her to deny her true desires and instead to treat herself as a saleable commodity available to the highest respectable bidder on the marriage market. Cast out of her gilded world, Lily finds she is entirely unable to live a productive working class life and sadly looks to suicide as a last resort.

Despite the various levels of illusion and tragedy that guide her narrative, there is undoubtedly a kernel of reality in Lily's situation—as a human being, her readers expect that she needs food, water, shelter, and something to live for—but the simulacra-tainted norms of high society cloud her notion of how to achieve these needs. Lily yearns to create, but lacks the economic capital to decorate and the productive skill necessary to work in millinery. Since she is unable to do either, Lily puts her energy into using her own form to cultivate aesthetic appeal while she still remains under the illusion that she can attract a wealthy husband through artful means. However, Lily's class ascension is improbable from the start because she refuses to settle for anyone who does not meet her cultural and economic standards. Living for so long with the illusion that society will abide her presence for as long as she needs sets Lily up for her

inevitable failure when she abruptly must work for her living and realizes she lacks the skills necessary to do so. In this way Wharton identifies high society and the commodity fetishism that structures one's experience of it as a false reality that is both harmful and limiting to the subjects who wholly buy into its purported values.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Just as Wilde and Wharton's respective protagonists live comparable lives of indulgence as they pursue an aesthetic mode of living within the trappings of commodity culture, so too do they die in similarly self-destructive manners. Dorian's death—which occurs when he attempts to destroy his portrait, but instead leaves behind an unrecognizably deformed body that the magically restored portrait looks over—is an active display of violence against the self. Lily's death, meanwhile, is the passive and pitiful result of an opiate overdose that whisks her off to an endless sleep. Despite Dorian and Lily's minor differences, the manner of each character's death is in accordance with his or her respective identity and comes at an appropriate time within his or her narrative arc. More specifically, Dorian and Lily die at points in their stories when they recognize that their posturing as living art has proven to be unsuccessful.

In his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin recognizes that reproduction has traditionally been a necessary part of the artistic process. However, at a time when even the most complex art has become easily reproducible through the use of mechanical innovations, the status of art itself becomes problematic because the ease of reproduction potentially removes the aura of art's historical time and place from the imaginary equation that determines its relative socio-economic value (222 and 225). Put another way, once a piece of art loses the quality that makes it unique, it is only a matter of time before someone calls its status as art into question. While the reproducible object may still maintain the same beautiful outward appearance—and therefore its exhibition value—its cultural value depends in large part on the ceremonial forces that shape it in the first place. In the same way that Dorian and Lily's respective perceptions of reality are fragmented and obscured by the

various levels of simulacra that shape their lives, each character's value within the art of living framework exists on different planes as well. The recognition of the various fragmentations in their respective lives is the force that finally drives Dorian and Lily down the path of self-destruction.

Considering Dorian's demise first, his attempt to destroy his cursed portrait happens following an experiment in changing his ways. After behaving in a manner most wicked for the majority of the book, Dorian thinks that by not leading a young woman on and thereby not destroying her reputation, he can regain some of his lost purity. Instead of encountering an at least less-blemished visage in the portrait, he finds that there was "no change, save in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite" (Wilde 211). Dorian has gone so far down the path of corruption that any real change in his inner-person—therefore the outer portrait—is highly improbable. The version of Dorian who readers see at the end of the novel is unrecognizable compared to the Dorian of the novel's early chapters; whereas once Dorian is an impressionable young man who inspires an artist's best work, his experience transforms him into a deceptively corrupt monster by its conclusion. While Dorian at one point can rightfully claim the status of art because he is both beautiful and his own unique person, imitation shapes the remainder of his life after he meets Lord Henry. The portrait that Basil produces in the first place is an imitation of Dorian's physical form, the influence of Lord Henry and the poisonous yellow-bound book then lead to Dorian's reproduction of someone else's ideal mode of living, and Dorian's wish to remain young and beautiful finally transfers the aura of his actions and disposition away from his person to the portrait. Dorian possesses a seemingly unique outer aura, but he realizes that it does not and will never again correspond to his true being and value, so there is no logical conclusion other than self-destruction.

Lily's death, similarly, comes as a result of her realization that she, too, is not meaningfully unique. For her entire life, Lily learns to manipulate the aesthetic nature of her material surroundings to her advantage as she alters her identity to perform the role most likely to help her succeed within the context of the marriage plot. Although it seems as if there are moments when she, too, can make a fair claim to the status of art, even her most triumphant moment is a reproduction of someone else's work. What is more, with each of Lily's slip-ups in her pursuit of a husband, she slips down another rung on the social ladder and learns the real extent to which society women are all of a socially constructed type who depend very little on any unique qualities of their own. When Lily finally must work for her living, she sees that she is no different from any other woman of high society and that her lack of real, non-ornamental skills makes a successful working-class life impossible. The aura that Lily thinks she has is ultimately only of an imitative quality that depends on economic capital to survive. Unable to keep up the illusion of her aura without capital and unwilling to stoop to the unethical means necessary to possess that capital, Lily's death with at least some honor is the final avenue available to her.

Even though there is a gap of fifteen years and the world's second largest ocean between each author and the production of their respective novel, it comes as no surprise that Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wharton's *The House of Mirth* are part of the same ongoing ideological conversation. Each author is concerned not only with aesthetic philosophy and design, but also with the problematic state of art as it relates to a commodity culture that exists within the construct of late nineteenth and early twentieth century industrial capitalism. Considering Wilde's and Wharton's respective protagonists as they traverse the often blurry nexus of identity, art, agency, and the commodity itself shows that although Wilde asserts his

literature has no moral and Wharton seems to have participated willingly in upper-class society, the two authors express real anxiety regarding how anyone can remain unique in a culture wherein social class dictates any individual's material desires and the life choices that are available. Neither author appears to offer any constructive solution for the issues their novels depict, but each does an exceptional job of explicating the negative impact of the social forces of unwary imitation and conspicuous consumption that create the social ills in the first place. Although the conditions that each novel depicts are similar, there is no such thing as an identical scenario and it is the task of the responsible reader to break down and interpret any given assemblage on a case-by-case basis in order to see what forces potentially cause a problem and what solutions are available.

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