

Representation of Woman Character in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*

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Abstract

Edith Wharton is an American novelist, and short story writer. She presented the lifestyles and morality of the Gilded Age in a realistic manner by drawing on her personal knowledge of the upper class New York "aristocracy." In 1913, she wrote *The Custom of the Country*. It offers cultural as well as a contemporary viewpoint on numerous facets of the American way of life. At one point, it seems to have been Edith Wharton's effort at composing a feminist book, highlighting the suffering that women suffer by excluded from public life. The narrative depicts a society in which a woman's marriage serves as both her principal vocation and the unique space for healthy competition. Wharton contrasts the European rituals and elaborate rites with the American infatuation with material pleasure. The book regarded as a separation novel or as a reflection on the treatment of women by capitalism. In this book, Undine Spragg, the main character, has presented as an unsatisfactory woman who is compelled to do domestic responsibilities due to her gender. Women who dislike covert sexual infidelity, prefer sincere connections with men, and realize that engaging in affairs as well as a relationship without love and commitment is meaningless shown in this book.

Keywords: Woman, Society, Marriage, Divorce, and Isolation.

Edith Wharton is the first woman who receives the Pulitzer Prize for Literature and a member of the privileged in New York City. It has known for her social criticism, complex characters, and exploration of American culture. Her books reflected classic works of American literature. She published *The Custom of the Country* in 1913 novel regarded as both a cultural artifact and a modern perspective into various elements of the American way of life. The creators of the popular television series *Downton Abbey* were among the authors whose works has affected by *The Custom of the Country*. It was a moment of revolts during the Progressive Era of World War One, but it was also a time of widespread corruption, which even new "trust breaking" laws were powerless to stop. Even if *The Age of Innocence* is a good representation of Wharton's superior knowledge, *The Custom of the Country* is definitely one of the least well-known books produced by a writer whose more famous works are among the best there are. *The Custom of the Country*, on the other hand, has an impact that reads like a prophetic judgment of what was about to happen to America, much like *The Age of Innocence* did when Newland Archer discovers what has been going on. Wharton started writing her novel just as World War I was about to break out and seven years after Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* declared the Jazz Age had begun. Fitzgerald wrote about the recent past, but Wharton instead takes us back to New York in the 1870s to demonstrate how all it takes to predict what will happen in America in thirty years is to look at what occurred in America thirty years earlier.

The nouveau riche shocked the social structure of the bluebloods as the Gilded Age was about to begin, overturned the apple cart of the nouveau riche in a manner similar to the flappers and other Jazz Age performers who would shake the theatre in the 1920s. *The Custom of the Country* is a piercingly humorous critique of the overflow of individuality and the underlying faults in the capitalist social structure that, despite the harm done, has always forgiven, disregarded, and allowed to eat away at the spirit of the country. It becomes immediately clear from reading the novel's pages that Edith Wharton was well versed in Thorstein Veblen's brutal critique of indolent capitalism *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

Major works have effects, therefore be worthy the depth critical scrutiny. Throughout Wharton's works, female characters have a powerful and take the lead part. As a woman author, Wharton shows numerous American women from all socioeconomic groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a moment of change and struggle about whether to choose to be an old or new woman.

The conversations between the male characters and these female are piece of content. These situations demonstrate both the causes of marriage and separation in American culture as well as the difficulties related with them. They also convey how Wharton's male characters evolved from being stereotypes to convincing depictions of real individuals. Writings by Wharton, in especially the way female characters presented themselves and revealed their problems and personal relation.

It appears that Edith Wharton attempted to publish a feminist novel at one point, *The Custom of the Country*, which portrays the great harm to women by their loneliness from public life. The story portrays a culture where women's primary occupation and overall appearance is marriage, which serves as the independent legitimate field for rivalry.

Wharton's own divorce from her first husband occurred in 1913. It has claimed that *The Custom of the Country* is a work about divorce or a condemnation of the patriarchal oppression of women. Undine Spragg, the book's protagonist, has portrayed in these readings as a disappointed woman who should carry out her household responsibilities due to her gender.

