
Intellectual Vagrants and Mechanical Readers: The Promise of Tautological Value in *The House of Mirth* and ‘*The Vice of Reading*’

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Abstract

From Lily Bart’s first appearance in the opening paragraph of *The House of Mirth* (1905), she is associated with both movement and its lack: in the “rush” of Grand Central Station, the sight of Lily “standing apart” causes Selden to “pause in surprise”-and also provokes a “faint movement of interest.” Furthermore, this movement is not only spatial, or perhaps even sexual, but is also financial: Lily, we are told, “always roused speculation.” *The House of Mirth* is, in many senses, the story of this tension between mobility and fixedness: Lily’s mobile value, rising and falling like a financial product on the stock market, and its intersection with her physical and moral mobility, or lack of it. Lily wants to live the life of an “intellectual vagrant”-rather than that of a “mechanical reader” (the terms coined by Wharton in “*The Vice of Reading*” [1903])-while also resisting the fixing of her economic value by others. However, she resists by insisting on the immobility of her value; as Wai-Chee Dimock points out, Lily’s greatest power-perhaps her only power-comes from her insistence on repaying her debt to Gus Trenor exactly: “by making money its own equivalent, Lily reduces it to its own terms and defies its purchasing power.” This paper considers how issues of consumption, value and commodification intersect with the way texts are represented (their circulation, exchange and consumption) in *The House of Mirth* and “*The Vice of Reading*,” and the extent to which mobility (spatial, economic, moral, or otherwise) offers a possible means of resistance to reification and commodification.

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