

## Social Ostracism in Wharton's Fiction

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Wharton's heroine, Lily, is born into a patriarchal environment where she happens to challenge its values unconsciously in her search for material emancipation and security in high society. According to the male-dominated culture of the time, a woman ought to marry to secure herself a stable place in a man's house as his wife and bearer of his children. However, because Lily's upbringing blinds her to the harsh realities in pursuit of life's comforts, she has not acquired the male values of self-reliance and economic independence. Her parents have trained her for submission to the patriarchal subject for material benefits and security. However, in her entry into the society, she unconsciously challenges its values in her "intrusion" into the "spaces previously considered the spheres of men" as Goldman aptly puts it (71). These "intrusions" into the "spheres of men" cause her eventual ostracism from the society she struggles to be part of.

What then are some of the intrusions that Wharton's heroine unconsciously violates in society? Firstly, she has acquired vices unacceptable in the male-dominated culture. She smokes cigarettes and gambles at dinners. In her world, smoking and gambling are spheres only for men she defies. When Bertha asks for cigarettes, she gets tight-lipped about having them because she is conscious of Gryce's presence in the train. Although the other characters know that Lily smokes, she suddenly becomes careful by lying so that Gryce will not know she smokes or her chances for marriage with him will fail. Also, Lily's passion for gambling is a taboo for an unmarried woman without means. Eventually she loses Gryce as the outcome of Bertha's malicious talk about Lily's gambling addictions. He is a conservative person who has acquired the traditional values of the patriarchal subject.

Another intrusion into a man's sphere that Lily challenges is when she asks for assistance from a married man for investments in Wall Street (105) in her desire for economic independence. Trenor's business acuity is well-known in high society. He readily acquiesces to Lily's request for business deals with him because he expects something in return from her. He must have thought that he has power over a single woman in need of funds. Trenor is attracted to Lily sexually and her asking him for business investments awakens his desire for attention and sexual pleasure he does not receive from his wife. So in Lily's society, she gets the perception that she is asking for financial favours from Trenor because they are in an illicit relationship. Even Selden has the same perception which is somehow confirmed by him when he sees both of them in Trenor's house one late night. Rosedale and Grace are also aware of Lily as recipient of funds from Trenor.

Another instance of Lily's intrusion into a man's sphere is when she is forced to see a married man for an afternoon walk and talk in a park. Naturally, they become the talk of the town. Lily is pure in her intentions to see Trenor because she merely wants to appease him when he complains that she spends less time with him. He is so insistent on seeing her because she receives funds from him. Lily expresses her resolve to pay him back when she can already secure the needed funds. However, Trenor does not exactly expect Lily to pay the total amount of cash she receives from him. He expects her payment in another form which suggests the physical gratification of his need for a woman's warmth and availability. On the other hand, he imagines that Lily is just using him to secure the needed funds:

Ah – you’ll borrow from Selden or Rosedale – and take your chances of fooling them as you’ve fooled me! Unless – unless you’ve settled your other scores already – and I’m the only one left out in the cold! (134)

Nevertheless, the perception of the society about their meeting in a park strengthens speculations about them as a couple.

Another example for the social ostracism of Lily is her long status as unmarried woman which implies that she lives a solitary life without the benefit of security from the patriarchal subject. Society’s goal for the single woman is domesticity and male submission. Her actions therefore seem far from submission to traditional domesticity because she is still unmarried at a ripe age of twenty-nine. Lily’s free status alarms her friends, and their assistance for her entrance into the marketplace of marriage fails. Her inability to get married may also mean that she refuses the traditional female role because she is incapable of caring for a child and husband herself because she is accustomed to being cared for always. This is illustrated when she happens to see Nettie’s changed situation from a sickly woman to someone fulfilled domestically because she acquires herself a husband and a child despite her life of survival in the tenement. Lily believes that the truth of one’s existence is in life’s continuity through a loving husband and a child. She thinks of Nettie’s stability and permanence despite the absence of material comforts in her solid family:

The poor little working-girl who had found strength to gather up the fragments of her life, and build herself a shelter with them, seemed to Lily to have reached the central truth of existence. It was a meagre enough life, on the grim edge of poverty, with scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance, but it had the frail audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built on the edge of a cliff – a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss. (292)

The other reason for Lily’s ostracism is that she gives the high society wives of powerful men a cause for jealousy. For instance, when Bertha invites her for a European cruise, Lily’s social communication skills with the royalty mean that others would seek her company. Bertha gets so jealous of her that she retaliates by insinuating that Lily has an affair with her husband, George. She invites her in the cruise to divert George’s attention from her because she wants to spend time with Ned whom Bertha is cultivating a dalliance. Bertha does not expect Lily to be hobnobbing successfully with the royalty. The result of her jealousy is Lily’s unexpected eviction from the ship.

Lily does not show her feelings of love for the man she cares for. When Selden verbalizes his love for her, she ignores his feelings and informs him that she will marry for money because it is the only choice for a woman like her. However, despite her urgent need of marriage, she also refuses marriage with Rosedale and Dorset. Eventually, she falls from high society and lives in a boarding-house where she reflects about deeper misery that is more than living in lack which she calls “solitude”:

It was indeed miserable to be poor – to look forward to a shabby, anxious middle-age, leading by the dreary degrees of economy and self-denial to gradual absorption in the dingy communal existence of the boarding-house. But there was something more miserable still – it was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept away like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years – the feeling of something rootless and ephemeral ... (292)

The failure of the love between Selden and Lily signifies the triumph of realism. Romanticism deals with happy endings. Trapped by romantic values, the heroine is conquered by the society. She dies untimely in order to pave the way for realism. Lily is an embodiment of romanticism. Her romantic self cannot survive in a society plagued by the practical and powerful represented by the men in her life. She has become “an image of entrapment in the structures of human economy and false values” (McEntyre 99). Her name is a symbol of innocence and idealism. Her society is a symbol of corruption. Therefore, Lily cannot mix with her society because it is not a place for her beauty and idealism. Her ostracism from the society is thus inevitable. When she gets obsessed with materialism for personal survival, her “natural” self is unable to cope with it leading her to end her life abruptly. Wharton notes: “She had a sense of deeper impoverishment – of an inner destitution compared to which outward conditions dwindled into insignificance” (291). The only feeling left for her after her abysmal descent from society is the “feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral” she thinks that “there had never been a time when she had any relation to life” (292). McEntyre explains that her “suicide is a testimony to the cost of living life trivially, pursuing false happiness, and habituating oneself to numbing pursuit of material comforts” (84).

The abruptness of Lily’s death remains confusing because there are twofold interpretations as to her decision to increase her intake of chloral for sleep inducement. Literary critics question if her death is a form of suicide or an accidental one. Lily has previously contemplated of self-destruction by drowning although she fails to carry it out because she abandons the idea. On her last night before she sleeps, Lily is bothered again by a sense of vacuum and feelings of desolation and a bleak perception of the future: “But the terrible silence and emptiness seemed to symbolise her future – she felt as though the house, the street, the world were all empty, and she alone left sentient in a lifeless universe” (294). She has apprehensions about going to bed at night because of her inability to sleep, and at that time, she has suffered from sleepless nights already: “Sleep was what she wanted – she remembered that she had not closed her eyes for two nights” (294).

