WOMEN ON THE MARKET: 
A STUDY OF THE HOUSE OF MIRTH BY EDITH WHARTON

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Introduction

In The House of Mirth (1905), Edith Wharton shows how women, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tended to be exploited despite their social class. The novel centers on a female protagonist, Lily Bart, who is a beautiful upper-class woman. Lily inherited very little money from her parents who died after her father failed in business. She has no means of earning her own living. The only way to remain in her upper-class world is to marry a person of great fortune. She is, however, already twenty-nine years old. Should she fail to marry a desirable partner, she will not only lose her social position but her economic base as well. In this paper, I will explore the economic conditions of women living in this capitalist society, focusing on Lily Bart.

Though working class women were financially independent to some degree at this time, they engaged in trivial work in exchange for their low wages. It was difficult for them to gain employment in desirable working places. Even if fortunate enough to be hired in a more desirable position, the female labor force was exploited.

Aside from Lily, the novel shows other types of female characters in relation to their economic conditions. For example, Wharton depicts lower-class women at a millinery establishment where Lily, without possessing the requisite skills, attempts in vain to earn money. Gerty Farish, Lily’s friend and her spiritual supporter, strives to help working-class women. However, the funds for her work come from other people’s money. Lily, for example, donates to Gerty’s charity work before she faces her own financial disaster. Nettie Struther, who was abandoned by her former lover, is saved by Lily’s contribution to Gerty. Thanks to Lily, she is able to marry a working class man and have a baby. She is a figure typical of Wharton’s era; that is, she has no work earning money in society but engages in her “work” of reproduction at home.

In short, many types of female characters in the novel do not have a direct relationship to work, which would produce a certain amount of capital. Thus, they have to depend on someone, like a husband, to support them financially in order to obtain the necessities of life.

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As the story develops, Lily Bart’s living conditions worsen. She has her inheritance from her parents but no skills in order to earn her own money. Her situation is the typical miserable destiny of all women who never marry or find means to produce something in this society. But more importantly, an upper-class woman such as Lily takes it for granted that marriage to a
wealthy man is her only guarantee for the future, as her mother so often told her from childhood.

In this upper-class society, people do not earn money with their own hands. As Carol Wershoven has observed: "Lily Bart is a woman who has been trained from childhood to work for one thing: to use her beauty as a tool to gain social acceptance and the financial security that an approved and wealthy marriage will bring." In her society, marriage is considered as woman's most important vocation.

Thorstein Veblen points out that the main occupation of women in the leisure class is to consume and show off their husband's wealth. In another sense, men also use them to achieve their status quo in society. For example, Simon Rosedale, a wealthy Jew, who wants to become part of the upper class in New York, proposes to Lily not because he loves her but because he needs "the right woman to spend [on]" and show off his great accumulation of wealth.

If women in this capitalistic society have no means to earn money, they cannot survive unless they get married. Therefore, Lily tries to hide her predilection for smoking and gambling from the eyes of wealthy Percy Gryce, her first candidate for a husband. When she discovers that Percy is proud of his collection of Americana books, she attempts to become informed about Americana, something she is not interested in. She feigns interest in order to attract Percy's attention. She also goes to church to demonstrate to him she is a "pious" Christian and will be a devout wife.

In the process of getting a husband who can guarantee upper-class economic security, she is treated by men as an object. Her personality is measured by men's standards as if she were a commodity on the market. Luce Irigaray says, "The price of the articles, in fact, no longer comes from their natural form, from their bodies, their language, but from the fact that they mirror the need/desire for exchanges among men." In this market, Lily's exchange value is her beauty. "Lily understood that beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success other arts are required" (39). Or, she "liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste" (35).

Her exchange value, her beauty, is measured, for example, in the scene of the tableau vivant. On the stage, she becomes an artistic object, enacting Mrs. Lloyd, a figure in a Sir Joshua Reynolds painting. The audience values her outer beauty but not her inner self. After the show, a member of the audience offers his impression to a friend, saying: "Really, you know, I'm no prude, but when it comes to a girl standing there [on the stage] as if she was up at auction..." (157).

