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“The Lily We Know”

Reading *The House of Mirth* as a Captivity Narrative

He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear (329).

Much has been said about this ambiguous ending to *The House of Mirth*, with the consensus among feminist critics being that

Selden is free, once Lily has died, to re-write the whole history of their encounters, to re-write her, and to find “all that his heart craved” in this posthumous reconstruction. As Susan Gubar explains, the word in this final passage “is Lily’s dead body; for she is now converted completely into a script for his edification, a text not unlike the letters and checks she has left behind to vindicate her life.” He will tell the history (*his* story) of her life and death as a “lady,” and we know that he will erase much of the complexity that made her such a “fascinating study” for him and for us. In this way, Selden more than any other character in the novel is indicted by Wharton for his sentimental notions of romance and his cowardly inability to deal with Lily in her full humanity.

This final scene is more than an exposure of Selden’s coy and dishonest treatment of Lily, however; it is also the moment when Wharton “outs” a subtle but similar aspect of her own narrative strategy. Although the novel is told for the most part through the points of view of different characters, with all of the limitations and unreliability that such perspectives bring, it is also “interrupted” frequently by an omniscient narrator who claims to know certain truths about Lily—truths that other characters, we readers, and Lily herself are not necessarily privy to. The final reference to “the word which made all clear” is the most blatant example of this—there is “a word” which will clarify the ambiguities of this novel and this character, but the narrator will not tell us what it is—and it is a clue into both the difficulties inherent in “reading” Lily, and a particular strategy for doing so.

If Selden is guilty of colonizing Lily with his own simplified and romantic view of her, the narrator is guilty of a series of narrative “hijackings” in which, as I will show, she derails the course of

Lily's thoughts at crucial moments, figuratively wrapping a hand around Lily's mouth just as she seems to be on the brink of insight or breakthrough. Both of these factors in Lily's "framing" exacerbate the insistent and deliberate theme of captivity present in the novel to the point that it becomes appropriate to consider *The House of Mirth* a captivity narrative. Doing so—that is, bringing critical literature developed around and about captivity narratives to bear on Wharton's novel—not only complicates and enriches our understanding of Wharton's negotiations with the sentimental tradition she was writing out of, it also offers another way to clarify what is arguably Lily's central problem—the frustratingly invisible source of her captivity.

According to Christopher Castiglia in *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Culture-Crossing, and White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst*, the genre of the captivity narrative has afforded white women a "symbolic economy" with which to express dissatisfaction with gender roles, to re-imagine those roles and the narratives that normalize them, and to transform boundaries of genre. Departing from the standard reading of puritan captivity narratives (such as Mary Rowlandson's, Rachel Plummer's and Hannah Dustin's) as "predictable and artless ... expressions of voluntary social conformity," Castiglia shows that stories of captivity have allowed white women to document agency and write about culturally unnamable forms of imprisonment. As such, the presence of literal captors was sometimes less crucial to the impact or import of the narrative than the subversive commentary on "legitimated" states of captivity such as marriage or, even more silently but stringently enforced, heteronormativity.

The House of Mirth fits into Castiglia's genealogy not only because Wharton borrows certain terms and images from the captivity narrative tradition, but because the novel is so centrally concerned with culturally unnamable forms of imprisonment—and specifically with heteronormativity. In this article I argue that the final "word," that passes between Selden and Lily is less *clear* than *queer*. That is not to argue that any of the characters can be identified as gay or lesbian in terms of behavior or identity, but rather to assert that the supposed and assumed "impossibility" of such behavior or identity is undermined throughout the novel, largely through such odd narrative interventions as "the word." Early in the novel, Rosedale is declared "impossible;" but gradually, due to a rapidly changing world, he is initiated into the inner circle of glittering New York society. Analogously, the identity categories of "heterosexual" and "homosexual," having been recently "invented" and increasingly taking hold as a way to "scientifically" categorize individuals, are of course "impossible" for Wharton to address—but the actual and increasing "possibility" of this subject matter lurks stubbornly in the subtext of the novel. The missing links of Lily's story—our knowledge that she is bound by unseen forces, by Selden's and other character's readings of her, by the limitations of the narrative that we are presented—create a palpable tension of unspeakability in which we are forever searching for another, perhaps more "true" reading of Lily. We never can resolve what her true aims are, and why she fails—or if she fails—to achieve them. Caught in a liminal space between rapidly developing new models of womanhood, Lily Bart's character expresses

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a critique not only of capitalism and the objectification of some women (and the complimentary exploitation of others), but of an unspoken system of sexual categorization in which she is not free to explore the shape of her own most intimate desires.

