“To be herself, or a Gerty Farish”: The Powerful Presence of the Sisterhood Union in *The House of Mirth*

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Critics have evaluated *The House of Mirth* highly, especially from a feminist standpoint, discussing how Edith Wharton criticizes conventional gender politics in the novel. Elizabeth Ammons, for example, argues that this novel criticizes marriage “as a patriarchal institution designed to aggrandize men at the expense of women,” concluding that Lily Bart “is murdered by her culture” (26, 42). Focusing on Selden’s eyes gazing on Lily, Cynthia Griffin Wolff among others states that readers can see Wharton’s criticism of his “judging and imperceptive eyes,” which see Lily “as a moral-aesthetic object” (332) to such an extent that they “irretrievably transfor[m] [Lily] into an object” at her deathbed (338).[1] Linda Wagner-Martin, on the other hand, argues that while Wharton portrays the New Woman-like figure of Lily, who rejects marriage as a social custom, she takes “strategies that appeased the hostile readers” toward the New Woman by making “the conclusion allo[w] *The House of Mirth* a traditional ‘marriage novel’ structure” (111, 127). The central matter in these arguments is the problem of Lily’s marriage and the conventional gender politics based on the dichotomy between men and women. But how much is the heterosexual relationship the fixed model in this novel? In other words, does Lily have only the option of a heterosexual relationship?

To reconsider the complexity of the gender politics in the novel, I will focus on Lily's relationship with Gerty Farish and her "Girls' Club." Lily distances herself from Gerty on a conscious level, though she seems to be curiously attracted to the option presented by the latter. A closer look at their relationship will reveal that while the central contrast of the surface story lies between Lily's relationships with Rosedale and Selden—namely the contrast of "the republic of the material" in the Gilded Age with the idea of "the republic of the spirit"—another powerful contrast, or tension, emerges from underneath: the contrast between a heterosexual relationship and strong sisterhood. With Lily's "choice" between these two options remaining open, the heterosexual plot of the surface of the story becomes much more unstable than it seems.

1. Lily's Relationship with Gerty and Her Girls' Club

Though not being portrayed as radical, Gerty is a New Woman who gets involved in social work in the public sphere,[2] and is introduced as an opposite type of woman to Lily from the beginning of the novel. In Selden's flat, Lily complains about her lack of options, showing her dissatisfaction with the inequality between Selden, who can choose whether he marries or not, and her, who cannot: "Ah, there's the difference—a girl must, a man may if he chooses" (*HM* 12). To her, Selden suggests that women can have an independent life, saying that "[e]ven women … have been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat" (*HM* 8). Lily, however, denies the possibility of being one of them: "Oh, governesses—or widows. But not girls—not poor, miserable, marriageable girls!" (*HM* 8). Here Lily underlines the specific category of "girl" and defines it as "marriageable." When Selden continues, "I even know a girl who lives in a flat," Lily first is expectantly surprised, but then emphasizes that the "girl" whom he means, Gerty Farish, is not "*marriageable*" (*HM* 8). Looking at her gorgeous appearance, Selden understands she cannot be a Gerty Farish: "As he watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist, he was struck with the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen" (*HM* 8). Lily is "the product of Gilded Age culture" (Kassanoff 45) and is presented as a perfect model of the American Girl—or the Gibson Girl—who was culturally and socially constructed by male image-makers in the Progressive Era as a feminine ideal representing the norms of race, ethnicity, and gender.[3] As Lily internalizes the gender norm that a girl must marry (especially for money), the ostensible problem of Lily is "which man she should marry."

Nevertheless, Gerty's way of life, which is regarded as impossible for Lily, is repeatedly shown as one of the "options" for Lily in the novel. Lily deplores her lack of options in comparison not only to men but also to Gerty: "It was a hateful fate—but how escape from it? What choice had she? To be herself, or a Gerty Farish" (*HM* 23). The option of "becoming a Gerty" is presented as opposite to the life of Lily as the American Girl. Lily tells Selden that Gerty "has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat" (*HM* 8); later again, she "ha[s] a vision of Miss Farish's cramped flat, with its cheap conveniences and hideous wallpapers" (*HM* 23). Lily emphasizes the difference between Gerty and her: "But we're so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy. And besides, she is free and I am not" (*HM* 8). Continuously denying her possibility of becoming a Gerty, however, Lily is irritated by the fact that Gerty enjoys her life: "Of course, being fatally poor and dingy, it was wise of Gerty to have taken up philanthropy and symphony concerts; but there was something irritating in her assumption that existence yielded no higher pleasures, and that one might get as much interest and excitement out of life in a cramped flat as in the splendours of the Van Osburgh establishment" (*HM* 71). Lily's irritation here is attributed to the fact that Gerty, who belongs to the same class and society as Lily, finds contentment in a life different from the one she pursues. In other words, Lily is irritated by Gerty's showing another option for a "girl," one that gives a girl freedom, independence, and self-fulfillment.

