

# Intimate Exchanges: Work, Affect, and Exploitation in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

**James Dorson**

Freie Universität, Berlin

***Abstract:** The opposition between the world of work and the exchanges that constitute it, on the one hand, and that of intimacy and affect, on the other, has been a rich source of criticism on Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* ever since its publication in 1905. Through a close rereading of the novel in terms of emotional labor, this essay argues that the novel is less concerned with questioning the confluence of work and intimacy in the late nineteenth century than with the problems arising from attempts to separate them. By thematizing the problem of compensation for work that is meant to resemble leisure, *The House of Mirth* is read here as a story of the exploitation that results from refusing to recognize emotional labor as work. While calculation and intimacy are inextricably joined by economic necessity in the figure of Lily Bart, it is ultimately not the commodification of intimacy that destroys her, but the compulsive search for "the real Lily Bart" that her circle of friends engage in.*

***Keywords:** Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, work, affect, emotional labor, exploitation*

When Lily Bart tells the successful Simon Rosedale near the end of *The House of Mirth* that she is out of work, he is volubly outraged: "Out of work – out of work! What a way for you to talk!" The source of his outrage, however, is not that Lily is unable to find work, but that she has to work in the first place: "The idea of your having to work – it's preposterous!" (261). Being a writer of and predominantly about the leisure class, one

would think that Edith Wharton has little to say about work. Yet by the novel's end, it is apparent that Lily Bart has, in fact, had very little leisure. If she is only actually employed once in her brief life – as a milliner, a job at which she fails miserably – throughout the novel, she provides services for her social circle and those aspiring to enter it. These services sometimes take the direct form of card and letter writing or managing appearances and facilitating acquaintances; at other times, they are rendered tacitly, through the value of her social status, or in the form of smiles, looks, and listening to others as they unburden themselves to her. In working to secure a wealthy husband – her only conceivable escape from want – she is forced always “to calculate and contrive” (42), with the result that “the rare joys of mental vagrancy” (59) stand out sharply against the backdrop of constant effort. The first definition of work in the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* describes it as an “activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a result.” The only sense in which Lily fails to meet this criterion is that her efforts do not yield any tangible result. Thus, for the reader, what is “preposterous” is not the thought of Lily having to work, but that, for all her work, she has nothing to show for it.

In contrast to work, understood as an act of exchange – the exchange of “effort” for “result” – intimacy is commonly understood as a realm that is, or at least should be, exempt from the rules of exchange. Whereas one can exert a great deal of control over one's work, in the sense of turning one's mental and physical capacities into instruments for achieving an end, it is more difficult to exercise control over one's affections. Although we may identify with our work, work is thought of as something exterior to ourselves, which we choose to do or not, whereas intimacy pertains to our “inmost” selves. Calculative rationality is endemic to work: what result will I obtain for expending so-and-so much effort? When calculation is found in intimate relations, it has a chilling effect on them. It then becomes “cold intimacy”, Eva Illouz's apt phrase for when “emotional life [...] follows the logic of economic relations and exchange” (5).

In fact, in everyday life, intimacy is often laced with pecuniary considerations, just as it habitually relies on principles of exchange that on less intimate occasions are taken for granted.<sup>1</sup> All behavior is subject to culturally defined codes of conduct, to which reciprocity is central: “behave unto

1 In *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Viviana Zelizer demonstrates in a number of examples from everyday life how intimacy and economic activity frequently intersect and constitute each other.

others as you would have them behave unto you” is a core tenet of good behavior, even if the degree of reciprocity varies depending on hierarchies of status and power. Acts of intimacy differ from other culturally prescribed acts only in that affect is associated with involuntary behavior, thus making the rules that govern such acts less apparent than in the conventions that govern interaction between people who are less intimate. Manners are a matter of form, but intimacy is considered to be a matter of renouncing form, which is seen as a barrier to intimacy. We do not – or at least are not supposed to – exchange intimacy the way we exchange compliments, favors, or work for wages.

