



The Myth of Gender Essentialism in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Henry James's *Daisy Miller* (1878)

**Mai Mohammad Abbas
Lecturer
English Department-Faculty of Arts
Tanta University**

Abstract:

Ahead of their time, Edith Wharton (1862-1937) and Henry James (1843-1916) were critical of the dichotomy of the feminine and the masculine as incorporating certain essential qualities. Both articulated the modern view that gender is social rather than natural. In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Henry James's *Daisy Miller* (1878), the two heroines, Lily and Daisy, are wavering between an angelic docile compliance to the social moral codes and an equal internal insubordination to these codes. This oscillation in the heroines' mindset arises from the nature of their societies which, ironically, seem to be repulsive and tempting at the same time. For whereas these societies prove to be superficial, hypocritical, and abusive on the one hand, they also prove to be enchantingly elitist, embracing exclusively the wealthy and the classy. However, as soon as Lily and Daisy choose to adopt the qualities of the masculine gender and rebel against the conventions of their societies, they are rejected by their male lovers who ironically show a *feminine* sentiment of submission and fear of dynamicity. The heroines' rebellion is aborted because even while rebelling against their masculine-biased society, the two heroines let themselves be bounded by the masculine definition of femininity. The existence of essential qualities of gender is, thus, presented by the two authors as a myth. Wharton and James both underline that Gender is a social construction that waits for conscious subjects to redefine it.

Keywords: Gender, Essentialism, Socially-constructed femininity, Socially-constructed masculinity

The Myth of Gender Essentialism in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Henry James's *Daisy Miller* (1878)

The dialectical relationship between gender as an underlying essentialist quality, on the one hand, and gender as a socially-constructed entity, on the other, emerged by the end of the twentieth century. Post-modern feminists, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan introduced two opposing paradigms of Feminist thought: essentialist vs. constructionist feminism. The former considers gender as natural rather than social, imposing a clear distinction between the psychological and biological attributes of the feminine and those of the masculine. The latter, on the contrary, does not view gender as an intrinsic attribute, but rather as a social construction within a specific historical context:

Two perspectives began to form, one 'constructionist' or accepting of the idea that gender is made by culture in history, the other 'essentialist,' more inclined to the idea that gender reflects a natural difference between men and women that is as much psychological, even linguistic, as it is biological . . . each necessarily denied the other" (Rivkin and Ryan 766).

According to essentialist feminism, universal properties are shared by all women. These properties are essential for women to

be *women* in any manner. Women are, thus, classified under the two, supposedly natural, categories of angels and monsters (Gilbert and Gubar 812). Essentialists argue that whereas angelic women reflect the appropriate, compliant qualities of the feminine gender, the monstrous women, take over the improper, aggressive role of the masculine gender. Implementing double-standard moral codes, essentialists regard masculine qualities as improper only when adopted by women; however, the same qualities are acceptable and even consistent for men. Unlike essentialist feminism, constructionist feminism views gender as a social and historical construction. Women, thus, share common attributes only because they have been described by the patriarchal society as such in order to maintain its supremacy over women: "The psychology or identity that feminist essentialists think is different from men's is merely the product of conditioning under patriarchy" (Rivkin and Ryan 768). Accordingly, constructionists redefine women as distinct, non-classified social groups who do not share inherent values that constitute their identities. The following study examines essentialist vs. constructionist feminism in two modern novels: *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *Daisy Miller* (1878).

Ahead of their time, Edith Wharton (1862-1937) and Henry James (1843-1916) were critical of the dichotomy of the feminine and the masculine as essential categories. Both seemed to be aware that gender is social rather than natural. In Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and James's *Daisy Miller*, the two heroines, Lily and Daisy, are wavering between angelic docile compliance to their societies' moral codes and inner rebellion against these codes. This oscillation in the heroines' mindset arises from the nature of their societies which, ironically, seem to be repulsive and tempting at the same time. For whereas these societies prove to be superficial, hypocritical, and abusive on the one hand, they also prove to be enchantingly elitist, embracing exclusively the wealthy and the classy. Both wealth and high-class operate as weak points for the two heroines. However, as soon as Lily and Daisy choose to adopt the qualities of aggression and defiance related to the masculine gender, they are rejected by the male figures who ironically show feminine attributes of submission and compliance. Nevertheless, the heroines' rebellion is aborted because even while rebelling against their masculine-biased society, the two heroines let themselves be bounded by the masculine definition of femininity.