Those who have frequently praised the book's fine prose and unflinching social observation have either exaggerated Undine's "success" or believed, like Percy Lubbock, that the book lacks "a controlling and unifying middle," which is due to the critical fixation with the book being a fictional account of Wharton's own experiences (53). As indicated by Undine Spragg's condition in the book, some women enjoyed considerable economic and social rights than they had in earlier times, yet they still denied the ability to vote, and males still controlled the majority of positions of power. The protagonist of this novel is an American woman named Undine who marries into an aristocratic family and gains French influence. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines her given name Undine as "a female spirit or nymph inhabiting water," which alludes to her submersion into a nouveau riche lifestyle and drifting movement in upper class New York society and the French society. It is disgusting and intriguing to see Undine Spragg, the protagonist of the novel, make a tortuous and dark transformation from a Midwestern rube to a ruby-encrusted new-money empress. A beautiful creature with rose-gold hair, creamy skin, and a wide spiritual jaw that could swallow New York City, that the finest literary anti-heroine to compare with Undine. Individuals like her have been abundant in American society for a while, but it seldom seems involved in their success; more frequently, that ineffectively hopes for their failure. But, with Undine because of the unique combination of compassion and contempt that animates Wharton's words throughout the novel and permits her to counteract Undine's savagery with a lot of her own strength, it comes off as wanting her to get whatever she wants. *The Custom of the Country* starts with Undine, a lonely immigrant to New York who has just moved there after two years in the fictitious town of Apex.

In a patriarchal culture, Wharton exposes an underlying feminism, and the story has driven by theme marriage relationships, which highlights the traditional role of women in maintaining the aristocratic social customs. The French have their own social norms about behaviour, an exaggerated vision of feminine beauty, and a pride in their capacity to maintain socially acceptable ethical standards. In this study of identifying potential, it has shown how the representation of the main female characters reflects societal conventions as well as the typical French aesthetic. Throughout the novel, Wharton weaves a French theme that shapes the portrayals of aristocratic women and, in particular, the love tensions that occur around the turn of the century. Wharton creates French aristocratic-sounding protagonists in her novels with traits typical of this same class.

Undine is the main character of *The Custom of The Country*. On the other hand, Undine is passionate on gaining material goods and succeeding in doing so despite facing several difficulties. Nevertheless, how she sees herself in the eyes of others has a significant role in how she defines success. She always desires for the unachievable, which causes her to be disappointed in the majority of the circumstances she experiences. She is rather awful to poor Ralph, yet it is irrationally stimulating to see how she accepts her faults and simply moves on. Undine attracts the attention of Mrs Fairford's brother, Ralph Marvell; the poet Andrew Marvell ("To His Coy Mistress") may have inspired the character name by Wharton. The Marvell are an old New York family that has retained its vaunted reputation but little of its wealth. Ralph makes a classic mistake: having taught to imagine that white women are naturally innocent; he sees the purest virtue in Undine's beauty. He imagines "society careering up to make a mouthful of her, and him whirling down on his winged horse" (Jia Tolentino 2019). Without him, Ralph thinks, Undine would be "easy prey to the powers of folly" (2019). He makes a marriage proposal, and Wharton uses the chance to expose her character once more while still keeping readers interested in Undine's beautiful, shameless selfishness by portraying a dinner at the Marvell family's house. She is married to Ralph Marvell, and while he sometimes fails to satisfy her every need, she counts on his wealth. The etymological root of undine has a Latin origin meaning "a wave," which may symbolise her marital status that ebbs and flows in that she is remarried twice. Her numerous divorces and remarriages are evidence of her adultery. In France, adultery tolerated and "a sin against the individual is less grave than an offense against the form of manners or codes of society" (Alan 115). As Wharton shows in her two most famous novels, *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*, by narrating stories of women whose decisions are restricted by patriarchal structures, it is not good for women to have to live in a culture that distributes wealth and authority through men.

Marriage was encouraged in early twentieth century popular culture for personal happiness through a very specific lifestyle, not for love, stability, or even financial support. In response, reformers who had long argued that divorce was necessary for "women to gain independence from oppressive marriages" began to talk about divorce in terms of a "concern for marital happiness and the right of either partner but especially the woman to free herself from an unsatisfying union" (May 103). This approach was particularly evident in Western states known as "divorce colonies," which allowed a multitude of acceptable grounds for divorce. Combined with the religion of romance, the relaxation of divorce rules eventually failed to advance women's rights but effectively reduced female dependency on males. Nothing of the women in *The Custom of the Country* who divorce does so to achieve their freedom; instead, they consistently do it in order to remarry and have fulfilled lives. Undine finally travels to divorce colonies, which are renowned for the enthusiasm with which such remarriages take place. In this way, the trendy of romance rationalizes and may even