This opposition between the world of work and the exchanges that constitute it, on the one side, and that of intimacy and affect, on the other, has been a rich source of criticism on *The House of Mirth* ever since its publication. Not without reason: one of the most striking features of the novel is how intimacy is subjected to the rules of work and exchange. Dale M. Bauer talks about “the cooptation of sexuality and intimacy as a form of business exchange” (117). Wai-Chee Dimock discusses “the centrality of exchange” in the novel, how “even the most private affairs take on the essence of business transactions” (783). Thomas Loebel considers the novel to be about “the power of materialism in its attempt to render society commensurable and exchangeable all the way to its most constituent parts, the human in the person and sociality in society” (107). The theme of commodified intimacy in *The House of Mirth* would have appealed to its contemporary readers, who by the time of the novel’s publication in 1905 were experiencing the full impact of industrial capitalism and the instrumental reason that accompanied it. Today, however, as the rationalization process has turned inward in ways that Wharton could never have imagined, *The House of Mirth* seems even more timely in its examination of the convergence of intimacy and commercial rationality than it did when it first appeared.

Over half a century ago, C. Wright Mills first identified the rise of a “personality market,” where “personal or even intimate traits of the employee are drawn into the sphere of exchange and become of commercial relevance, become commodities in the labor market” (182). Three decades later, Arlie Hochschild turned Mills’ precocious critique of postindustrial work into a full-blown sociology of what she termed “emotional labor,” which she described as the manipulation of one’s emotions for work-related ends (7). One of the paradoxes of emotional labor is that it differs from other types of work in that the less it looks like work the more successful it is. In order to

work, emotional labor should not appear as such, as those whom it is meant to benefit will then perceive it as manipulative. Because the very result that emotional labor aims to achieve is a positive change in the emotions of those it targets, the result of emotional labor is best obtained when its recipients are unaware – or at least are not made explicitly aware – that they are being rendered a service. The more spontaneous an emotion appears to be, the better its result will be, but the less it consequently will seem like work. This creates a problem of payment, when those who are meant to compensate for the work done are also those who must disavow it as work for it to be effective. When the work is immaterial, the pay also tends to be immaterial. In her discussion of the flight attendant's smile, Hochschild writes that it is the part of the job "that requires her to coordinate self and feeling so that the work seems to be effortless" (8). The smile is the emotional labor meant to make the task look easy and natural. Emotional labor, in short, makes work look more like leisure.

My reading here of *The House of Mirth* addresses this paradox. The question of exploitation is one that is often eclipsed in work on the novel's commodified intimacy due to critics' tendency to focus more on the monetization of intimacy itself than on the omission of pay for emotional services rendered – that is, on the alienating effects of instrumentalized affect, rather than on the material consequences of exploitation. Mills, in a move characteristic of the alienation critique of his times, called for a critique of "American society of the mid-twentieth century in more psychological terms, for now the problems that concern us most border on the psychiatric" (xx). In the precarious labor market of the "New Economy" today, where we have come a long way from the "golden age" of bureaucracy in which Mills lived, the problems that concern us most now are surely as material as they are psychological.

The character in *The House of Mirth* who most blatantly combines intimacy and exchange is Simon Rosedale. All of his encounters with Lily before her fall from grace are marked by a struggle of form between the two: he imposes his familiarity on her by disregarding form, while she tries to fend off his intimacy by upholding a formal distance without outright snubbing him. Though Rosedale at first is not welcome in Lily's fashionable set, his "idea of showing himself to be at home in society was to display an inconvenient familiarity with the habits of those with whom he wished to be thought intimate" (14). When he speaks to Lily, it is "in a tone which had the familiarity of a touch" (13). The metaphor of "touch" is used throughout

the novel to designate intimacy, and it poses a latent threat: when touched by intimacy one is exposed and made vulnerable. Gus Trenor, another of Lily's admirers who claims more intimacy than she is willing to concede, is made vulnerable in business when he is "heavily 'touched' by the fall in stocks" (114). In turn he seeks to touch Lily, both literally and figuratively. Intimacy is risky, and to deflect intimacy is to avoid risk.<sup>2</sup> But if intimacy may be costly, it may also be lucrative, as it is for the reporter who cashes in on the fallout in public between Lily and Bertha Dorset: "the whole scene had touches of intimacy worth their weight in gold" (189). Dispensing with conventional rules of exchange in both the market, where intimate ties may yield valuable "tips", and in private affairs, where the suspension of formal distance can be made to pay through gifts or loans, is to risk either greater profit or more devastating ruin. Unlike the *quid pro quo* of work relations, intimacy in *The House of Mirth* tends to spawn results that are greatly out of proportion with any efforts made.