In nineteenth-century America, the angel-like women reflected the socially-constructed qualities of the feminine gender: women were isolated within the sphere of the home. In such a domestic circle, submissive women's exclusive role centered on becoming mother figures who revered their husbands and children and considered it a consecrated honor to obliterate themselves as autonomous beings and even to "grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 16). In other words, women were transformed into negative objects. In "Silencing the Self: The Power of Social Imperatives in Female Depression," Dana Jack argues that silence becomes the only shelter against the invasive pressures of society: "the authentic self becomes silent to protect the integrity of its own vision from judgment" (178). Women believed that if they had a voice to express their views, they would never be understood, but rather, they would be condemned as selfish, sinful, and would eventually be ostracized and alienated. Within the same argument, in *The Divided Self*, Ronald Laing argues that:

The self, in order to develop and sustain its identity and autonomy, and in order to be safe from the persistent threat and danger from the world, has cut itself off from direct relatedness with others, and has endeavored to become its

own object: to become, in fact, related directly only to itself. Its cardinal functions become phantasy and observation. Now, in so far as this is successful, one necessary consequence is that the self . . . never actually 'meets' reality. (137)

Thus, even though the self stays silent and safe, yet, this self is alienated. It lives in a virtual world, cut out from the truth. Its function is restricted to staying an object. Indeed, in a very significant analogy, Elizabeth Allen argues that American women were looked upon as objects that were prepared to signify but not allowed to be active agents in the signifying technique (1). The object may have lots of meanings, but it never generates meaning; it can be constructed but it can never be able to construct its own world. It becomes subject to social standards, yet, it is not able to create its own standards.

Nevertheless, whereas some women were content to remain as silent objects lest they become demonized by society, other rebellious nineteenth-century American women attempted "to reconcile the contradiction of woman's existence, both as sign and as conscious subject" (Allen 1). Repulsed by the restrictive role of the obedient wives and mothers, and motivated by the American Revolution and the attempts of the abolition of slavery, these

frustrated, rebellious American women called for their freedom (Hymowitz and Weissman 80). They started to talk about and defend their rights to “own property and control wages; to exercise free speech; to obtain a divorce; and to achieve equal opportunities in commerce, trade, the professions, and education” (Hymowitz and Weissman 95). Women's claims startled American society: it was aggressively received by the majority of people who were not ready to defy traditions and conventions (102). Women's right to liberation was described as an “assault upon the social order” (83). Any deviance from the “angelic” category on the side of women results in their social expulsion to an out-of-place existence. Any manner which does not conform to the traditional principles is automatically designated as “unfeminine,” (Gilbert and Gubar 819). Indeed, If a woman ventures to step out of this sphere, she “was despised as an ‘unsexed woman’” (Hymowitz and Weissman 67). Wayward as they were, these women adopted the qualities of the masculine gender which were socially regarded as suitable merely for men, not women.

At the beginning of *The House of Mirth* and *Daisy Miller*, Lily and Daisy do not consistently relate either to the space of the passive angelic feminine gender or to the space of the active monster-like

masculine gender. Indeed, the two heroines are torn between being passive and submissive due to the pressures and temptations of their societies on the one hand, and being dynamic and rebellious due to their desire to sustain their dignity and self-assertion on the other hand. The vacillation of the two heroines between compliance (the angelic feminine) and rebellion (the monster-like masculine) mirrors an equal contradiction in the standards of their own societies. Indeed, despite being repulsive, these societies are simultaneously alluring. For whereas these societies prove to be superficial, hypocritical, and abusive on the one hand, they also prove to be temptingly elitist, embracing exclusively the wealthy and the classy.