Importantly, what she says about Gerty's life is quite similar to what she tells Selden about their potential married life. When Lily and Selden are alone in the park at Bellomont, Selden tells Lily about his idea of the "republic of the spirit," where success means "personal freedom" (*HM* 55), and Lily temporarily dreams of a marriage to Selden, which would be dingy but would give her self-fulfillment, saying, "I shall look hideous in dowdy clothes; but I can trim my own hats" (*HM* 59); then Lily, though repeating her dislike of Gerty's flat, tells Selden that she "could manage to be happy even in her [Gerty's] flat" if she is "free" (*HM* 8). Thus, the idea of freedom is connected not only with Selden's idea of the "republic of the spirit" but also with the choice "to be a Gerty Farish." In a significant way, "to be a Gerty Farish" serves as powerful an option for the American Girl Lily as marriage to Selden.

Indeed, Gerty, who gets involved in social works, plays the role of showing Lily a "different point of view" (*HM* 223), different both from society's and from Selden's. One of the activities Gerty is engaged in is the Girls' Club, of whose committee she is a member. The object of the Club is "to provide comfortable lodgings, with a reading-room and other modest distractions, where young women of the class employed in down town offices might find a home when out of work, or in need of rest" (*HM* 87). Many clubs like this were established in turn-of-the-century America, especially in urban areas. They were generally called the "Girls' Club" or the "Working Girls' Club," which offered working girls an opportunity for education and a place for rest and at the same time served as "a haven for women seeking alternatives to domestic confinement and subservience to men—two cardinal conventions of 'true womanhood'" (Murolo 74). Additionally, between club members and sponsors developed "a cross-class sisterhood" (Murolo 7), which was different from the sentimental sisterhood of the Victorian era.[4] Considering these facts, Gerty can be seen as a character who is not necessarily politically radical but possibly transcends conventional gender norms.

Through her relationship with Gerty, Lily comes to be involved in the Girls' Club and its cross-class sisterhood. When Lily accidently meets Gerty at a shop and hears about the lack of money for the Girls' Club, she gives Gerty a certain amount of money which she has kept for a dressing-case. Though Lily "was often bored by the relation of her friend's philanthropic efforts" (*HM* 88), she acquires a different view from what she had held before: "These were young girls, like herself; some perhaps pretty, some not without a trace of her finer sensibilities. She pictured herself leading such a life as theirs—a life in which achievement seemed as squalid as failure—and the vision made her shudder sympathetically" (*HM* 88). Contributing to the activity of the Girls' Club, she is satisfied to find "a new interest in herself as a person of charitable instincts," and "her horizon was enlarged by the vision of a prodigal philanthropy" (*HM* 88). Though the narrator suggests that Lily's philanthropy is dubious, adding that Lily's awakening as a philanthropist is merely a "sense of self-esteem which she naturally mistook for the fruits of altruism" (*HM* 88), it is still important that Lily has sympathy for working girls and is "drawn out of herself by the interest of her direct relation with a world so unlike her own" (*HM* 119).

At the Brys's party, Gerty tells Selden about Lily's commitment to the Girls' Club:

> "Do you look at Mrs. George Dorset's pearls—I suppose the smallest of them would pay the rent of our Girls' Club for a year. Not that I ought to complain about the club; every one has been so wonderfully kind. Did I tell you that Lily had given us three hundred dollars? Wasn't it splendid of her? And then she collected a lot of money from her friends—Mrs. Bry gave us five hundred, and Mr. Rosedale a thousand. ... Do you know she has been there with me twice?—yes,

> Lily! And you should have seen their eyes! One of them said it was as good as a day in the country just to look at her. And she sat there, and laughed and talked with them—not a bit as if she were being *charitable*, you know, but as if she liked it as much as they did. …” (*HM* 104-05)