Yet Rosedale's intimacy with Lily is never as risky as her intimacy with Gus Trenor, George Dorset, or Lawrence Selden, with all of whom she pays dearly for her intimacy. The reason is that Rosedale's intimacy with Lily is of the "cold" kind. For Rosedale, every relation is a business relation, and thus his intimate overture to Lily is "a plain business statement" (156). He is well aware that Lily is "not dead in love" with him: "I've got sense enough left to see that. And I ain't talking to you as if you were – I presume I know the kind of talk that's expected under those circumstances" (156). Here, Rosedale deliberately skirts the rules of courtship, but adamantly maintains the rules of business exchange. When he renews his suit later in the novel, his reduction of subtle social codes to gross business codes is made even clearer:

Put by Rosedale in terms of businesslike give-and-take, this understanding took on the harmless air of a mutual accommodation, like a transfer of property or a revision of boundary lines. It certainly simplified life to view it as a perpetual adjustment, a play of party politics, in which every concession had its recognized equivalent: Lily's tired mind was fascinated by this escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures. (226)

Intimacy with Rosedale does not mean risk but certainty because Lily, however crass this "give-and-take" proposal is, would be assured a return on her

2 See chapter 7 of Walter Benn Michaels' *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* for a reading of risk in *The House of Mirth* as an expression of the novel's ideological commitment to a market society.

intimacy. “[I]f I want a thing I’m willing to pay” (155), Rosedale says, and he wants Lily. Dimock notes that Lily is “the only one who pays routinely and scrupulously, and often with a currency she can little afford” (787). But no matter how “debas[ing]” the exchange that Rosedale proposes is, it is not a risky one; it is one of “concrete weights and measures,” where her intimacy is sure to be rewarded.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, this sort of talk makes Lily feel that she is “no more than some superfine human merchandise” (223), and that is precisely what she is to Rosedale: an object. Lily knows that his interest in her is not exclusively material – “I can’t help making love to you” (223), he admits – but her attempt to get him to marry her on the basis of his feelings, which would make her feel less like “human merchandise”, does not succeed. “Getting on to things is a mighty useful accomplishment in business, and I’ve simply extended it to my private affairs” (225), Rosedale says. Yet while he extends his business practices to his private affairs, he does not extend his private affairs to business. His marriage proposal to Lily is not meant as an intimate exchange but as a business exchange, because what he is interested in is not to purchase her intimacy, her “inmost” self, but to secure the benefits of her public persona, that is, her “outmost” self. The reason Rosedale finds it so preposterous that Lily has to work is that what he admires about her is not her private struggle to be her public self, but the result of that struggle. Rosedale literally wants her at “face value,” the social worth of her appearance and status, not what is behind it.<sup>4</sup>

The motive for this is clear. One of the defining stigmas of the *nouveau riche* is that they are identified by the work they have done to become rich. Unlike the “old rich”, they are not “naturally” rich but have to work for the privilege of leisure. As one of the objectives of the *nouveau riche* is to gain the sanction of the leisure class, their aim is to appear to be naturally rich

3 Dimock argues that “nonpayment” belongs to rule of exchange (785), implicitly making an analogy to how the state of exception belongs to the rule of law. While such a Carl Schmittian reading of business exchange is true in the sense that the terms of exchange must first be set before any exchange can take place, it ignores the fact that without a rule of exchange and a law to enforce it nonpayment would not only be the exception that confirms the rule but would quickly become the norm itself.

4 As such, Lily’s social standing is attractive to Rosedale as an object of what Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* had called “conspicuous consumption.” In Veblen’s words, good manners such as Lily’s were considered “one of the chief ornaments of the well-bred housewife” (38). Veblen’s dissection of the role of married women in the leisure class as “trophies” (16) or “chattel” (35) certainly haunts *The House of Mirth*. For a reading of *The House of Mirth* in terms of Veblen’s critique, see Yeazell.

and at leisure, with the consequent paradox that the harder they work to appear at leisure, the less “natural” and at leisure they appear to be. Unlike the other prominent new rich ascendants in the novel, the Wellington Brys, Rosedale is aware that what sets them apart from Lily’s set is the efforts they make to be included in it, and the ensuing conundrum that this entails. “[T]here’s one thing vulgar about money,” Rosedale says, “and that’s the thinking about it” (155). He admits to Lily that the Brys’ ostentatious party was “well done”, but at the same time declares that he would “want something that would look more easy and natural” (155). The most conspicuous thing about the *nouveau riche* is their artifice. The trick is to look rich while not looking as if you were trying to look rich, a distinction that the Brys clearly have not yet mastered. Lily’s friend Carry Fisher, who is tasked with the lucrative work of “breaking in” the Brys, complains to Selden about Mrs. Bry: “If she’d be natural herself – fat and vulgar and bouncing – it would be all right; but as soon as she meets anybody smart she tries to be slender and queenly [...] I’ve said to her again and again: ‘Just let yourself go, Louisa’; but she keeps up the humbug even with me” (164). The new rich are not vulgar because they *are* vulgar, but because they *act* as if they were not. The greatest obstacle that Mrs. Bry faces in entering “society” is herself: it is not that she works too hard to get in, but that her eager efforts are apparent to all. In short, she does not look “natural.”