On the one hand, the two heroines are rejected by their societies which prove to be superficial, hypocritical, and abusive. First of all, these societies are superficial. In *The House of Mirth*, the society has a “force of negation which eliminate[s] everything beyond [its] own range of perception” (49). Different representative figures give us insight into the shallow nature of these societies. For instance, Percy Gryce is said to have reverence for “the art of accumulation” (22). Mrs. Peniston is described as a “looker-on at life” who is intrusive and curious about other people's life. She is

even described as resembling her Dutch lineage who were used to watching the road so they could see what was going on even in the street (37). Gossiping, gambling, and the attention to trivial matters such as the tiny details of new dresses or wedding gowns seem to be the main characteristic of Lily's social circle. These people live on the surface of life; they have “no more real existence than the poet’s shades in limbo” (290). In *Daisy Miller*, society is as trivial as that of *The House of Mirth*. Like-wise, many figures act as symbols of this society. For instance, Mrs. Costello makes her first appearance in the novel through the line: “his aunt had always almost a headache” (48). We know afterward that she is frequently that she simply wants to show that if she had not been prone to chronic headaches, she might have made a great impression on her time (61). She is also snobbish, and highly elitist. Thus, she also describes to Winterbourne the picture of “the minutely hierarchical constitution of the society” (62). We also have Mrs. Walker who, like Mrs. Peniston, works as a looker-on at life for she, like many American ladies, scrutinizes every aspect of the European society (96). Mrs. Walker, thus, collects “several specimen of her diversely born fellow-mortals to serve, as it were, as textbooks” (96). However, despite the

supremacy which these people feel towards others, they seem to be living on the surface of life.

Not only are these societies superficial, but also they prove to be hypocritical. Lily and Daisy's societies are heavily characterized by sexual double standards. This is apparent in *The House of Mirth* in the discrimination against unmarried women: a good-looking girl should better marry, "then no questions are asked" (166). This bias is highlighted in the character of Bertha Dorset: a married woman who is having an affair outside her marriage but goes unnoticed just because she is married. Society only punishes the offensive unmarried women who "betray its connivance" (109). The code of this society is that a woman's only judge is her husband and as long as she is under the shelter of his approval: he becomes above suspicion (109). The same idea of differentiation between married and unmarried women takes place in *Daisy Miller* when Winterbourne contemplates that in Geneva it is not allowed for a young man to talk to a young unmarried girl (51), then in another instance, he mentions that married women "were great coquettes—dangerous, terrible women, with whom one's relation was liable to take a serious turn" (58).

Another form of sexual double standards in these societies is that whatever is permitted to men is not permitted to women: in *The House of Mirth*, Selden has an affair with Bertha Dorset, but “men do not . . . suffer much from such exposure” (109-110). In *Daisy Miller’s* opening paragraphs, Winterbourne is said to be in Geneva “studying” as a symbol of his affair with a lady who lives there (48). Selden and Winterbourne are free to have different affairs; they will not be blamed only because they are men. On the other hand, if a woman does the same thing, she is expelled out of the social circle only because she is a woman. Because of this hypocrisy, the society is described in *The House of Mirth* more than one time as being operated in terms of a cue: Lily exposes the hypocritical nature of her society by contemplating that “The Dorsets, the Stepneys, the Brys—all the actors and the witnesses in the miserable drama—had preceded her with the version of the case” (238-239). Likewise, in *Daisy Miller*, whereas Winterbourne is free to have an affair in Geneva, a woman's reputation for having an affair destroys her social image at once and leads her to be excluded from the social circle.

In addition to being superficial and hypocritical, Lily and Daisy's societies are abusing both heroines through a process of

commodification. It is a dominant quality in most of the nineteenth-century literature to have its heroines beautiful. As Vinicius de Moraes says: "May the ugly ones forgive me, but beauty in a woman is indispensable" (Wright 1). From Washington Irving's Katrina Van Tassel through Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Bryne (Wright 3), the value of female beauty is celebrated. Presumably, beauty is a source of power; however, truthfully, it is a source of abuse. Indeed, these societies commodify the female body. In "Women on the Market," Luce Irigaray emphasizes how a society can commodify women, turning them merely into valuable silent objects. Thus, according to Irigaray, a woman becomes "an envelope that is precious but impenetrable, ungraspable" (802).