Gerty reveals that Lily raised funds for the Girls' Club and visited twice. Lily's visit to the Girls' Club on the one hand strengthens the myth of the American Girl, for Lily is adored and seen as an ideal by the working girls of the Girls' Club. On the other hand, Lily's contribution to the Girls' Club can be regarded as something different from her activity in society. The life represented by Bertha Dorset with her gorgeous pearls (and the life Lily clings to) is vividly contrasted with the life Gerty spends working for her Girls' Club (the life to which Lily is secretly attracted). What is peculiar here is that the information about Lily's contribution to the Girls' Club is disclosed not only to Selden but also to readers for the first time. The narrator did not show any scene of Lily visiting the Girls' Club. This may be attributed to Wharton's lack of knowledge of such clubs for working girls.[5] At the same time, the very point that the narrator does not describe scenes at the Girls' Club effectively suggests that the Girls' Club is situated outside the society that the novel portrays and that Lily clings to. This point is emphasized also by fact that Mrs. Bry and Mr. Rosedale, who contribute to the Girls' Club, are marginalized in society. Thus, the Girls' Club and its cross-class sisterhood based on sympathy are presented as something opposite to the norms of society. Indeed, Lily's closer relationship with Gerty and the girls at the Girls' Club coincides with her gradual decline in society and to the loss of her status as the American Girl.[6]

Gerty further serves to make the gender politics in the novel more complex. At the famous scene of the *tableau vivant* at the Brys, Lily performs “Mrs. Lloyd,” which has been frequently analyzed from a feminist standpoint that focuses on "the gap between the female subject and the male narrative gaze through which she is presented" (Orlando 73). It is also worth noting, however, that there is another gaze, which would be no less essential to the argument from sexual politics regarding Lily Bart. When Lily presents her *tableau vivant*, it is not only Selden that sees in her a romantic figure of "the real Lily"; his view is shared by Gerty Farish:

> "Wasn't she too beautiful, Lawrence? Don't you like her best in that simple dress? It makes her look like the real Lily—the Lily I know."
>
> He met Gerty Farish's brimming gaze. "The Lily *we* know," he corrected; and his cousin, beaming at the implied understanding, exclaimed joyfully: "I'll tell her that! She always says you dislike her." (*HM* 107)

In this scene, Gerty's adoring female gaze at Lily undermines the "male gaze-female object" structure. Additionally, as Lily starts to be the object of negative rumors in society, Lily's participation in Gerty's social activity drives Gerty to adore Lily all the more: "Gerty's affection for her friend—a sentiment that had learned to keep itself alive on the scantiest diet—had grown to active adoration since Lily's restless curiosity had drawn her into the circle of Miss Farish's work" (*HM* 119). Gerty adores Lily to such an extent that she has Lily's "recent photograph" in her room, which she praises to Selden as she did Lily's *tableau vivant* at the Brys: "The photograph was well enough—but to catch her as she had looked last night! Gerty agreed with him—never had she been so radiant. But could photography capture that light? There had been a new look in her face—something different; yes, Selden agreed there had been something different" (*HM* 123). The "something different" that both of them see in Lily might indicate them seeing her as someone other than the American Girl of the Gilded Age, a new Lily who is suitable not only for Selden's "republic of the spirit" but also for Gerty's sisterhood union, though Lily herself regards her *tableau vivant* as an opportunity to restore her status in the society.

2. The Possibility of an Intimate Sisterhood Union

As the novel continues, the relationship between Lily and Gerty becomes more intimate. Situated at the center of the novel, Chapters 13 and 14 of Book I are highly important in terms of their relationship. The two chapters start with the similar image of two girls waking up in a happy mood; in Chapter 13, "Lily woke from happy dreams to find two notes at her bed-side" (*HM* 109), and in Chapter 14, "Gerty Farish, the morning after the Wellington Brys' entertainment, woke from dreams as happy as Lily's" (*HM* 118). In the two chapters, then, these girls' happy dreams are broken; in Chapter 13, Lily's happy recognition of her success at the Brys' is undermined by her potential rape by Gus Trenor, and in Chapter 14 Gerty's happy dream about her union with Selden is broken by the recognition of his love of Lily. In both chapters, heterosexual relationships have a destructive effect on the girls.