It is in this way that she realizes her value and uses it effectively to attract someone who will possess her as an artistic commodity. Gradually, however, she loses her inner self for her value on the marriage market because women are expected to meet buyers' demands. Irigaray

1) Carol Wershoven, The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton (New Jersey: Associated UP, 1982) 43.
2) Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth 1905 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969) 175. All further references are contained in the text in this essay.
3) Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One (New York: Cornell UP, 1986) 181.
notes, "A commodity—a woman—is divided into two irreconcilable 'bodies'; her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values."^4^)

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Once, Lily Bart "was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race [for marriage] and make an independent life for herself" (39). However, she gives up looking for means because she asks herself, "What manner of life would it be?" (39) and she cannot find an answer to lead the respectable life she had before her father went bankrupt, that is, no way to become independent of a man.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in *Women and Economics* (1898), insists on the urgent necessity of women's economic independence. According to Gilman, the economic relationship governs the sexual relationship. However, she does point out that women's economic independence is hard to achieve because economic progress "is almost exclusively masculine. Such economic processes as women have been allowed to exercise are of the earlier and most primitive kind."^5^)

Lily's tragic fall is caused mainly by two events. Firstly, she refuses to play cards with the other upper-class members staying at Gus Trenor's country house. The Trenors are members of the upper class and Lily's acquaintances. She gradually amuses herself by playing, thinking it "was one of the taxes she had to pay for their prolonged hospitality" (26).

The other event comes about through her gambling. She doesn't realize that she owes a great deal until the amount reaches beyond her ability to pay. Lily's gambling debts lead her to another debt. She asks Gus to invest her money without understanding the workings of the stock market: "She was too genuinely ignorant of the manipulations of the stock-market to understand [Gus's] technical explanations, or even perhaps to perceive that certain points in them were slurred. ... She understood only that her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without risk to herself" (85). Making deals with Gus, she realizes there is a power-relationship between Gus and herself, the one who engages in the economic system and controls the money and the other who obeys the economic discourse.

However, she does not dare to plunge herself into the system: "[She] wished she had a clearer notion of the exact nature of the transaction which seemed to have put her in [Gus's] power; but her mind shrank from any unusual application, and she was always helplessly puzzled by figures" (115-116).

In addition, she knows nothing of the system of investment, the stock exchange, nor of the current economic situation which worsens. Thus, her disaster comes about through her ignorance of the economic sphere controlled by men. Facing precipitous financial difficulties, Lily says to Rosedale, who proposes to lend her money, "I can never again be sure of understanding the plainest business arrangement" (299). What she learns from her transactions with Gus is there is an economic aspect unfamiliar to her and untouchable.

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4) Ibid., 180.
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As we discussed in the first chapter, women at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century as represented in The House of Mirth did not have economic independence; consequently, their reproductive function was exploited by the male-dominated society. Marriage was the most suitable and desirable way to guarantee future security. As a result, they were forced to accept their role as a 'commodity' on the marriage market. Let us examine more closely how men in this system exploited women as possessions in another manner.

Gus Trenor in The House of Mirth takes advantage of Lily Bart's lack of investment knowledge and makes her believe he has invested her income. She believes she has transacted business with him. However, he does not use her money but gives his money to her. She in turn wants to return the same amount of cash, believing she has business dealings with him. Even Lily, with little business expertise, knows of cash transactions. To her surprise, he asks her to repay her debt with her sexuality, which means he asks her to be his lover. If only he pays the price for it, he thinks he can deal with her as he wishes. It is interesting to note that the origin of Lily's family name, Bart, is, as Linda Wagner-Martin points out: "possibly suggestive of the word barter, the medium of exchange for people without currency." [my emphasis] He persuades her to pay off her debt not in currency but with her sexuality. In Gus's asking for Lily's sexuality, we see an aspect of society in Lily's time which shows us how men regarded women's sexuality as a commodity.

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Friedrich Engels justifies prostitution by tracing four stages of the origin of the family, each relating to sexual discourse. At the first and second stages, there are respective rules prohibiting sexual relationships between parents and children or brothers and sisters. Except for the incest taboo, unrestricted sexual freedom is allowed. At the third stage, people may still have several sexual partners but, compared with the first and second stages, their sexual freedom is restricted. So the first form of prostitution is used to fulfill their frustrated sexual desires at this stage.