Symbolized within the meaning of their name, Lily and Daisy are no more than ornaments. Their value lies exclusively in their beauty. The first thing that strikes us in *The House of Mirth* and *Daisy Miller* is that the heroines are stunningly beautiful. It is the typical story of the beautiful young girl who enchants whoever she meets. At one moment in *The House of Mirth* when Lawrence Selden first sees Lily, he is "conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness; in the modeling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair . . . and the thick planting of her straight black

lashes” (3). Moreover, when Winterbourne meets Daisy for the first time, he is aware that he has “not seen for a long time anything prettier than his fair countrywoman’s various features-her complexion, her nose, her ears, her teeth” (53). Moreover, both Selden and Winterbourne contemplate the beauty of Lily and Daisy’s hands. Selden watches Lily’s hand “polished as a bit of old ivory,” (5) while Winterbourne notices Daisy’s “extremely pretty hands . . . folded in her lap” (55). In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart is aware of the power of her beauty: she confesses that she has been “brought up to be ornamental” (315) and that her role in society is to “amuse and charm it” (238). Like Lily Bart, Daisy Miller is aware of the power of her beauty. Through her beauty, she can be “a fearful, frightful flirt” (99). Throughout the novel, it is her beauty that dazzles the male figures.

At one moment in *The House of Mirth*, Rosedale commodifies Lily; he proposes to her, saying that when he wants something, he is willing to pay for it (184). We know that the fact that Lily is aloof “appealed to his collector’s passion for the rare and unattainable” (119). Consequently, there is a latent fear in Lily’s life from aging. Mr. Rosedale reminds Lily that if she grows older, she may lose her dreams to have a fixed position in society (187). Lily herself echoes

this idea when she contemplates that when one thinks that time moves slowly, it may “break into a wild irrational gallop” (321). She is horrified when she sees “two little lines near her mouth,” (27) for this is her only asset in society. This idea of being on the verge of the abyss of time lingers in Lily's life, for she is twenty-nine at the beginning of the novel, and her position in society, which is based, in the first place, on her beauty, begins to be precarious. In *Daisy Miller*, the main character, Daisy, is also abused through a process of commodification. The only art that Daisy Miller knows is the old art of seductiveness. She has the attributes of being natural and spontaneous, but one may say that it is her beauty that enchants society, for the same attributes might have gone unnoticed if they were coming from an ordinary character.

Even though these societies prove to be superficial, hypocritical, and abusive, Lily and Daisy are tempted by the social circle that embraces only the wealthy and the classy. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton describes Lily's desire to be a part of society: “these people whom she had ridiculed and yet envied were glad to make a place for her in *the charmed circle* about which all her desires revolved” (51; emphasis added). Indeed, society in *The House of Mirth* and *Daisy Miller* is like a charmed circle. The social

circle is charmed because despite being stifled with its authoritarian control, Lily and Daisy still aspire to be a part of it. The two girls act, initially, in agreement with the dominant social codes; both have a docile acceptance of the social roles ascribed to them in order to be permitted to join the charmed social circle.

It is important to consider how the issue of class and wealth hinders Lily and Daisy's efforts to be conscious active subjects. The tragic flaw of Lily and Daisy is the love of class and wealth; Lily is aware that she is chained within this love. She admits, "there are two selves in her, the one she had always known and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained" (155). Lily may not be satisfied with the life inside her social circle, but at the same time, it is too late to live outside it. The beginning, as she puts it, was in her cradle, "in the way [she] was brought up and the things [she] was taught to care for" (237). Class and wealth are the centers around which Lily was taught to revolve; if she stopped, she would lose her balance. Indeed, Lily was taught that through money, one could be free. Lily "might have resisted a great temptation" like that of Rosedale's offer, but "little ones would have pulled [her] down" (326). These little ones are her few dresses that she should buy or the gambling bills that she should pay. Money, Lily believes, should

permanently free her from the degradation and disgrace of the poor (50). This is why, at one moment, after she discovers that she is in debt to Gus Trenor, Lily says to Gerty: “Can you imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement—some hideous change that has come to you while you slept?” (173). Conjuring the image of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, this “disfigurement” is the apex of Lily’s sense of loneliness and alienation. This alienation is due to the idea that was planted in her mind: if there is no money, there is no freedom: “The only way to not think about money is to have a great deal of it” (71). Indeed, Lily stakes her sense of freedom and independence on money (187).