Chapter 13 of Book I shows a highly tensioned scene where the heterosexual relationship appears in its most essentially violent form. Ammons sees this chapter as central to the novel and regards Gus Trenor's "attempting to rape her [Lily]" as the climax of the patriarchal system on which the world in the novel is based: "The first book of Wharton's novel shows Lily's deviancy, her refusal to become the wife of Dillworth, Gryce, Selden, or Rosedale, and ends in a sexual confrontation in which the head of the entire economic and social system, its most powerful august patriarch—a man Wharton even names Augustus—literally tries to force Lily into submission" (34). Admitting that he is "not talking the way a man is supposed to talk to a girl" (*HM* 116), Gus quite openly suggests to Lily what he wants: "Hang it, the man who pays for the dinner is generally allowed to have a seat at a table" (*HM* 114). Twice he touches Lily, who rejects it utterly: "He had taken her hand, half-banteringly, and was drawing her toward a low seat by the hearth; but she stopped and freed herself quietly" (*HM* 112); then, "His touch was a shock to her drowning consciousness. She drew back from him with a desperate assumption of scorn" (*HM* 116). As Ammons suggests, this scene can be seen as one of the climaxes of the novel in terms of Wharton's criticism of patriarchal gender politics. However, the following scene at Gerty's is no less significant. Though deeply threatened, Lily manages to free herself from Gus's place, and fearing that "she must spend them [hours] alone, shuddering sleepless on her bed" (*HM* 117), she strongly wants "the darkness made by enfolding arms, the silence which is not solitude, but compassion holding its breath" (*HM* 118). What Lily thinks of the next instant, then, is Gerty Farish, to whose house she goes:

> Miss Bart released her [Gerty], and stood breathing brokenly, like one who has gained shelter after a long flight.
>
> "I was so cold—I couldn't go home. Have you a fire?"
>
> Gerty's compassionate instincts, responding to the swift call of habit, swept aside all her reluctances. Lily was simply some one who needed help—for what reason, there was no time to pause and conjecture: disciplined sympathy checked the wonder on Gerty's lips, and made her draw her friend silently into the sitting-room and seat her by the darkened hearth.
>
> [...] The girls looked at each other in silence; then Lily repeated: "I couldn't go home." (*HM* 129)

In this scene, such words as "shelter," "home," "compassionate" and "sympathy" are effectively used to evoke the idea of sisterhood. Gerty's "home," where she sympathetically accepts Lily, seems to be close to the Girls' Club—a home for suffering girls. In fact, Lily compares herself to a girl of the working class whom Gerty and her Girls' Club help: "I am bad—a bad girl—all my thoughts are bad [...]. There are bad girls in your slums. Tell me—do they ever pick themselves up? Ever forget, and feel as they did before?" (*HM* 131). Lily's identifying herself with a working girl makes her status as the American Girl quite unstable.

In the following scene, furthermore, Lily shares a bed with Gerty and a sense of strong sisterhood, which can be found at the basis of the Girls' Club, appears in a fairly tensioned way:

> There was but one bed in the little flat, and the two girls lay down on it side by side when Gerty had unlaced Lily's dress and persuaded her to put her lips to the warm tea. The light extinguished, they lay still in the darkness, Gerty shrinking to the outer edge of the narrow couch to avoid contact with her bed-fellow. Knowing that Lily disliked to be caressed, she had long ago learned to check her demonstrative impulses toward her friend. But tonight every fibre in her body shrank from Lily's nearness: it was torture to listen to her breathing, and feel the sheet stir with it. As Lily turned, and settled to completer rest, a strand of her hair swept Gerty's cheek with its fragrance. Everything about her was warm and soft and scented: even the stains of her grief became her as rain-drops do the beaten rose. But as Gerty lay with arms drawn down her side, in the motionless narrowness of an effigy, she felt a stir of sobs from the breathing warmth beside her, and Lily flung out her hand, groped for her friend's, and held it fast.
>
> "Hold me, Gerty, hold me, or I shall think of things," she moaned; and Gerty silently slipped an arm under her, pillowing her head in its hollow as a mother makes a nest for a tossing child. In the warm hollow Lily lay still and her breathing grew low and regular. Her hand still clung to Gerty's as if to ward off evil dreams, but the hold of her fingers relaxed, her head sank deeper into its shelter, and Gerty felt that she slept. (*HM* 133)