The House of Mirth declares its allegiance to the captivity narrative in obvious thematic ways, as references to Lily's being

"trapped" or "imprisoned" by various (if sometimes vague) social forces abound in the text. Exploring this novel's relationship to its predecessors (those first "American" bestsellers) can help us to better understand some of the particularities of narrative that drive *The House of Mirth*, its uses of and resistance to the sentimental tradition, and our own unending fascination with Lily. In other

words, we identify with Lily because she is captive, but we are beguiled and bemused by her when her narrative does not fulfill the usual trajectory of the captivity narrative. That is, she does not effectively resist, and she does not, for reasons that seem impossible to fathom, escape.

As Evelyn E. Fracasso has pointed out, Edith Wharton was somewhat obsessed with the theme of imprisonment. Gary H. Lindburg has written that “society functions as a prison in [Wharton’s] fiction ... the individual ... learns to perceive reality through the bars of a cage.” Marius Bewly describes her protagonists as “hopelessly trapped,” and Wharton describes herself in a letter to Sara Norton as seeing the world “through the prison bars of illness and suffering.” It comes as no great surprise, then, that Lily Bart’s opening words to Selden place her in a woefully captive state: she says, “How nice of you to come to my rescue!” (4)

Michael J. O’Neal reads Selden at the novel’s opening “acting as a kind of Jamesian ‘center of consciousness’ or ‘reflector’; the readers first glimpse of the heroine ... is filtered through Selden’s mind.” In these passages, the narrator has performed a kind of mind-meld with Selden, so that we at once hear the details of time and space that are the stuff of omniscient narration, the minute details of Selden’s particular thought processes, and the faint traces of cultural norms that are preserved in the idiom of his social set. We are thus allied with Selden when he observes Lily’s bracelet to be “like manacles chaining her to her fate” (7), and compares her to “a dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing room” (13). Many critics have also noted that in our first encounter with Lily, she is “captured” by Selden’s commodifying gaze.

When, in the middle of the first chapter, the narrator disengages from Selden’s consciousness and performs her mind-meld with Lily, we find our heroine to be surprisingly self-aware about her own status as a captive. For one thing, Lily feels herself to be a displaced person, having been chased from her parents’ privileged home not by intruders but by financial ruin. Much more obviously, Lily characterizes her life as “in bondage to other people’s pleasure” (28). She considers it to be “a hateful fate—but how escape from it? What choice had she? To be herself, or Gerty Farish” (25). She tells Selden of his cousin Gerty, the drab, sensible philanthropist, “she is free and I am not” (7). She describes feeling “buried alive in the stifling limits of [her aunt] Mrs. Peniston’s existence” (100) and her room there “seemed as dreary as a prison” (109).

For all of this openly declared and urgently felt captivity, however, Lily is lacking an important element of the captivity narrative: an identifiable, threatening, restrictive enemy “captor.” In fact, although she encounters many “beastly” and “savage” (to her mind) individuals in the opening pages of the novel—including both Rosedale and Mrs. Haffen the char-woman, both of whom try to “trap” Lily in different ways—before long she feels an ambivalent closeness towards these cultural Others. Like many of the captive heroines in Castiglia’s study, it is her “home” culture that begins to fill Lily with repugnance and to make her feel trapped, while she glimpses freedom in “anything different, strange” (100). It remains unclear, then, why she cannot break free from her social set. Observing Selden, Lily decides that he

had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, or having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world outside the cage looked to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, she knew, the door 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. It was Selden’s distinction that he had never forgotten the way out. (54-55)

Passages like this one set up the fundamental puzzle of Lily’s character. “In reality ... the door never clanged: it stood always open.” So what are the forces of her captivity? Why can she not “regain her freedom”? What would Lily look like if she were free?