Not only was Lily taught to relate money to freedom, but she was also taught to relate it to virtue. Indeed, Lily “felt very virtuous as she dispensed the sum in sops to her tradesmen” (89). In addition, Lily relates money to virtue through philanthropy: Lily’s works of charity give a new meaning of nobility to her desire for money. Devoid of money, Lily has no other choice but to imagine herself as a being devoid of virtue. Dimock analyzes Lily’s dependence on “marketplace” elements as a way of a moral victory:

Her few moments of moral triumph, translated into the idiom of the marketplace, merely figure as moments of ill-advised

improvidence, altogether in keeping with her lifelong habit of spending "more than she could afford." Morality, in *The House of Mirth*, provides no transcendent language, no alternative way of being, but feeds directly into the mechanisms of the marketplace. (135)

Like Lily Bart, Daisy Miller lacks the cultivated manners of the high class. Indeed, we know from the very beginning that Daisy is a part of what Mrs. Fisher calls the "new Americans" (197) who have money but lack the cleverness that would make them a part of the higher class. The poor manners of Daisy and her family are contrasted with the clever manners of "neat German waiters," "Russian princesses" and the "little Polish boys walking about" (48). Despite lacking the proper manners, Daisy "dresses in perfection," (62) and thus can erase the demarcations that separate her from higher classes through her wealth. In other words, Daisy's strong aspiration to be a part of the elite social circle chains her in and makes her, like Lily, prone to be stifled by it.

Realizing the superficial, hypocritical and abusive nature of their social circle, and rebelling against the alluring shackles that chain them to wealth and class, Lily and Daisy are able to transform themselves from passive, dormant objects into active, dynamic

conscious subjects. Lily is aware that there is something more profound than physical appearances. Thus, Lily longs to be to Selden “more than a piece of sentient prettiness, a passing diversion to his eye and brain” (98). One emotional moment that best expresses the rebellious sentiments within Lily Bart is when she envies Selden's detachment from the “great gilt cage” in which she lives. Lily contemplates: “How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to [her] as she heard its door clang on her!” However, the door, Lily knew, never clanged: “it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom” (56). This moment shows how Lily Bart is a true wayward protagonist. She seems to be aware that the circle will eventually stifle her. Thus, Lily, expressing her rebellion against the societal moral codes, loses many chances to be settled in a marriage with a wealthy man. In a very insightful observation, Mrs. Fisher, a good friend to Lily, notes that: “That's Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic . . . Sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for” (198).

Lily knows, deep inside, that marriage to a wealthy man will imprison her inside the social circle forever, so she refuses to be a part of it.

Like Lily, Daisy defies the norms of her society asserting that she is a rebellious young lady. She is not embarrassed when she talks to Winterbourne. Her glance is “direct and unshrinking” (53). She boasts of having gentlemen friends (57). She is, as Winterbourne describes, “a designing, an audacious, an unscrupulous young person” (57). One of the scenes that best exemplifies Daisy’s nonconformity is the scene of the carriage: Daisy breaks the conventions by “expos[ing] herself unattended” (86) to the Roman crowd in the street. The Roman crowd gazes at Daisy, the same way the charwoman gazed at Lily when she was going down the stairs of the Benedick. The two girls are subjected to the gaze of the society which has the right to impose its standards on them in every action if they were to be admitted to its circle. Nevertheless, Lily and Daisy are able to question the patriarchal authority of their societies. Indeed, the two heroines developed rebellious ideas "so as to make 'visible' . . . what was supposed to remain invisible" (Irigaray, "Power of Discourse" 795). Defying social norms, Lily and Daisy are looked upon by society as adopting the masculine gender. That is to say, since they are dynamic, they

are, consequently, looked upon as monstrous who become dispossessed of the qualities of the compliant angelic feminine gender.

This transformation from a (feminine) passive object to a (masculine) dynamic conscious subject is rejected by the male figures of the two novels who ironically show a feminine sentiment of submission and compliance to the moral codes of their societies. Indeed, Selden and Winterbourne are afraid that Lily and Daisy's mobility is a menace to the long-held qualities of their masculine gender. Selden and Winterbourne even regard the female charms of Lily and Daisy as seductive art that aims to steal their own masculine energy. This fear is a continuation in the history of the relationship between masculinity and femininity represented in the western culture and patriarchal mythology:

From Errour to Dullness, from Goneril and Regan to Chloe and Caelia— the female monster . . . has been made to represent all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death . . . male dread of women . . . has historically objectified itself in vilification of women, while male ambivalence about female "charms" underlies the traditional images of such terrible

sorceress-goddesses as the Sphinx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome, all of whom possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and to steal male generative energy. (Gilbert and Gubar 822-823)