Whereas in the earlier forms of the family, men never lacked women but, on the contrary, had too many rather too few, women had now become scarce and highly sought after. Hence it is with the pairing marriage that there begins the capture and purchase of women---widespread symptoms, but no more than symptoms, of the much deeper change that had occurred.  

The last stage is 'the Monogamous Family,' which "was the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions---on the victory of private property over primi-
tive, natural communal property.\(^8\) Sexual freedom is restricted in all four stages.

The family form is based on economic ideas of inheritance, not on love. Moreover, man's innate preference for sexual freedom, which is explained as one of our essential instincts since the first family form came into being, is never done away with; "The old comparative freedom of sexual intercourse by no means disappeared with the victory of pairing marriage or even of monogamous marriage.\(^9\) Therefore, Engels continues, it takes for granted that man's innate desire for sexual freedom has brought the professional prostitution and adultery to the monogamous society.\(^10\) Engels says that neglected wives, whose husbands are devoted to the prostitution system, try to fulfill their sexual desires through adultery. Sigmund Freud says, "If civilization imposes such great sacrifices ... on man's sexuality..., we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization."\(^11\) Therefore, in the monogamous society, people have had to look for ways to fulfill their restricted desires.

It is noteworthy that Engels realizes that both men and women have had the same preference for sexual freedom. However, the same sexual desires appear in two different forms in the monogamous society; that is, 'the professional prostitute' is for men while 'adultery' serves for women. Engels's explanation implies that there is an inequality here, an economic disparity between men and women. Why do men and women deal with their restricted sexual desires in different ways? And what exactly is the difference between 'prostitution' and 'adultery'?

The capitalistic society distinguishes between men who have money and women who do not have enough money or the means to earn money. Men pay for prostitution while women, on the other hand, do not pay for adultery as they have no money with which to fulfill their sexual desires. As a result, prostitution has the potential to generate capital. On the other hand, adultery, reflecting women's economic disadvantage, cannot support an industry as there is no money in adultery.

Prostitution has influenced men's attitude toward women, regarding them as a commodity, to be controlled by money. In other words, while women cannot regard men as a commodity because of a lack of money, men have related to women as possessions because of prostitution. Because of the influence of prostitution, it is said that "more than ever before, women were perceived as objects and images to purchase, judged by their sexual talents, and measured in terms of monetary exchange and value."\(^12\) It comes as a surprise to see that Engels does not point out this distinction that 'professional prostitution' and 'adultery' are caused by economic inequality between the sexes. However, he does show us other aspects of economic inequality between the infrastructure and the superstructure.

\(^8\) Ibid., 95.
\(^9\) Ibid., 96.
\(^10\) Ibid., 97-98. Gilman also points out the relationship between monogamous marriage and prostitution;
"monogamous marriage has been growing to be the accepted form of sex-union--prostitution--we have accepted, and called a 'social necessity.' We also call it 'the social evil'" (Gilman, 28).
\(^12\) Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros* (New York: Norton, 1992) 141.
It is estimated that there were tens of thousands of prostitutes in 1908 in New York. However, Laura Hapke points out that even daring writers did not directly deal with the actual situation and did not note that prostitution met the needs of society, because these writers were wary of "increased censorship and the unwritten laws of the genteel literary marketplace." The so-called Victorian genteel tradition concealed the fact that the male-dominated society formed "a multimillion dollar business" of prostitution as well as "a new sexual subculture" in which men paid money for women's sexuality.

With "the expansion of elevated railroads after 1870 and the opening of the subways in 1904," prostitution was no longer limited to the downtown area. It spread to all parts of the city so that everyone could see prostitutes soliciting customers in public places such as parks, or at the doors of theaters or the Metropolitan Opera House. Added to the geographical expansion of prostitution, customers from various social classes had relations with prostitutes. Their social classes ranged from working class to the upper class, of which Gus Trenor was a member. It is clear that prostitution was not a 'sub'culture of the time but rather a pervasive culture.

Various types of men engaged in such "public leisure and commercial exchange" of women's sexuality. Timothy J. Gilfoyle points out that women's sexuality organized a huge industry which could produce considerable capital, saying that "as New York gave birth to a new industrial economy, its reverberations not only transformed sexuality into a new commodity but turned prostitution into a distinctive part of the urban female economy."

