

The Writing of Body in *The House of Mirth*

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Historical studies on the character of Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* have predominantly revolved around psychology, sociology, and aesthetics, yet neglecting the significance and role of the body within the narrative. Using Brooks's concept of body writing, this paper focuses on exploring Lily's body in three dimensions: the body of vision (self-objectification); the body of privacy (moral dilemma); and the body of modernity (overdose symbolizing the clash of science and humanity). Scrutinizing and analyzing the body writing in *The House of Mirth* reveal the feminist undercurrents of Lily's character and highlight the broader and significant role of body writing in literary works.

Keywords: body writing, Lily Bart, *The House of Mirth*, feminism

Introduction

Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* (1905) follows the tragic journey of Lily Bart, a beautiful yet impoverished woman striving for social status in New York's upper class. Despite its early oversight by early 20th-century critics, feminist scholars have recognized its significance (Olin-Ammentorp, 1988, p. 237). While Lily Bart has been extensively studied, previous research still overlooked her body image. Peter Brooks posits that writing onto the body is "a sign of the attempt to make the material into a signifying body" (Brooks, 1993, p. 1). And "the most highly elaborated symbolic structures and discursive systems" also originated from "bodily sensations" (Brooks, 1993, p. 9). Meanwhile, symbols used in literature provide a powerful means to reproduce the symbolic meanings of the body, which convey complex notions related to identity, desire, emotions, morality and so on. The literary narratives "dramatize ways in which the body becomes a key signifying factor in a text" (Brooks, 1993, p. 8). This paper focuses on how Lily's body is woven into the narrative to represent the inner struggles, desires or societal roles of independent women and explore the symbolism of the body.

The Body of Vision: Self-objectification

The predominant means of conveying the body in literary narration is the act of observing it. According to Brooks, "to know, in realism, is to see, and to represent is to describe" (Brooks, 1993, p. 88). Central to this dynamic is the power of male ideology, which casts a specific gaze upon the female body. Termed the "male gaze," it often reduces women to two options: subservience or resistance. However, Lily Bart, the heroine of *The House of Mirth*, introduces a third mode—she actively embraces and caters to the male gaze. She objectifies her

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own body to allure men, relying on their gaze to fulfill her desires. The self-objectification of body leads Lily to place immense importance on her appearance. Even when her financial situation becomes precarious, she remains deeply concerned about her physical allure, dreading the emergence of “two little lines near her mouth” as signs of aging (Edith, 1905, p. 43). Lily steadfastly believes in the lasting power of her beauty, trusting it to secure her future, notably when she contemplates marriage to Percy Gryce (Edith, 1905, p. 78).

Vision serves as the most direct channel of observation, extending beyond mere visual connection and redefining both the observer and the observed, i.e. “the seer as well as the world seen” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 77). Against the backdrop of a burgeoning capitalist economy, commodities have infiltrated and profoundly influenced social life, becoming “crucial for the subjugation of men’s consciousness” (Lukacs, 1968, p. 86). Within this context, Lily’s female body, perceived as more passive in societal constructs, falls prey to objectification through the male gaze. As her family descends into poverty, Lily’s mother, Mrs. Bart, views Lily’s beauty as a potential weapon for future retribution and as the “last asset in their fortunes” (Edith, 1905, p. 53). In the absence of material wealth, Mrs. Bart views Lily’s body as prospective capital. This judgment reflects a male-oriented, “imaginary” perspective regarding the value of Lily’s body. By perpetually reinforcing the value of Lily’s body, Mrs. Bart imparts to Lily the notion of women’s objectification, laying the foundation for Lily’s self-objectification.

For Lily, practical material wealth, enabling her to maintain her position in the upper class, symbolizes the embodiment of her desires. In the novel, her body serves as an “agent” in the pursuit of material gain. Admiration and objectification from others are thus crucial, granting Lily a sense of vanity and an expectation that her body can secure her financial well-being. During the opening night of the opera, Lily luxuriates in the “general stream of admiring looks of which she felt herself the center” and “it was good to be young, to be radiant” (Edith, 1905, pp. 186-187). Possessing a beautiful and vibrant body equates to carrying capital, forming the core of Lily’s ideology.