What is to note is that this scene evokes a tension which is different from but as sexual as the previous scene at the Trenors. In the beginning, Gerty tries at all costs to avoid touching Lily and at the same time suffers from doing so. Gerty tells Selden later that she has a traumatic memory of kissing Lily and being rejected by her (Lily says, "Please don't kiss me unless I ask you to, Gerty"), and since then she has "always waited to be asked" (*HM* 211). Gerty's avoidance of touching Lily can be regarded as her fear of being rejected by Lily. Lying apart from Lily, however, Gerty is "torture[d]" by Lily's breathing, her movement, and "a strand of her hair" which "swept Gerty's cheek with its fragrance." After these tensioned descriptions, Lily asks Gerty to hold her and Gerty touches Lily "as a mother makes a nest for a tossing child" (*HM* 133). Here their relationship is compared to a mother and a child and the sensuous tone of this scene recedes; nevertheless, the intimate relationship between Gerty and Lily evokes that of lovers. Lily asks Gerty to touch her while she rejects Gus's touching her, and "the warm hollow" that Gerty provides Lily eases the coldness which she refused to have eased at the Trenors. Here, two girls' "happy dreams" that have been broken by men are replaced by the warm union of sisterhood, and the sense of sisterhood so intimate and so powerful in this scene overtakes, even if only temporarily, the heterosexual order on which the world in the novel is based.

After this scene, as Lily's status in the society is threatened, it is Gerty who stands by Lily's side. Selden repeatedly suggests that Lily should live with Gerty: "But with your income and Gerty's—since you allow me to go so far into the details of the situation—you and she could surely contrive a life together which would put you beyond the need of having to support yourself" (*HM* 218). Selden's suggestion that the two women live together can be connected with the idea of the Boston marriage. The Boston marriage—or strong female sisterhood—was a "late 19th-century version of the earlier romantic friendship modified by the women's new economic independence" (Faderman 33), and was frequently seen, especially in urban areas. Lily, however, rejects this idea, and decides to remain a "marriageable American Girl" representing the heterosexual gender norm.[7]

While Lily refuses to accept Gerty's hospitality, their potential sisterhood union becomes essential to Gerty. Gerty remembers the night she spent with Lily later in the novel:

> She [Gerty] had not forgotten the night of emotion when she and Lily had lain in each other's arms, and she had seemed to feel her very heart's blood passing into her friend. The sacrifice she had made had seemed unavailing enough; no trace remained in Lily of the subduing influences of that hour; but Gerty's tenderness, disciplined by long years of contact with obscure and inarticulate suffering, could wait on its object with a silent forbearance which took no account of time. (*HM* 209)

Here, from Gerty's point of view, the narrator describes that "she and Gerty had lain in each other's arms," whereas earlier it was written that "Gerty silently slipped an arm under her [Lily], pillowing her head in its hollow as a mother makes a nest for a tossing child" (*HM* 133) in Chapter 13 of Book I. While the same-sex union is finally replaced by the image of the mother-child union in the latter, it is presented as more intimate in the former, and the emotional intimacy described here is much more powerful than in any other relationships in the novel. "The sacrifice she [Gerty] had made," namely her giving up Selden for Lily, signifies that Gerty's feeling toward Lily prevails over that toward Selden: the union of sisterhood prevails over the heterosexual union in Gerty.

3. The Novel's Two Endings

While Lily seemingly refuses the sisterhood union, however, a tensioned contrast between heterosexual love and strong sisterhood, which can be found in Chapters 13 and 14 of Book I, is repeatedly seen at the end of the novel. The last chapter of the novel ends with the parting of Selden from the dead Lily. To his eyes, the dead Lily has a "calm unrecognizing face, the semblance of Lily Bart," and he hardly recognizes her as real: "That it was her real self, every pulse in him ardently denied. Her real self had lain warm on his heart but a few hours earlier―what had he to do with this estranged and tranquil face which, for the first time, neither paled nor brightened at his coming?" (*HM* 252-53). Lily's dead face even looks like a mask to him: "He stood looking down on the sleeping face which seemed to lie like a delicate impalpable mask over the living lineaments he had known. He felt that the real Lily was still there, close to him, yet invisible and inaccessible; and the tenuity of the barrier between them mocked him with a sense of helplessness" (*HM* 253). The mask Selden sees on Lily's face is that of the American Girl. She dies, remaining a marriageable American Girl, and for Selden her death "apotheosizes her triumphant *tableau vivant*" (Wolff 337). But is "the real Lily" who Selden feels near him truly near him? The ending of the novel certainly shows, whether romantically or ironically, the picture of a heterosexual union of Selden and Lily, and in this sense "the conclusion allows *The House of Mirth* a traditional 'marriage novel' structure. If the expected ending was the marriage of the protagonists, then the scene of the lamenting Selden, kneeling near Lily's dead body, is a satisfactory denouement ―the marriage novel frustrated" (Wagner-Martin 127). But how much is the heterosexual relationship a fixed standard in the novel?