Struggling to assert their masculine energy, Selden and Winterbourne attempt to maintain the imaginary fairy tale of active, strong men who come to rescue the impotent, passive women: Selden uses an insightful analogy in his desire to “rescue” Lily. He likens himself to Perseus whose task was to break loose Andromeda’s chains “for her limbs are numb with bondage and she cannot rise and walk, but clings to him with dragging arms, as he beats back to land with his burden” (167). Selden then reflects that “it was [Lily’s] weakness which had put the strength in him” (167). Only when Lily is weak does Selden love her. Only when he feels that she needs him is he able to renew his faith in her. Selden demonstrates to Lily the meaning of ultimate freedom symbolized in his description of the republic of spirit: to be freed from “everything-- from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents” (70). Yet, according to Selden, this lesson about freedom— which for him is illusory since he is a social product of his society—is not aimed at inspiring Lily with real revolutionary

emotions, but rather to keep his favorite place as her mentor and savior.

However, as soon as Lily shifts the masculine-feminine roles; that is, as soon as she adopts the masculine/dynamic, Selden loses his love and faith in her. This is best exemplified when Selden expresses his resentment that Lily spent time in England after being expelled from the yacht and then went to Alaska with the Gormers. Selden contemplates that these actions take her away from the region where they met for an illumined moment and that this recognition produced in him “a sense of negative relief” (287). Selden rejects Lily’s mobility because he becomes concerned about his masculine energy being overthrown.

Like Selden, Winterbourne attempts to contain Daisy in the imaginary, stereotypical fairy tale of the strong man who saves the weak woman: he describes her as an “indolent sylph.” Winterbourne reflects that he never enjoyed the feeling of steering a boat with a gorgeous young lady under the gleaming star lights of a summer night (71). He describes his excursion with her as an “escapade” and “adventure” (75) and that he “could have believed he was going to elope with her” (74). Moreover, Winterbourne describes his relationship with Daisy in terms of a conqueror who wants to

subjugate her: when introducing himself to Daisy, Winterbourne decides that he must “advance farther rather than retreat” (52). He is addicted to “observing and analyzing the feminine beauty” (53) and to analyze something is, in a way, an attempt to control it. Indeed, all Winterbourne’s analytic efforts to categorize Daisy into a specific ‘type’ are trials to assert his power over her. This is why Winterbourne tries to find “*the formula* that applied to Miss Daisy Miller” (58; emphasis added). Within the same argument, Allen argues that Daisy is observed as a dormant object rather than being a reflective, conscious self: “Daisy is what Winterbourne sees, it is up to him, the conscious subject, to accord Daisy some social place, some function as sign” (53). In other words, Winterbourne is the conscious subject who gives her some meaning through his own process of signification.

Like Lily, Daisy again shifts the masculine-feminine roles. Now it is Daisy who adopts the masculine/dynamic. As soon as Daisy shows a sign of masculine dynamicity, Winterbourne is repulsed. At one moment, he is disappointed because Daisy destroys his imaginary fairytale of a pretty, weak young lady waiting for her lover to come and rescue her: “he was annoyed at hearing of a state of affairs so little in harmony with an image that had lately flitted in and

out of his own meditations; the image of a very pretty girl looking out of an old Roman window and asking herself urgently when Mr. Winterbourne would arrive" (80). Eventually, Winterbourne, at a moment which can be equated with the moment in which Selden feels "a sense of negative relief," (287) is able to find this *formula* when he sees Daisy and Giovanelli in the Colosseum. Winterbourne believes that Daisy does not deserve his respect because of her shameful behavior. He discovers this with a sort of horror and relief as the riddle becomes easy to read. He even feels annoyed it took him too much time to come to the right way of seeing Daisy (111). Thus, Winterbourne loses interest in the dynamic, conscious Daisy. Objectifying Daisy into a formula, Winterbourne can eventually preserve his masculine energy from being overthrown.