Lily’s obsession with decorative ornaments exemplifies her reliance on the gaze of others. In the capitalist society of the 20th century, this aspiration metamorphoses into a blind adherence to consumerism. She originally is not fond of playing bridge and is even “afraid of discovering the same symptoms in her own case” after witnessing the young poet Ned Silverton losing all his wealth and talents through gambling (Edith, 1905, p. 40). However, her hostesses expect her “to take a place at the card-table”, and Lily considers their invitations as “one of the taxes she had to pay for their prolonged hospitality” (Edith, 1905, p. 41). In return for “the dresses and trinkets which occasionally replenished her insufficient wardrobe”, Lily becomes a regular card player who is overwhelmed by “the gambling passion” (Edith, 1905, p. 41). Despite her initial disinterest in card games and gambling, she succumbs to the pressures of her social circle and becomes engulfed by the “gambling passion,” eventually losing her entire fortune. This transition illustrates how her spiritual pursuits are gradually overtaken by consumerism as she becomes more concerned with dressing like her peers and seeking financial gain by asking Gus Trenor to invest money for her on the stock market (Edith, 1905, p. 132).

However, Lily’s self-objectification rests on a flawed perception, and deconstructing it reveals underlying tragedy. The male gaze holds visual fetishes for the female body and defines the value of the female body through its judgment mechanism. This mechanism, however, constrains female subjectivity and makes it non-independent, bound by gendered ideologies. Lily’s perception of her own worth is firmly rooted in the male

gaze mechanism, which is evident in *The House of Mirth*. Descriptions of Lily's body serve as a means to appease the male audience. Lily's "modelling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair ... and the thick planting of her straight black lashes" are actually details of Lily's body in the eyes of Lawrence Selden. As a male observer, "Selden was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness" (Edith, 1905, pp. 6-7). Within the male gaze, the female body is often perceived as strange and mysterious, and it becomes the object of both knowing as desire and desire as knowing. Selden's pleasure in observing Lily's body is a projection of his male desire. The male gaze and evaluation mechanism limit the expression and representation of female subjectivity. Under the male gaze, the material details of the female body are often linked to abstract concepts of spirituality. Lily, as an object of the gaze and of desire, is repeatedly reduced to a set of body details, thereby undermining her coherence as either an object or a subject. For example, Selden's praise of Lily's "streak of sylvan freedom in her nature" is derived from the "long slope of her slender sides" as she adjusts her veil before a mirror (Edith, 1905, p. 19). For Lily, even though she aims to achieve her desires through her body's appeal to men, the value of her body depends on male judgment. The self-objectification of the body leads to the erosion of subjectivity.

The Body of Privacy: Moral Dilemma

The private realm of the body serves as a cornerstone for personal space, life experiences, and significantly contributes to our understanding of privacy. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart takes active measures to establish unwavering boundaries safeguarding her privacy, reflecting her unwavering commitment to self-preservation. When Mr. Trenor makes a distressing attempt to assault her, Lily "raised her head, and achieved a last clear look at him" and calmly responds him by asking "what more have you to say" (Edith, 1905, p. 237). Eventually, through her immediate lucidity and strength, Lily effectively seizes control of the situation, ultimately enabling her to "fight her way out alone" (Edith, 1905, p. 237). Similarly, when faced with Rosedale's proposal, which could be interpreted as an intrusion into her private life, Lily bluntly rebuffs any unwelcome advances and "she spoke with the intention of making him see that, if his words implied a tentative allusion to her private affairs, she was prepared to meet and repudiate it" (Edith, 1905, p. 286).

This narrative exemplifies how literature often becomes a mirror through which the private aspects of life are scrutinized, offering insights into the ongoing struggle between safeguarding and infringing upon personal privacy (Brooks, 1993, p. 32). Lily's actions and responses provide a model, elucidating the intricate mechanisms that underlie the concept of privacy within society.

In the upper-class society portrayed in the novel, the insatiable desire to pry into the private lives of others is embodied by individuals like Simon Rosedale who "made it his business to know everything about every one" (Edith, 1905, p. 23). He is so keen to peeping into Lily's private life that his name "obtruded itself on Lily's thought like a leer" (Edith, 1905, p. 90). When Lily escapes from Mr. Trenor's assault to stay overnight at Gerty's abode being safe, she becomes the subject of such invasive scrutiny, where she must contend with the "searching gaze" from the maid and the "prying eyes" from her aunt Grace Stepney (Edith, 1905, pp. 272-273). This gaze is not merely observational but signifies a symbolic intrusion into Lily's personal affairs. The collective interest in invading privacy often transforms into the dissemination of private information, thereby creating a mechanism for discourse and communication. It is "fractional" and "altogether indirect" (Mill, 2003, p. 140). For example, Lily's romantic entanglements with Prince Varigiliano and Lord Hubert, as well as her private loan from old Ned

Van Alstyne, become topics of discussion among various characters. They were firstly told by Ned to Carry Fisher, and Fisher “told Bertha, naturally” (Edith, 1905, p. 121). However, the information disclosed is often vulnerable to distortion, as demonstrated by Bertha’s deliberate omission of certain facts when conveying Lily’s situation to Percy Gryce.