As Rosedale knows, Lily’s capacity for appearing natural is unrivalled. Unlike the new rich, she looks “easy and natural” without apparent effort to do so, which is why the idea of Lily Bart working is incompatible with Rosedale’s idea of her. For all her social machinations, Lily has the skill of looking natural under the most trying of circumstances. Encountering her old set at a restaurant after having been excluded from it, Lily “gave to the encounter the touch of naturalness which she could impart to the most strained situations” (199). Selden accuses her of “converting impulses into intentions” (60), but her gift is rather the reverse, converting intentions into impulses. She excels in making her efforts look effortless, not merely for the pride she takes in managing people, but because she knows that the best results are those that appear to be unintentional. In managing Trenor, she reflects that “[i]t was part of the game to make him feel that her appeal had been an uncalculated impulse” (75). Even when she is at work, she looks as if she were at leisure.

The best example of Lily’s ability to look natural is during the novel’s famous *tableau vivant* scene, where Lily impersonates Joshua Reynolds’

1776 painting of Mrs. Lloyd carving the initials of her betrothed in the trunk of a tree. Focalized through Selden, we are told that the series of *tableaux* prior to Lily's "touched the vision-building faculty in Selden", so that he lets himself be transported by "the spell of the illusion" they produce (118). Lily's *tableau*, however, has quite a different effect on Selden and many of the other spectators: "so skillfully had the personality of the actors been subdued to the scenes they figured in that even the least imaginative of the audience must have felt a thrill of contrast when the curtain suddenly parted on a picture which was simply and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart" (118). The power of Lily's performance is that it appears not to be one. Unlike the others, she does not seem to be acting because "she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself" (119). In the art historian Michael Fried's terminology, the pose that Lily strikes in her representation of Mrs. Lloyd is not one that is "theatrical," in the sense of performing for an audience, but one that conjures a state of "absorption"; that is, being so absorbed in the task at hand (carving her lover's initials) that she appears to be unaware of the presence of any beholders. There are, of course, many beholders present, but her representation of a state of absorption makes everyone feel that they are alone with her, or, rather, that she is behaving as if she were alone, that she is not putting on a front but is her "inmost" self. The effect of absorption is one of intimacy. If the others are skilled performers who create an illusion, Lily's act creates the paradoxical illusion of breaking the spell. The result is an artless art, which has all the more power for effacing its own artifice, and thus the work that went into its creation.

Selden's experience of the artless effect of Lily's *tableau*, however, differs from how Rosedale sees it. Selden and Rosedale both covet Lily, but they do so for opposite reasons. If Selden at first objectifies Lily in the same way Rosedale does – by admiring her good looks and social facility as a connoisseur would – he is soon brought around to another view of her. This shift in Selden's attitude first occurs during their meeting in the wooded gardens of the Trenor estate at Bellomont, a scene that is described in terms that anticipate the pastoral setting and mood of Reynolds' painting:

Selden was still looking at her, but with a changed eye. Hitherto he had found, in her presence and her talk, the aesthetic amusement which a reflective man is apt to seek in desultory intercourse with pretty women. His attitude had been one of admiring spectatorship, and he would have been almost sorry to detect in her any emotional weakness which should interfere with the fulfillment of her aims. But now the hint of this weakness



had become the most interesting thing about her. He had come on her that morning in a moment of disarray; her face had been pale and altered, and the diminution of her beauty had lent her a poignant charm. *That is how she looks when she is alone!* had been his first thought; and the second was to note in her the change which his coming produced. (60-61)

While Selden's first view of Lily is from an aesthetic distance, he is brought around to a more intimate view of her by encountering her in a pose of private absorption ("*That is how she looks when she is alone!*") identical to the one that enralls him later in the novel. From seeing her first as a flawless *object*, the trace of vulnerability that absorption conveys makes him perceive her instead as a flawed *subject* with emotional depths stirred by his own presence.