Lily feels she has reached the lowest level of social existence in the dreary boarding-house. Her descent from high class society is so drastic that she seems unable to handle her new relocation because she represents the woman of “leisure” before her degradation according to Kaplan: “For the lady of leisure, domesticity was subordinated to publicity as the home became a stage for gala social events orchestrated and acted out by women” (91). She is a heroine who functions as ornament accustomed only to a life of luxury and materialistic consumption intended for others’ gaze or scrutiny. Showalter notes: “And, whereas the heroine of women’s fiction triumphs in every crisis, confounds her enemies, and wins over curmudgeons and reforms rakes, Lily is continually defeated” (46). She is a heroine who is unable to save herself from life’s challenges because they seem so overwhelming for her that she does nothing to change her situation even if her friends are ready to help her. Quiet about the economic pressures that beset her, she merely remains self-absorbed and passive. From living in posh manors and hobnobbing with her select group, Lily now lives friendless in a boarding-house, a symbol of dearth where only dinginess and solitude reigns. In her chance meeting with Rosedale in Sixth Avenue, she feels that he “was taking contemptuous note of the neighbourhood” while he stares at the place “with an air of incredulous disgust” (268) when they almost reach the door of her house, the tangible sign of her ultimate economic collapse.

Lily’s rejection of her friends’ offer for assistance is a sign of her progressive compulsion towards self-annihilation. Her relocation from high society represents a relentless leap into further degradation that leaves an impact on her behaviour. She demands to be alone in her despondency, an attitude of a person with suicidal tendencies. Her decision to relinquish all kinds of help from

concerned friends is unexpected for someone with normal thinking. In Lily's case, however, her decision is a result of her depression and insomnia where she becomes dependent on a chemical substance, chloral. Her rejection of her friends' offer for help indicates she does not want to be a burden to her friends, a premonition of what she is capable to do.

There are many cases of real people with suicidal tendencies. Some of the common reasons for their suicide are severe depression and insomnia as in the case of Ernest and Clarence Hemingway. Clarence is Ernest Hemingway's father who committed suicide. Ernest Hemingway, a Nobel laureate and son of Clarence, also committed suicide. Aside from "erratic blood pressure and blinding headaches", Reynolds points to "insomnia and severe depression" that were responsible for the suicide of both Clarence and Ernest (609). Reynolds further adds that Ernest like his father "was caught in a biological trap not entirely of his own making" (610). This "biological trap" refers to the delicate genetic structure of the Hemingway family because other Hemingway children committed suicide eventually. Reynolds notes: "Eventually three of the Hemingway children took their own lives: Ernest in 1961. Ursula in 1966; Leicester in 1982" (609). Hemingway's psychological make-up is similar to Lily's because she likewise suffers from insomnia and severe depression which may also point to the cause of her subtle act of suicide. Her depression may have been triggered by her financial worries:

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Like Lily, Clarence Hemingway was also always worried about money for the family, and medical sources likewise claim that financial worries are one of the common causes of suicide. He suffers from "erratic shifts of mood – now gentle, now angry" (Reynolds 601). Lily exhibits mood swings, too, such as when she "felt stronger and happier" (Wharton 289) after she witnesses Nettie's solid domestic life but after a while, when Lily enters the door to her boarding-house, "she felt the reaction of a deeper loneliness" (289). She remembers the warning of the chemist concerning chloral: "If sleep came at all, it might be sleep without waking" (295). Lily has actually increased her chloral consumption: "She had long since raised the dose to its highest limit, but tonight she felt she must increase it" (294-95). She is no longer concerned with the question on the possible effect of increased chloral intake because she impulsively swallows the "contents of the glass" (295) which means that she takes all the chloral found in the bottle. Wharton writes:

She did not, in truth, consider the question very closely – the physical craving for sleep was her only sustained sensation. Her mind shrank from the glare of thought as instinctively as eyes contract in a blaze of light – darkness, darkness was what she must have at any cost. (295)

Lily's only reason for the increased chloral intake is to have a good sleep, but because she is aware of the detrimental side effect of the pills, she must have willed her untimely death by taking all the pills available in the bottle. Her suicide represents freedom from all forms of dreariness and all feelings of vacuum where "perspectives" are wiped out ad infinitum. It also means a negation of all life's possibilities because of her obsession for total darkness, a pessimism negating unwanted feelings that mar her solitary existence amidst societal corruption and decadence.

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