To sum up, the male figures try to protect their masculine energy from being overthrown by the heroines. They, consequently, attempt at confining the heroines within the limitations of the traditional hierarchy of the strong male savior who comes to rescue the pretty, weak young lady. As soon as the heroines adopt the socially ascribed dynamicity of the masculine in order to rebel against this hierarchy, the male "saviors" are repulsed and lose interest in the love relationship; thus, protecting their masculine

authority from being displaced. Ironically, despite their attempts to maintain their masculine power, this repulsion from dynamicity confines our male figures within the socially-constructed qualities of the feminine gender being negative, passive, and ineffectual. The shift is now complete: Lily and Daisy adopt the masculine gender; Selden and Winterbourne are bounded—despite their efforts—within the feminine gender.

However, as soon as Selden and Winterbourne stop determining what Lily and Daisy signify, both heroines disintegrate. Although Lily and Daisy express their refusal to submit to the restrictions of the real world (Gilbert 57), both of them stake the success of their rebellions on male saviors. The hegemony of masculine thought is too powerful to allow for a genuine and self-constructed feminine structure. In other words, the feminine rebellion is eventually rooted in a masculine thought that impedes its growth. As Toril Moi puts it, "there is no pure feminist or female space from which we can speak. All ideas, including feminist ones, are in this sense 'contaminated' by patriarchal ideology" (Moi 205). Hence, despite their serious attempts to break free from the hegemony of their patriarchal society, the same essential gender ideology controls

Lily and Daisy when they fancy they could not be saved without Selden and Winterbourne's support.

Indeed, Lily and Daisy's need for male saviors in their rebellions denote that they are trapped in the stereotypical patriarchal bounds of what Willa Cather names "the over-idealization of love," "the spoil of the poets" and "the Iphigenias of sentiment" (292). Cather talks about the female staking her life on a male savior who comes to free the heroine from her long-life tortures. Cather notes that such heroines wait for "an individual and self-limited passion to yield infinite variety, pleasure and distraction, to contribute to their lives what the arts and the pleasurable exercise of the intellect gives to less limited and less intense idealists" (293). This is why when Selden and Winterbourne abandon Lily and Daisy, the two heroines become too impotent to continue their rebellion: because they expected one passion, that of love, to replace an authentic process of self-construction.

Lily and Daisy let themselves be defined through the masculine definition of femininity: both regard Selden and Winterbourne as the conscious subjects who give their rebellion the meaning through their own course of signification. But, instead of being the signified object, Lily and Daisy could have been the

signifying subjects. Instead of identifying with male saviors, the heroines could have refused the qualities attributed to the feminine by their societies; they could have formulated new qualities and attributed it to *the feminine*: being independent, not vulnerable; being strong, not monstrous, and being audacious, rather than insane. Yet, Lily and Daisy were never revolutionary enough to pose any original addition to their societies' definition of the feminine. Lily, for instance, plays the socially-assigned role of the angelic-feminine gender when she refuses to blackmail Bertha Dorset. She eventually dies--maybe, intentionally, by committing suicide— thus escaping any potential defiance to her society. Daisy, likewise, plays the role of the angelic feminine when she decides to renounce her existence—which could have been subversive and threatening to her society— and expose herself to the plague which offers an escape from struggle and a surrender to the passive status of death. Rootless as they are, lilies and daisies die without anything to which "the poor little tentacles of self could cling" before the flood of the authoritarian society engulfs them (Wharton 338).

Death can symbolize the heroine's failure, their retreat to the embrace of infancy, and their recognition of their own passivity and impotence. But the heroines' death can also be seen as a symbol of

their final attempt at proving their subjectivity through their ability to escape the stifling pressures of their society. Within the same argument, Elaine Showalter interprets Lily's death as a final sign of solidarity: "Doing justice to Lily Bart requires that we see how far she has come even in her death . . . *The House of Mirth* ends not only with a death, but with the vision of a new world of female solidarity" (152-153). That is to say, through their death, Lily and Daisy assert their refusal of the social dichotomy of the masculine and the feminine gender, declaring that this dichotomy is only mythical and is merely socially constructed to repress their free spirits. Thus, both Wharton and James regard the existence of essential qualities of gender as mythical. They stress that Gender is a social construction that waits for conscious subjects to redefine it.



Works Cited

Allen, Elizabeth. *A Woman's Place in the Novels of Henry James*.

Macmillan, 1984.

Banta, Martha. *Failure and Success in America: A Literary Debate*.