Rosedale is not interested in a humanly flawed Lily Bart. In response to her performance as Mrs. Lloyd, he tells her that she looked as if she were wearing a crown, and fancies that "if she had one she'd wear it as if it grew on her" (155). He envisions Lily not only as the uncrowned princess of high society but as organically looking the part. For Selden, the power of Lily's *tableau* is its decontextualized setting, not at the peak of society but detached from it. She does not appear to him as a princess but as a wood nymph with "dryad-like curves" (119). Looking thus absorbed and isolated from any social context, Selden has the epiphany that his meeting with her at Bellomont had prepared: "for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was part" (119). If Lily's beauty for Rosedale is inseparable from its social context, for Selden it is incompatible with it. Lily's *tableau vivant* means different things to them, because her value for Rosedale resides in her *acting* natural in her social environment, while for Selden it resides in her *being* natural *in spite* of her social environment. The difference is one between appearance and essence. Neither Selden nor his cousin Gerty Farish, who also claims "the real Lily – the Lily I know" (119), accept Lily at face value. They seek to get under her skin, so to speak, to uncover a version of Lily Bart perceived as more real and authentic than the flawless image she projects.<sup>5</sup>

5 To a great extent this quest for "the real Lily Bart" is corroborated by the narrative itself, as the novel is framed like a detective story seeking to discover what goes on in Lily's mind behind her fine looks and immaculate manners. Selden's opening question is one that readers are encouraged to partake in: "He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine

One of the great ironies of the text is that the point at which they seem to see “the real Lily” most clearly is when she is on stage pretending to be someone else. But the irony is instructive, and should be seen in light of Selden’s view of fashionable society itself as a stage show, replete with dramatic performers and sumptuous settings. In true naturalist fashion, the dramas of society for Selden are nothing but a costume play that masquerades as life, just as the brilliant surface of Lily’s social self is nothing but a veneer masking her “real self” (84). The public self that Rosedale covets in Lily is what Selden rejects as her false self. For Selden, society has become synonymous with acting, artifice, and calculating for effect. And if people are only really themselves when they are not working to achieve something, it is only possible to gain the “personal freedom [...] from all the material accidents” (60) that he idealizes when one stands apart from society, either in the pastoral shelters to which he escapes with Lily, or in the intimacy of his home.

This retreat from and rejection of society and its actors as materialistic is just as symptomatic of the late nineteenth century when the novel takes place as the business rationality that had made it so. Selden’s ideal “republic of the spirit” is characteristically “antimodern,” in Jackson Lears’ sense of a “revulsion against the process of rationalization” (7). In her memoir *A Backward Glance*, Wharton described Lily Bart as a tragic heroine destroyed by her environment (207). In true tragic fashion, Lily is a liminal figure caught between two social orders, an older aristocratic one composed in equal measure of morality and hypocrisy, and a new materialistic one devoid of any standards other than those that lead to the greatest profit and most power. But in *The House of Mirth*, old New York – and Lily with it – is destroyed by more than the invasion of the *nouveau riche* like Rosedale. That older society was equally ruined by the prevalent reaction against commercial values at the turn of the last century. The old order placed value on appearances as a necessary mode of public interaction, but as social relationships and market relationships increasingly flowed together in the final decades of the nineteenth century, the maintenance of appearances in

glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a course texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into futile shape?” (5). As readers we also seek to uncover “the real Lily Bart” beneath her exquisite finish in order to know what she is made of, and in this sense we too partake in her destruction.

public became associated with instrumental behavior. In reaction to this, new emphasis was placed on the private self as the locus of authentic, non-instrumental behavior. Commercial practices hollowed out the moral core of the old society, making it seem false and hypocritical. However, it was the reaction against this loss of meaning that accelerated the demise of the old society by relocating meaning from the social bonds of manners and morals to a private self that was assumed to be exempt from the laws of exchange.<sup>6</sup>

Hochschild describes how, in reaction to the commercialization of feelings and beliefs that constitute our private selves,

we make up an idea of our “real self,” an inner jewel that remains our unique possession no matter whose billboard is on our back or whose smile is on our face. We push this “real self” further inside, making it more inaccessible. Subtracting credibility from the parts of our emotional machinery that are in commercial hands, we turn to what is left to find out who we “really are.” (34)

Instead of focusing attention on the modes of production and consumption that spur the process of instrumentalization, we tend to search for new experiences, inside and outside of ourselves, which appear to have escaped commodification and thus seem more authentic. Ironically, once such new experiences are found or created, they become valuable as sites of rare non-instrumental behavior, which, following the logic of emotional labor, are even more effective instruments for their apparent spontaneity. This is a seemingly endless spiral of commodification and escape, a process fed by our very aversion to instrumental exchange.