Amidst the moral decay of society, Lily emerges as a champion of privacy, taking measures to protect not only her own but also the privacy of others. Faced with Mrs. Haffen’s threat involving love letters that might be used to “convict Selden of negligence in a matter where world holds it least pardonable” (Edith, 1905, p. 169), Lily arranges for the payment of extortion money to shield him. This unwavering commitment to safeguarding privacy not only bolsters Lily’s individuality but also garners recognition from her peers, forming a critical foundation for effective communication.

However, Lily’s proclivity for excessive concealment of her privacy complicates her standing within society. Her evasive responses to Mrs. Peniston’s inquiries about her debts and her decision to accept the Dorsets’ invitation to the Mediterranean to evade financial difficulties exacerbate communication challenges. Lily’s negligence results in Mrs. Peniston’s ailment and ultimately strains their relationship. Mrs. Peniston’s alteration of the estate arrangements, leaving Lily with a mere ten thousand dollars on her deathbed, symbolizes the harm brought about by Lily’s proclivity for concealment, negatively affecting both parties.

Lily’s struggle with privacy extends to moral quandaries, highlighting the relative and occasionally perplexing nature of privacy protection. Despite her grievances regarding the challenges of safeguarding her privacy, Lily’s resistance often manifests primarily through silence and self-imposed isolation. She complains, “Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine?” Even though Lily is traumatized and seems to be “alone in a place of darkness and pollution” (Edith, 1905, p. 239) after resisting Trenor’s assault, she only “shook her head” and remains silent when Gerty tries to console her (Edith, 1905, p. 265). Being confronted with moral dilemmas, Lily remains confused and helpless. For example, when Rosedale incites Lily to put to Dorset “the latent menace contained in the packet so miraculously delivered into her hands” (Edith, 1905, p. 417) and to control her, she is swayed by such an offer, “how much strength was left her to oppose it?” (Edith, 1905, p. 478). Her confusion and perceived lack of strength to oppose the situation ultimately lead to her tragic demise.

In summary, *The House of Mirth* delves into the intricate dynamics of privacy within society through the lens of Lily Bart’s experiences. The novel navigates the delicate balance between preserving and breaching privacy, illustrating the consequences of excessive concealment and the moral complexities associated with privacy protection in a society marked by moral decline.

The Body of Modernity: Clash of Science and Humanity

In *The House of Mirth*, the character Lily Bart experiences a significant transformation as she shifts from the upper class to the working class, with her individual identity changing accordingly. This transition serves as a powerful symbol of the evolving significance of the human body in the context of modern society. The body, marked by its physical and physiological attributes, becomes an integral part of “a universal system of social semiotics and control”, embodying “the anxiety and fascination of the hidden, masked, unidentified individual” (Brooks, 1993, p. 26). In literature, the depiction of politics, modern medicine, and urban civilization provides a

framework for interpreting the evolving symbolism of the body. In this context, the body takes on more economic and productive meanings.

In her previous social sphere, Lily relies on her exceptional social skills to carve out her place. However, as she became entangled in the labor force, her body shed the gender, age, and other physiological markers that once defined her. It transformed into a mere instrument of labor productivity. The body, as a biological entity, “occupies a position in physical space and social space” (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 131). The more abstract and crucial of these is the social space, wherein the body resides. The feature of socialization is the defining attribute of human existence, and the relationships individuals establish with others during their practical engagements are instrumental in their self-orientation and development. Each field, composed of a distinct network or configuration, has “a logic and a necessity that are specific and irreducible” to those that define other fields, resulting in exclusive boundaries (Bourdieu & Loic, 1992, p. 97). Transitioning from one field to another entails a dual transformation, affecting both the meaning of the body and an individual’s social relations.

In the realm of the working class, labor stands as the core practice that shapes social relationships. After two months of work at Mme. Regina’s millinery establishment, Lily still struggles with sewing errors, prompting the forewoman to finally ask her to “give the hat to Miss Kilroy” (Edith, 1905, p. 462). Lily’s lack of technical skills subjects her to the scorn of her female coworkers, who express their derision through hushed laughter (Edith, 1905, p. 459). Workers in this milieu primarily value “success—by the gross tangible image of material achievement” which can only be achieved after intensive mechanical training (Edith, 1905, p. 462). Lily’s ineptitude in producing high-quality items makes her the target of the forewoman’s and her fellow workers’ disdain.