This is an issue that critics of the novel have never been able to resolve. In the large body of work analyzing *The House of Mirth*, Lily has been read either as a pitiable victim of the forces of capitalism, racism, and sexism, or as a free feminist agent who refuses to capitulate to these forces, though she must die to ‘escape’ them. Frances L. Restuccia negotiates these two simplified positions by reading *The House of Mirth* as “a feminist novel comprising at least two feminisms.” Lily represents a “practical” feminist message—ornamental women tend not to survive—but her representation also resonates with a poststructuralist feminism that “luxuriate[s] in perpetual openness and

inaccessibility.” In Restuccia’s view, Wharton intentionally wrote Lily so that there can be no definitive ‘reading’ of her. Lily remains throughout the book in a state of oscillation which Restuccia locates in the novel’s use of the terms “fate”—which implies an unavoidable state of captivity to a certain role—and “luck”—which implies that anything is possible. These terms are flung around as explanations for events, by the narrator and by Lily, but neither becomes a definitive or convincing resolution. Of Lily’s death, which could be fate or chance, Restuccia writes “that both alternatives ought to be held in suspense is one lesson of Lily’s book long oscillation.” Restuccia’s reading basically matches Lily’s description of flies in a bottle—she is both captive and not.

This sense is supported by the narrative form, which is tightly controlled by an unknown source. All of the main characters, and even some minor ones, merge with an omniscient type narrator at one time or another during the unfolding of the story, and their perspectives on themselves and each other create an enclosed world where each person’s identity is created in a dynamic interplay of how they conceive themselves and how others see them. However, to read the novel as the brilliant re-creation of a social network and its effects on the people “entrapped” in it is contingent on a slight simplification of the narrative structure. Bruce Michelson, for example, writes that “*The House of Mirth* presents Lily through her own eyes and through Selden’s, Selden through his own and Lily’s, but rarely does the book comment on either of them, explicitly or otherwise, from anything like an omniscient stance.” While I agree with Michelson that such moments are few and far between—rare enough, indeed, to make such an omniscient voice almost seem like interference in the novel’s progress—I think he underestimates their potentially far-reaching effects. While we are free to question Lily, Selden, and Gerty, to critique their positions or to analyze their personalities, a voice unallied to any character is nameless, faceless, invisible and untouchable—and only serves to increase our sense of Lily’s captivity.

The first of these sudden and discordant interruptions comes in chapter four, during a long stretch when the events of Lily’s ill-fated decision to skip her church date with potential husband Percy Gryce are narrated in her own point of view. Suddenly this unknown voice states, “but poor Lily, for all the hard glaze of her exterior, was inwardly as malleable as wax” (53). This statement



could not come from Lily’s consciousness; nor could it reasonably be assigned to any other character. The judgment that it pronounces directly contradicts the way that Lily is described when her consciousness is merged with the narrator: for example, in chapter three, the narrator had conveyed her thought, “Ah, no—she was too intelligent not to be honest with herself” (39). Basically, *this* narrator is telling us that Lily is not as good at this social game as she at first appeared to be and, worse, that she does not even have an accurate assessment of herself.

When Judy Trenor reprimands Lily for letting Gryce get away, this unknown narrator once again undermines our ability to access Lily’s introspection by stating: “she was always scrupulous about keeping up appearances to herself ... when she made a tour of inspection in her mind there were certain closed doors she did not open” (82). This further implies Lily’s extreme lack of self-awareness, her personal failure to accurately evaluate social situations, while it leaves us wondering what exactly lay behind the closed doors in her consciousness.

What function does this narrator serve in the novel? It seems that Wharton is undermining the carefully crafted narrative structure that leads us to understand all of the characters as social selves, as performers enmeshed in a particular world of perception and definition. Without the floating narrative voice, we would have only the characters—unreliable as they all are—to rely on. The strange interference of an omniscient narrator at certain points gives the impression that there *is* an omniscient narrator—that such a point of view is possible—that there is a mode of interpretation for this novel outside the purely perspectival one of the characters that we know. To return to Restuccia’s terms, this narrative voice seems to work to “reduce” Lily, even as the whole of the novel keeps Lily

irreducible.