Selden desires to retreat from society with Lily, not to transform it. But the retreat from the world of work and exchange into the sphere of intimacy has consequences that Selden does not recognize. Rosedale, who objectifies Lily, wants to help her by paying her; Selden, not wanting Lily's work but her leisure, wants “to help her by loving her” (266). In reaction to the principles of exchange and commodification, Selden turns Lily back from a commodity to a person, from an object to a subject. By the end of the novel, she is much changed. Instead of trying to keep Selden's intimacy at bay, she now wants him to “see her wholly” (270). Even Rosedale is puzzled by her transformation as she now draws him “into strange depths of intima-

6 See Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man*, which traces the history of how private values of intimacy from the early nineteenth-century entered and increasingly came to dominate the public sphere.

cy" (255), whereas previously he was always met by her cool front. While Lily used to dissimulate her feelings in order to protect herself, she is now beset by an "eager communicativeness" (256), a "passionate desire to be understood" (268). The scene in which she is welcomed into the intimacy of Nettie Struther's working class home, and has the transpersonal experience of Struther's baby becoming "a part of herself" (277) as she holds it, is suggestive of the actual loss of self that her "real self" entails. Cast into poverty and excluded from the society she used to crave, but which Selden has made her see as shallow, she now takes comfort in a cosmic sense of "human fellowship" (277), of "kinship with all the loving and forgoing in the world!" (280). It is a realization of the "eternal harmony" that Selden observed in "the real Lily Bart" during the *tableau vivant* scene. However, the "real self" shed of its social trappings and in spiritual kinship with all of humanity appears to be no self at all, a negation of self, just as "human fellowship" proves to be a poor substitute for the fellowship of society. Her epiphany leaves her with a feeling of "inner destitution" (279), and she is engulfed by a "terrible silence and emptiness" (281).

What could have saved Lily Bart? Rosedale's vulgar materialism could have saved her, but that is hardly a satisfactory answer. Perhaps more vulgar materialism is needed in an age like ours where work is increasingly seen as a site of emotional rather than economic fulfillment. Yet Rosedale places value not on Lily's work itself but on the result of her work. As critics have noted, Lily is perceived not only as an object but as an *objet d'art*.<sup>7</sup> Since artworks have no intrinsic use value, their value is determined entirely by the caprices of the art market. Their value is not controlled by their creators but by their consumers. Rosedale may recognize Lily's efforts, but it is not what he is willing to pay her for. Selden, on the other hand, disavows her efforts the same way he disavows that her *tableau vivant* performance is a performance. In both cases, Lily's work is effaced. In the case of Rosedale, she would be compensated for the results of her social efforts, but they would be detached from any proportional relationship with her work: depending on her market value in society, she is either worth nothing or everything to Rosedale. In the case of Selden, the only return for her efforts, which he does not recognize as such, would be his immaterial love, which is obviously not enough to sustain her. In the former case, the value

7 See for instance Tyson.

of her work is completely dependent on the market; in the latter case, she is exploited.

*The House of Mirth* offers no solution to the problems posed by intimate exchanges; its social significance lies in identifying such problems. If the fall of Lily Bart contains a lesson for readers today, it is the importance of recognizing work for what it is. If everything is exchanged, as *The House of Mirth* suggests, then we should not shy away from the fact that intimacy is instrumentalized, but rather compensate it accordingly. The only way to avoid exploitation is to recognize emotional services as work on an equal basis as other types of work. This may conflict with our desire for authentic behavior, but the less we insist on the exigencies of non-instrumental action, the more we would be able to accept that emotional labor serves important functions in society. We may not like a society where everything is bought and sold, but as long as those are the conditions under which we live and work, we should be wary of offering our services for free. Indeed, this demand for balanced proportions in the exchange of work for pay would be in the spirit of Wharton's neoclassical sense of symmetry in everything from Italian villas and their gardens to the "perfect sense of proportion" (*The Writing of Fiction* 75) that she aimed for in the composition of novels.

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