The operation is controlled by those in specific positions, who possess the authority to allocate profits and exercise control over individuals in the field. In the realm of labor, Lily finds herself ostracized by the leaders and influential groups holding positions of power. Mme. Regina, who wields absolute authority over the workers in her workroom, is unsatisfied that Lily “had so often been unwell, and had done so little work when she came”, thus she tells Lily that “her services were no longer required” in the late April, which removes Lily from the field (Edith, 1905, p. 480). For Mme. Regina, Lily’s inability to produce valuable commodities translates to a lack of utility. It’s essential to note that while Lily struggles to integrate into the working class, she isn’t entirely isolated. Miss Kilroy extends genuine kindness towards her, showing the “penitent eye” for laughing at Lily, as an “unexpected advance” (Edith, 1905, p. 463). Nettie Crane, a beneficiary of Lily’s and Gerty’s charitable efforts, invites Lily to her home to see the baby, because she feels that Lily does “not fit to go home alone” (Edith, 1905, p. 506). These women workers deviate from the standard operating rules of the working class field, prioritizing relationships over material gain. However, their peripheral position within the power structure prevents them from preventing Lily’s expulsion from the working class.

Lily’s body labor efforts prove unsuccessful, ultimately leaving her in a liminal state, outside both the upper and working classes. This situation exacerbates her reliance on modern medications. After departing from the upper class, Lily grapples with insomnia, “her craving for the keen stimulant was forever conflicting with that other craving for sleep” (Edith, 1905, p. 467). She resorted to the prescription provided by Mrs. Hatch’s chemist, and the chloral gives her “a momentary illusion of complete renewal, from which she drew strength to take up her daily work” (Edith, 1905, p. 476). Over time, chloral becomes “the only spot of light in the dark prospect” (Edith, 1905, p. 503). As she continues to rely on the drug, she builds up a resistance to the drug, and “there had been

nights when she was perpetually floating up through it to consciousness” (Edith, 1905, p. 503). It results in an increased dependence and ultimately her tragic overdose. The disease ideology has gone through the change from premodern medicine’s “an interior sensation or something to be discerned on the body’s surface by sight” to the illness “to be observed inside the body” (Sontag, 1977, p. 123). It means that modern medicine’s approach to illness has shifted from the premodern emphasis on internal sensations or visible bodily symptoms to an emphasis on diagnosing conditions within the body. Drugs developed through the integrated use of scientific knowledge not only improve the professionalism of doctors, but also help them treat various diseases more effectively. However, with the gradual formation and existence of independent medical system, more and more people gradually incline to scientism. Modern medicine pays more attention to people’s physical diseases while neglecting the increasing spiritual and psychological anxieties of people in a modern society that increasingly place “life in the form of culture” (Tao, 2009, p. 82). Lily’s reliance on medical intervention highlights the existential challenges brought about by this tension between science and humanity.

The sole source of solace for Lily in her tumultuous journey is found in the presence of Nettie’s nearly four-month-old baby, nestled in the “extraordinarily small and almost miraculously clean” confines of Nettie’s kitchen (Edith, 1905, p. 507). Cradling the infant, Lily feels “the soft weight sink trustfully against her breast”, which “thrilled her with a sense of warmth and returning life” (Edith, 1905, p. 510). The baby, untouched by the intricacies of established social connections, presents Lily with an unguarded trust and becomes a symbolic representation of unsocialized purity. The connection between Lily and the baby intensifies when, teetering on the edge of death due to a sleeping pill overdose, Lily senses “the pressure of its little head against her shoulder”, bringing “a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure” (Edith, 1905, p. 522). In this poignant moment, the baby embodies the untarnished, original body, offering Lily a temporary respite from the burdens of societal expectations. Yet, beneath this poignant imagery lies the harsh reality—Lily’s failure to find her footing in the world of labor leaves her ostracized by the working class, denying her the chance to forge meaningful social connections and establish her presence in society.

Conclusion

The human body is an intricate unity of biology and symbolism, representing the very foundation of our existence. According to Brooks, desires originating from and embedded within our bodies serve as the impetus for understanding and exploring the world. Our perception of the body forms the symbolic framework that underpins our understanding of the world, making it the fundamental starting point for literary narration. In the process of being defined and interpreted, the body remains elusive, always in a state of absence, a notion reflected in its representation within literary works—an ongoing effort to bring the body to the forefront. The body is the central subject of narrative in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. The body of the heroine, Lily Bart, emerges as a multi-layered canvas open to exploration through the prisms of visual representation, privacy, and modernity. Lily’s body isn’t merely a vessel; it enhances her character and delves into profound themes that underscore her feminist significance. Most importantly, the novel provides a vivid illustration of the evolution of the female body’s presence in literary texts, epitomizing the incorporation of body representation within the realm of feminist literature.

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