Princeton University Press, 1978.

Cather, Willa. "Comments and Questions." *The Awakening and*

Selected Short Fiction, edited by Rachel Adams, Barnes and

Noble Classics, 2003, pp. 291-294.

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Avon Books, 1972.

Dimock, Wai-Chee. "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The*

House of Mirth." *Edith Wharton*, edited by Harold Bloom,

Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

Fryer, Judith. *The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth-Century*

American Novel. Oxford University Press, 1976.

Gilbert, Sandra. "The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's

Fantasy of Desire." *The Kenyon Review*, vol.5, no. 3, 1983,

pp. 42-66.

Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. "The Madwomen in the Attic."

Literary Theory: An Anthology, edited by Julie Rivkin and

Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publications, 2004, pp. 812-825.



Hymowitz, Carol and Michaele Weissman. *A History of Women in America*. Bantam Books, 1978.

Irigaray, Luce. "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publications, 2004, pp. 795-798.

---. "Women on the Market." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publications, 2004, pp. 799-811.

Jack, Dana. "Silencing the Self: The Power of Social Imperatives in Female Depression." *Women and Depression: A lifespan Perspective*, edited by Ruth Formanek and Anita Gurian, Springer Press, 1987, pp. 161-181.

James, Henry. *Daisy Miller*. Penguin Books, 1986.

Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. Methuen, 1985.

Laing, Ronald. *The Divided Self*. Penguin Books, 1965.

Peterson, Dale. *The Clement Vision: Poetic Realism in Turaenev and James*. Kennikat Press, 1975.

Poovey, Mary. "Persuasion and the Promises of Love." *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, edited by Carolyn G.



Heilbrun and Margaret P. Higonnet, *The Johns Hopkins University Press*, 1983.

Rivkin, Julie, Michael Ryan. "Feminist Paradigms." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004, pp.765-769.

Showalter, Elaine, editor. *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. Pantheon Books, 1985.

Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. Penguin Group, 2000.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*. Oxford University Press, 1977.

Wright, Charlott. *Plain and Ugly Janes: The Rise of the Ugly Woman in Contemporary American Fiction*. Garland Publishing, 2000.

المستخلص بالعربية:

أسطورة جوهريّة الجندر في روايتي "بيت المرح" لاديت وارتون و "ديزي ميلر"
لهنري جيمس

كان كلا من إديث وارتون (1862-1937) وهنري جيمس (1843-1916) في طليعة الكتاب الذين رفضوا وجود صفات جوهريّة لثنائية الأنثوية والذكورية. كلاهما صاغ وجهة النظر الحديثة القائلة بأن الجنس عبارة عن مركب اجتماعي وليس طبيعي. في رواية "بيت الفرحة" (1905) لاديت وارتون و"ديزي ميلر" (1878) لهنري جيمس، تتأرجح البطلتان ، ليلي وديزي ، بين الامتثال الملائكي المطيع للقواعد الأخلاقية و الاجتماعية وبين التمرد الداخلي على هذه القواعد. يعود هذا التذبذب في عقلية البطلتين الى طبيعة مجتمعاتهن المثيرة للمفارقة: فهي مثيرة للاشمئزاز من ناحية ومغرية من ناحية أخرى. فبينما تتسم هذه المجتمعات بالسطحية و النفاق و التعسف من جهة ، فإنها أيضاً تتسم بكونها نخبوية بشكل ساحر و ذلك لأنها مقصورة على الأثرياء و عليّة القوم. ومع ذلك ، بمجرد أن تختار ليلي وديزي تبني صفات الذكورية التي أسسها المجتمع والثورة على تقاليد مجتمعاتهم ، يتم رفضهم من قبل حبيبيهما الذكور و اللذان، و بشكل باعث على السخرية، يظهران شعوراً أنثوياً بالخضوع والخوف من الديناميكية. في النهاية يتم إحباط تمرد البطلتين لأنه و حتى أثناء التمرد على مجتمعها المنحاز للذكورية ، تتقيد البطلتان بالتعريف الذكوري للأنثوية. وهكذا ، فلقد أكد المؤلفان على أن الصفات الجوهريّة للجنس هي مجرد أسطورة. فالجنس هو بناء اجتماعي ينتظر الأشخاص الواعين لإعادة تعريفه و تركيبه.