While the silent union of Lily and Selden is situated at the end of the novel, the novel does have another ending: Lily's dying scene through her own perception. Though the novel does not show the exact moment of Lily's death, the life of Lily herself ends after Chapter 13 of Book II, after she falls into the eternal sleep. The final image presented at the end of Chapter 13, just before she falls asleep, is not the union of Lily and Selden but that of Lily and the baby.

Before that, having decided finally to show Bertha the crucial letters and to marry Rosedale, Lily visits Selden on her way to the Dorsets. Looking at Lily's serious face, Selden says, "You have something to tell me—do you mean to marry?", and she admits it, saying, "You always told me I should have to come to it sooner or later!" (*HM* 240). Meeting Selden, however, changes her mind, and her final decision is to burn the letters. Her decision to burn the letters seems to show her love for Selden; however, her disposal of the letters—and her giving up her potential marriage to Rosedale—does not necessarily lead Selden and Lily to a union. At the end of the chapter, she says "Goodbye" to Selden and leaves his room.

The next chapter, then, shows Lily on her way home accidently meeting Nettie, whom Lily had helped through Gerty's Girls' Club, and the sisterhood union shown before between Gerty and Lily is repeatedly shown between Lily and Nettie, though their relationship does not have a sensual tone. As with Gerty's "very heart's blood passing in to her friend" (*HM* 209) when she holds Lily, Lily momentarily leans on Nettie, whose "thin shabby figure" is full of "hope and energy," and gets energy from her: "[a] faint glow of returning strength seemed to pass into Lily from the pressure of the supporting arm" (*HM* 243). Again, as Lily gains warmth in Gerty's home after visiting Gus Trenor's cold home, she does so in Nettie's house after visiting Selden's cold house; while she says she is "very cold" in Selden's library (*HM* 241), "[i]t *was* warm in the kitchen" at Nettie's (*HM* 244). In this scene filled with warmth, the mother-child relationship portrayed in the union of Lily and Gerty is repeated in the union of Lily and Nettie's child: "The child's confidence in its safety thrilled her with a sense of warmth and returning life, and she bent over, wondering at the rosy blur of the little face, the empty clearness of the eyes, the vague tendrilly motions of the folding and unfolding fingers" (*HM* 245). As Despina

Korovessis argues, "[w]hat Lily seeks is a sense of community, a connection to her fellow human beings, and some sense of continuity with the past" (68). At Nettie's, Lily feels that "the surprised sense of human fellowship took the mortal chill from her heart" (*HM* 246) and "her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther's kitchen" (*HM* 248). Lily's craving for "mysterious links of kinship" (*HM* 248), then, leads her to meditate on her relationship with Selden, since Nettie's marriage shows an example of "[s]uccessful marriages based on love rather than material considerations" (Korovessis 67). In Lily's mind—or in her conscious thought—"mysterious links of kinship" should be brought about by her possible union with Selden, which she cannot achieve. In this sense, it may be right that "[i]ronically, Wharton's 'solution' to the commodification of women within the consumer public sphere is to (re)confine them within the heterosexual economy of nineteenth-century domesticity" (Merish 256). Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that Nettie's husband George does not appear in the scene. What is highlighted instead is the relationship between Nettie and Lily and that between Lily and Nettie's baby girl, whose birth Lily indirectly helps through the sisterhood activity of Gerty's Girls' Club. In a symbolic sense, Lily participates in "the continuity of life" (*HM* 248) through sisterhood.

The strong presence of the sisterhood union is repeatedly seen in the scene of Lily's death in Chapter 13 of Book II, evoking Lily's tensioned sisterhood with Gerty in Book I. In Chapter 14 of Book I, Lily, fearing that "she must spend them [hours] alone, shuddering sleepless on her bed" (*HM* 117), strongly wants "the darkness made by enfolding arms, the silence which is not solitude, but compassion holding its breath" and asks for Gerty's embrace (*HM* 118); in Chapter 13 of Book II, Lily, afraid of sleeplessness and thinking that "darkness, darkness was what she must have at any cost," takes a drug that will ease her "as though an invisible hand made magic passes over her in the darkness" (*HM*

250). The contrast of coldness and warmth is repeated again just before Lily falls into endless sleep:

> She stirred once, and turned on her side, and as she did so, she suddenly understood why she did not feel herself alone. It was odd—but Nettie Struther's child was lying on her arm: she felt the pressure of its little head against her shoulder. She did not know how it had come there, but she felt no great surprise at the fact, only a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure. She settled herself into an easier position, hollowing her arm to pillow the round downy head, and holding her breath lest a sound should disturb the sleeping child.
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> As she lay there she said to herself that there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them. …
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> Slowly the thought of the word faded, and sleep began to enfold her. She struggled faintly against it, feeling that she ought to keep awake on account of the baby; but even this feeling was gradually lost in an indistinct sense of drowsy peace, through which, of a sudden, a dark flash of loneliness and terror tore its way.
>
> She started up again, cold and trembling with the shock: for a moment she seemed to have lost her hold of the child. But no—she was mistaken—the tender pressure of its body was still close to hers: the recovered warmth flowed through her once more, she yielded to it, sank into it, and slept. (*HM* 251)

Though Lily momentarily thinks about Selden, about the word she has to tell him but forgets, her meditation is overtaken by her sense of union with the baby. The last paragraph in the citation above resembles that of Chapter 14 of Book I: “Her hand still clung to Gerty’s as if to ward off evil dreams, but the hold of her fingers relaxed, her head sank deeper into its shelter, and Gerty felt that she slept" (*HM* 133). The final image of Lily is that of her sleeping in the warmth that she felt at Nettie's and Gerty's. Considering that physical comfort is linked in the novel with Lily's belonging to society—or having money—, the point is highly important that Lily's body does feel comfortable in these two scenes, which are situated outside of the society to which Lily belonged and to which she wants to return. Furthermore, considering that the tensioned same-sex union of Gerty and Lily in their bed is replaced by the image of a mother-baby relationship in Chapter 14 of Book I, the image of mother-baby relationships at Gerty's and Nettie's and at Lily's death bed can be seen as a transformation of the sisterhood relationship. Though the heterosexual relationship ostensibly prevails at the level of Lily's story, strong sisterhood does so below the surface. Considering that the motif of the "house," which appears in the title of the novel, is one of the important themes of this novel, it is significant that it is Gerty who opens the door of the house for Selden when he visits Lily in the last chapter; the "house" which Lily seeks can be said to be the "home" of sisterhood.

It is true that, as critics have stated, the scene of Lily and Nettie's union is not necessarily presented as a positive solution. While Nettie embodies domesticity and "the continuity of life" (*HM* 248) that Lily cannot have, she tries to imitate the class of leisure, calling her daughter "Marie Anto'nette," and, in this respect, "Nettie's life also becomes a parody of its own imitation of upper-class life" (Kaplan 102). In addition, as Korovessis argues, "[i]t would seem a mistake … to idealize Wharton's account of working-class women in general" (72). Not only in the work-house but also in the restaurant, which is "full of women and girls," Lily is isolated: "Her eyes sought the faces about her, craving a responsive glance, some sign of an intuition of her trouble. But the sallow preoccupied women, with their bags and note-books and rolls of music, were all engrossed in their own affairs, and even those who sat by themselves were busy running over proof-sheets or devouring magazines between their hurried gulps of tea. Lily alone was stranded in a great waste of disoccupation" (*HM* 235). Wharton thus does not necessarily make cross-class sisterhood a powerful solution of women's plight. And yet, the warm sisterhood unions between Lily and Nettie and between Lily and Gerty present a "different point of view" (*HM* 223), and, as Eileen Connell states, a sentimental tone in the scene of Lily's chance meeting with Nettie can be seen as restoring "the original function of sentimentalism" (589). Moreover, the sisterhood in this novel contains something more than the Victorian sense of sentimental sisterhood. As mentioned before, the turn-of-the-century social work made possible a cross-class sisterhood through women's clubs—namely, "a home when out of work, or in need of rest" (*HM* 87). Through the presence of Gerty's Girls' Club, the idea of sisterhood and home has a new meaning that is different from and more radical than the sentimental ideas of the Victorian era, and Wharton, though making Lily choose to live as the American Girl, seems to explore secretly the unconventional possibility of the American Girl choosing the option of becoming a New Woman who lives for her sisterhood instead of seeking a conventional marriage.