There is a further connection between what Restuccia defines as Lily's "oscillation" and this interfering narrative voice. Taking Restuccia's insight that Lily is constantly in motion in this text, never resting in one place, we must acknowledge that the explanatory models that she oscillates between—"fate" and "luck"—do not, either of them, imply any kind of individual agency. Were she to rest in the critical domain of either fate or luck she would be, lucky or not, a powerless heroine. Lily's perpetual motion is the only thing that keeps her from being reified as some genre of stereotypical woman. It is also what ensures that she cannot survive. In this novel, there is no place where Lily can rest and escape oppressive definition; however, it is at the moments where such a resting place *could* be articulated that our interfering narrator steps in. As we've seen, she tells us that Lily is "inwardly as malleable as wax" just as Lily may have revealed why she decided to sabotage her attempted capture of Percy Gryce. Later, when the narrator reports that Lily "had never learned to live with her own thoughts" (178), she is considering Rosedale's first marriage proposal. And it is after Rosedale's next proposal—contingent on her doing the work to clear her name—that the narrator returns and informs us: "Lily, for all her dissatisfied dreaming, had never really conceived the possibility of revolving around a different center" (261). In these cases, it is at least possible that if Lily's consciousness remained in the normal "mind-meld" with the narrator that characterizes most of the novel, we would know more about those thoughts that she cannot live with, and if we choose not to believe this narrator, we might get to see what Lily would consider a "different center." In short, this narrator is covering over secrets with simplistic statements. In terms of the novel's structure, Lily's constant motion and the narrator's judgmental outbursts are the two factors that work to block articulation of a certain piece of Lily's consciousness, especially when it comes to how she feels about the possibility—be it luck or fate—of marriage.

This "reduction" of Lily is particularly distressing to us as readers because it departs from the usual trajectory of the captivity narrative, in which the heroine generally resists her captors in some way and escapes to tell the story. According to both Castiglia and Michelle Burnham in *Captivity and Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature, 1682-1861*, it is part of the pleasure and escapism of the captivity narrative genre for the heroine to act inappropriately for her race, age, gender, ethnicity or social class. As Burnham explains, "the captive professes an identity whose fixity is belied by the unstable and mobile processes of identification that supports that identity" and "what is sentimental about the imagined communities novels create is that they are not based on likeness." In other words, it is the close contact with Otherness, and indeed the very slippery boundary line between the Other (captor) and the supposed same (captive, reader) that creates the affective experience of novel reading (and eventually, of nation-imagining). We expect for protagonists to "break free" from conventions in the course of resisting their captivity, and in Lily's case would probably welcome, let alone forgive, such lapses in our heroine's immaculate manners as the exploitative use of the intercepted letters between Bertha and Selden, or even "falling" in a fit of passion.

That Wharton writes her novel in a way that does not conform to sentimental conventions has long been noted and read as her determination to break away from the role of the "lady novelist." As Amy Kaplan has articulated, "Wharton defines herself against an earlier generation of American women novelists, known as sentimental or domestic novelists." Elaine Showalter, similarly, reads *The House of Mirth* as "a pivotal text in the historical transition from one house of American women's fiction to another, from the homosocial women's culture and literature of the nineteenth century to the heterosexual fiction of modernism." As Showalter notes, the novel occurs at a time of historical transition in terms of both social and literary values. If *The House of Mirth* is an example of early

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“heterosexual fiction,” however, it must be pointed out that a critique of heterosexuality is lodged within the novel’s critique of sentimentality.