One of the characteristics of prostitution at this period is that it grew and prospered under certain capitalistic ideas. First, like other commodities on sale, prostitution expanded through

13) Ibid., 58.
14) Laura Hapke, Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction, 1885-1917, (Ohio: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1989) 1. This reform movement was reflected not only by the rising number of prostitutes but also by a general tendency toward the falling of contemporary morality, reflected also by the rising divorce rates (Hapke, 10).
15) It is pointed out that even in works written by female writers such as Louisa May Alcott, Work (1873) and Harriet Beecher Stowe, We and Our Neighbors (1875), young prostitutes appear as minor characters. Some male writers such as Stephen Crane, Harold Frederic and David Graham Phillips depict the prostitutes in some distorted way: "In exploring so daring a literary subject, however, these novelists inevitably played out their own late-Victorian conflicts about sexuality.... They 'solve' the problem of depicting her in all her complexity by removing her from the knowledge and often the consequences of carnal experience. She becomes in effect desexualized" (Hapke, 1-2).
16) Hapke, 1.
17) Gilfoyle, 124.
18) For roughly a century, from 1820 to 1920, new sexual subcultures of prostitutes and 'sporting men,' organized around an 'underground' economy, grew and expanded" (Gilfoyle, 18).
19) Gilfoyle, 199.
20) Ibid., 204, 205 and 214.
21) Ibid., 198.
22) Ibid., 98.
23) Ibid., 75.
the exploitation of the media: "Publishers, bookstores, and even small newspaper vendors attempted to exploit the popular demand for tempestuous tales of moral turpitude." 24 Women's sexuality was proclaimed, much as any other commodity. Second, a business of prostitution was run, following a hierarchical order. In most cases, a madam, who had been a prostitute and earned funds to establish a business or run a brothel, was the employer. The madam hired employees, or prostitutes. In some cases, a man was in charge—a pimp rather than a madam. "By the mid nineteenth century, [the brothel] was a highly specialized vehicle of business with its own hierarchy and systems of operation."

25 Not men's seduction but economic hardships caused by low wages for female labor or massive unemployment, led many women to become prostitutes. Though "they did not regard themselves as fallen women or white slaves," 27 it is obvious that they were victims of the capitalist society. Apparently, however, they seemed to be independent of the male-dominant system because they themselves could earn money by choosing their work. Nevertheless, they were still exploited by a capitalistic system of prostitution.

Conclusion

There were many women who did not have the skills to achieve financial independence from men around the turn of the century. Focusing on Lily Bart in The House of Mirth, Edith Wharton reveals how some women were able to live in the society of the time if they possessed the ability to earn money. As Gilman points out, "we are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation." 28 Lily has to be dependent on men either by marrying a man who will provide her living expenses or by using her sexuality as a lover, such as Gus, who also can provide her with money.

As we have discussed, in Wharton's time, the economic power relationships forced women to sell their sexuality. For Lily, the only way to live in society was either to become a possession through marriage or a commodity selling her sexuality. Since Lily was in actuality a commodity either way, her exchange value—her beauty or marriageable age—was determined by men.

Women-as-commodities are thus subject to a schism that divides them into the categories of usefulness and exchange value; into matter-body and an envelope that is precious but impenetrable, ungraspable, and not susceptible to appropriation by women themselves; into

24 Ibid., 132.
25 It should also be added that "By World War I, it was nearly extinct. But for nearly a century, the brothel remained the ubiquitous symbol of commercialized sex in America's leading metropolis" (Gilfoyle, 163).
26 Gilfoyle, 55.
27 Ibid., 284.
28 Gilman, 5.
private use and social use.\textsuperscript{29}

As we have also discussed, Engels's idea, which sees women's role as a by-product of commercial prostitution is representative of male debate; women's exploitation as a commodity tends to be tacitly justified and obscured by the economic power relation. It is said that the "exploitation of the matter that has been sexualized female is so integral a part of our sociocultural horizon that there is no way to interpret it except within this horizon."\textsuperscript{30} In this sense, Edith Wharton, in \textit{The House of Mirth}, succeeds in showing us what has been going on under the horizon--that women were treated as commodities by men.

\textsuperscript{29} Irigaray, 176.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 171.