Taken together, *The House of Mirth* presents a tension between the discourse of the heterosexual order and that of strong sisterhood, which reveals Wharton's ambivalent attitude toward the issue of gender. The novel has two endings—Lily's death from Lily's perspective in Chapter 13 and from Selden's perspective in Chapter 14—and Wharton leaves the question open of which union, heterosexual relationships or sisterhood union, prevails in Lily's story. Though Lily's heterosexual relationship with Selden seems to prevail as the novel ends with Selden kneeling at Lily's death bed and exchanging unspoken words with her, the warmth of sisterhood secretly functions as an alternative to the heterosexual relationship and destabilizes the (failed) American Girl plot. Facing Lily lying in the bed, Selden thinks that Lily's "real self had lain warm on his heart but a few hours earlier" (*HM* 252-53); however, it is Nettie's child who "the real Lily" was together with in her warm bed "a few hours earlier," and it is in a mother-baby union—a transformed version of sisterhood union—that Lily falls asleep to death. If the last chapter shows the death of the "American Girl" Lily—she appears as a mask—Chapter 13 presents the death of a girl seeking a sisterhood union who may be the "real Lily Bart."

Notes

This essay is a largely revised version of a part of my dissertation, "American Girls: Nation and Gender in James, Wharton, and Cather" (University of Maryland, College Park, 2010).

[1] Emily J. Orlando also connects Selden's "morbid reading of Lily" and Lily's "own status as a body-made-shrine at the narrative's end," which shows a typical theme of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the sleeping virgin on the bed (74), and discusses Wharton's criticisms of the sexual politics in the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood that sexualizes and possesses female bodies by making Selden's view similar to that of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

[2] Critics have tended to view the role of Gerty as limited or threatening. For example, Gilbert and Gubar argue that Wharton shows the limitations of the New Woman: "Nevertheless, by depicting Gerty throughout the book as, on the one hand, naively loving and, on the other hand, inexorably marginalized, Wharton implies that even if this New Woman's obscure existence in a shabby corner of her culture may be somehow 'right,' it is so tenuous, so tentative, that it can hardly be said to foreshadow the coming of a utopia" (146). Acutely aware of the importance of Gerty's role in the novel, Lori Harrison-Kahan links Gerty as a New Woman to Rosedale as a Jew and views them as "queer" beings who threaten Lily's "whiteness."

[3] When *The House of Mirth* was first published in *Scribner's Magazine* as a serial from January to November in 1905, it was accompanied by illustrations by A. B. Wenzell, a famous illustrator contemporary with Gibson. Each illustration shows a scene from the novel, and by portraying a tall, beautiful girl in white, Wenzell makes Lily represent the American Girl popular in contemporary popular culture. Wharton was unwilling to adopt these illustrations, however, and, as Jason Williams rightly states, "[d]espite Wharton's multi-faceted portrayal of a complex, conflicted heroine, A. B. Wenzell's illustrations present a single,

superficial vision of Lily Bart that reinforces conventional stereotypes rather than questioning them" (2).

[4] For more on Girls' Clubs at the turn of the century, see Priscilla Murolo. Also, Eileen Connell, reading *The House of Mirth* in comparison with the historic situations of New York City Working Girls' Clubs, states that "the clubs invented a home that would both suit the needs of the twentieth-century working girl and, like Nettie Struther's flat, provide a space in which the bridging of class differences between women could be imagined" (564).

[5] Mary Cadwalader Jones, Wharton's sister-in-law, wrote an essay on Working Girls' Clubs in 1894, however, and it is fairly possible that Wharton read the essay and had some knowledge about Girls' Clubs (*HM* 278 footnote).

[6] Significantly, Bertha Dorset, who is presented as the central figure of the society, excludes sisterhood based on sympathy. Later in the novel, when she faces a crisis after her husband notices her relationship with Ned Silverton, "it was to Bertha that Lily's *sympathies* now went out" not because Lily likes Bertha but because she thinks Bertha needs help, and Lily "picture[s] the poor creature shivering behind her fallen defences and awaiting with suspense the moment when she could take refuge in the first *shelter* that offered" (*HM* 160, emphasis added). Bertha, however, rejects Lily's sympathetic sisterhood, making Lily a victim and throwing Lily out of society instead. Regarding Wharton's use of sentimentalism in her social criticism, see Arai.

[7] In addition, Wharton denies Lily's possible success as a New Woman. Even if Lily wants to be independent, whether of men or of women, she cannot become a New Woman of the upper class leading an independent life. When starting to work at Mme. Regina's, Lily dreams of having "the green-and-white shop," just as "[o]ther young ladies of fashion [who] had been thus 'set-up,' selling their hats by the mere attraction of a name and the reputed knack of tying a bow" (*HM* 221); nevertheless, Lily comes to learn that it is only a dream she cannot afford. Lily cannot become a middle-class New Woman with a profession, and she instead becomes a working girl.

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