While it may be true, as Showalter claims, that “Wharton refuses to sentimentalize Lily’s position,” our interfering narrator has a tendency to accuse the characters of stupidly giving in to sentimentality themselves. For example, when Lily luxuriates in the multiple possibilities of Selden’s interest in seeing her at Bellomont, the narrator nearly sneers at her lack of reason: “It did not occur to her that Selden might have been actuated merely by the desire to spend a Sunday out of town: women never learn to dispense with the sentimental in their judgments of men” (61). For his part, Selden doesn’t fare much better in the narrator’s judgment; during his “Republic of the Spirit” walk with Lily we get a foreshadowing of his eventual emotional weakness:

From whatever angle he viewed their dawning intimacy, he could not see it as part of her scheme of life; and to be the unforeseen element in a career so accurately planned was stimulating even to a man who has renounced sentimental experiments. (69)

The fact that Selden had a sordid history with Bertha Dorset, well known for her “sentimental experiments” (128), further undermines his own sense of himself (when he is more in charge of the narration) as a reasonable and unaffected man. Sentimentality, denigrated throughout the novel, is linked firmly to heterosexual romance. At the same time, Lily is never “allowed,” as most captive heroines are, to rebel in any significant way. The result of this simultaneous critique and enforcement of heterosexual romance is a Lily who never marries, but who never quite holds agency over that fact.

It is pretty widely accepted among critics of *The House of Mirth*, and at least one character (Carrie Fisher), that Lily avoids marriage because she doesn’t *want* to be married. As Judith Fetterly has written, “she cannot project herself as a wife, she cannot imagine life after the plunge because she cannot finally face the price she would have to pay for it.” Similarly, Lori Merish writes:

Lily Bart’s ‘femininity’ and Selden’s ‘masculinity’ are tenuous constructions, while their heterosexual ‘passion’ is ambiguously presented in the text. . . . Lily Bart’s passion for men is much less convincingly rendered than her passion for things.

Merish notes that R.W.B. Lewis, “Obviously disturbed by Lily’s (hetero)sexual ‘coldness,’ . . . once pathologized Wharton’s heroine as a ‘nymphomaniac of material comfort.’” I believe that Lewis’ comment indicates his instinct that there is sexual desire represented in *The House of Mirth* does not match the heterosexual grid that it is supposed to. While Trenor, Rosedale and Dorset are all described as viscerally revolting to Lily, her supposed attraction to Selden also rings false. What is it, then, exactly, that Lily wants? Where are her true feelings, passions, human relationships, desires? She does not want to be the wife of Percy Gryce, of Selden, of Rosedale, or of George Dorset. Is it possible that she would prefer a different model of intimacy?

The “impossible possibility” of such a desire surfaces in one key scene with Gerty. After Lily’s traumatic encounter with Gus Trenor, the attempted rape scene which most explicitly outlines the physical and psychic danger of Lily’s liminal position in her world, she seeks comfort at Gerty’s apartment.

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 bedfellow. Knowing that Lily disliked to be caressed, she had long ago learned to check her demonstrative impulses toward her friend. But tonight every fiber in her body shrank from Lily’s nearness: it was a torture to listen to her breathing, and feel the sheet stir with it.

According to the plot, Lily disgusts Gerty because her own hopes about a possible romance with Selden have been dashed. But there is an ambivalent tension here between attraction and revulsion:

As Lily turned, and settled to complete rest, a strand of 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 to 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. (167)

This encounter between Lily and Gerty rests on the border of intimacy and disgust; comfort and alienation; physical closeness and emotional distance. It is a meeting which is neither here nor there—neither homosocial in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's sense of the term, because that cultural moment had, for Lily at least, passed; nor is it a lesbian encounter. It is simply an oddly intense scene, unsentimentalized and uncommented upon by our interfering narrator.

It is also, critically speaking, a largely ignored scene. For example, in describing the ways in which female relationships in *The House of Mirth* differ from those typical in the nineteenth century female world, Showalter writes:

Lily feels no loving ties to the women around her; in her moment of crisis 'she had no heart to lean on' ... Lily sees and treats other women as her allies, rivals, or inferiors in social competition.

But of course, the "moment of crisis" that she is referring to and quoting is precisely this moment of closeness with Gerty:

Lily had no heart to lean on ... As the pain that can be told is but half a pain, so the pity that questions has little healing in its touch. What Lily craved was the darkness made by enfolding arms, the silence which is not solitude, but compassion holding its breath.

She started up and looked forth on the passing streets. Gerty! —they were nearing Gerty's corner. If only she could reach there before this labouring anguish burst from her breast to her lips—if only she could feel the hold of Gerty's arms while she shook in the ague-fit of fear that was coming upon her! (149)

Lily does have a "heart to lean on"; even better, she has "enfolding arms" and "the silence which is not solitude." I do not mean to sentimentalize this encounter, especially since Lily's determination to "penetrate" Gerty's apartment and her friend's discomfort with her intimate needs suggests that Lily is selfishly using Gerty. However, it should be noted that when Lily needs comfort, at a moment when she is at her most "real" and vulnerable, it is Gerty that she turns to.

Ignoring this pivotal scene with Gerty, Showalter refers to Lily's encounter with Nettie and her new baby as "the strongest moment of female kinship in the novel, as Lily sees herself mirrored in Nettie and her baby, and recognizes that Nettie's achievement is far beyond any she has previously conceived for herself." Given our mischievous narrator and the particularly cynical end to the novel, though, I doubt the sincerity of Nettie's sentimental story of redemption and its comfort to Lily. Briefly holding the baby in Nettie's small flat seems to sap Lily rather than strengthening her:

At first the burden in her arms seemed as light as a pink cloud or a heap of down, but as she continued to hold it the weight increased, sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became part of herself. (316)

Although Lily reflects favorably on Nettie and her life seems almost to end on a vision of heterosexual, baby-producing bliss, we have learned from our interfering narrator to be suspicious of such sentimental narratives. In fact, the way Nettie is presented is stereotypical of the sentimental tradition:

The poor little working girl who had found the strength to gather up the fragments of her life, and build herself a shelter with them, seemed to Lily to have reached the central truth of existence. (319)

When she goes on to ruminate on the ways in which she needed Selden's faith in her, as Nettie's husband expressed in "redeeming" her, we know—this time without the narrator's interference—that Lily is not being honest with herself. Throughout the novel her trouble does not stem from Selden's or any other man's refusal to "stake his faith" (320) in her; it stems from her own refusal to be "staked" in that way (and her resistance to being 'penetrated' by a certain kind of intimacy, as when Nettie's baby "penetrates her with a strange sense of weakness"). Although it is never clear what else, besides marriage, Lily might want, and although she does suffer from "the clutch of solitude" (319) at the end

of her short life, it is clear that what finally happens is what she never wanted to happen: she loses control of her story, and she becomes “reduced,” defined, by the parameters of Selden’s ego.

By repaying her debt to Trenor and getting her affairs in order, Lily does control to some extent what Selden’s version of her will be, but really the outline that she left is too easily filled in. As readers, we can never be satisfied by Selden’s version of “the lady,” or what his sentimental notion of “the word” is likely to be. Wharton drew for us in Lily a character held in bondage to some invisible and silent force; and I believe she knew that we would be driven to search the subtext of the novel for the source of that captivity, for Lily’s “real” story, for the words that really would make her life more clear.

Christopher Castiglia argues that in the captivity narratives he reads, “captives’ experience of captivity and crossing cultures occasioned their revision of identities and of the genres that constitute them.” These acts of “revisionary survival” may be increasingly difficult to accomplish when the landscape of captivity moves from the wilderness to the city, and the forces of captivity move from clearly marked enemies to invisible normalizing truths. If Wharton’s aim is to convey Lily’s imprisonment in heteronormativity, a word and a concept that she did not have available as we do today, she must give us the sense that there is something more to Lily than what the other characters, and even she herself, can see. She then gives us the conviction that an “omniscient” reading of Lily—one that originates outside the world of the novel—is possible, by inserting an “omniscient” narrative voice at significant moments. At the same time, the insights that this narrator offers are so unsatisfactorily reductive that we cannot believe them. This inability to define Lily, coupled with a subtle insistent belief that there is a definition out there for her, both supports and interferes with the sentimental experience of reading the novel and the character, and ensures that we will never stop searching for the Lily that *we* know.