encourage opportunistic divorce, but it does not begin with that goal. Moreover, throughout the novel, fair rhetoric has compared with the expressions of the cult of romance what Elmer Moffatt calls "magazine" talk (492). This expression is moralistic and sentimental as May argues, it has drawn from the vocabulary of Victorianism, but it has been coopted in the service of market forces. Undine does not have a sentimental bone in her body, but she is convinced that "finding and catching the right man that the key to personal fulfilment the very essence of life" (71). Her adherence to the prescribed behaviours of the cult of romance effectively precludes her from being cold and calculating as Elmer Moffatt and Indiana Frusk are. Instead, Undine confuses the commercial reality of the "modern marriage" May describes for the romantic fantasy of finding "the right man" (218). Wharton reveals the way in which this sleight of hand of market forces leads Undine to effectively product herself, her husbands, and her son while simultaneously insisting that marriage should be more than "just a business contract" (489). Both Moffatt and Indiana appeal to Undine's sense of reality to no avail: Moffatt tells her "it isn't that kind of a story" when she starts to cry after he has successfully negotiated her promise to marry him (494). When Undine protests that Van Degen is under a moral obligation to her, Indiana criticizes her: "But that's just talk" (305). Undine's blind devotion to the idea of landing "the right man" provides her with a necessary excuse for her constant dissatisfaction her inability to get what she wants.

The beauty of *The Custom of the Country* is that, in this tale, having to dwell with Undine people is bad for males in general. Ralph's comparison of the beauty of Undine's female figure to her given name in the narrative reveals her character to be in keeping with a romanticized French aesthetic. The novel describe that, Undine's feminine beauty has illustrated as a "glimmering submarine light," which may refer to her radiant figure among other aristocratic women. The narrator describes her as looking like a sea nymph, or siren in French, elaborating on the connection between her elegant looks and name and giving a vision of a beautiful maiden in nature. Ralph describes Undine as "Ariel-like" expressed through the "coolness of the element from which she took her name." By establishing herself in aristocratic society, Undine eventually reaches the French norm for upper class women after symbolically blooming with natural feminine beauty. In order to fit the stereotype of a French woman from the early twentieth century, she integrates culturally when she visits Paris. Therefore, in order to accomplish her desire of becoming a member of the aristocratic social class, Wharton develops the reflection of a young, attractive woman with the French feminine aesthetic and marital status.

Hence, due to the lack of riches, Undine and Ralph must end their travels and return to America. The scholar Alan Bellringer from the University College of North Wales claims, the French are "frank in money matters and so may appear niggardly in their desire to avoid falling into poverty" (115). Similarly, Undine and Ralph are concerned with their finances and avoid poverty by returning to America. Undine tries to assist with their plans to travel to their homeland. In France, "marriage enables a girl to count 'as a social factor,' to engage in free conversation with men" (115). Undine convinces Peter Van Degen to allow her and Ralph to travel from Paris en route to New York via sailing on a steam-yacht known as the *Sorceress*. Ralph disagrees with Undine's proposal. Bellringer states, "Financial misfortune, therefore, is a more tragic prospect to a Frenchman than marital failure" (116). Undine loses her prominent place in aristocratic society after her divorce, although she starts a relationship with Peter and eventually marries Raymond de Chelles, a French count. She and her husband move back to the French countryside to live in Saint Desert, yet she longs to go to Paris. The wealth of the de Chelles are in their land, art, and antiques that they do not consider selling to obtain a profit. Undine tries to subvert the de Chelles family's financial policy by wishing to sell tapestries that had been the gift of King Louis XV to the ancestor Marquis de Chelles. Her husband replies, "We are fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us" (545), which signifies the clash of French and American culture. American expatriates and her integration into the French aristocracy both are parts of Undine's identity. Her husband stood in for the French norms that Undine needs to adapt. The literary historian Elizabeth Ammon's, Undine only has two options: "she can conform to the implicit cultural ideal of acquiescent femininity and thus perpetuate the aboriginal leisure-class ideal of feminine modesty and exposed leisure" or "she can marry new money and express her ambitious nature vicariously but widely as her husband's conspicuous consumer"(Ammons 338) and she chose the latter. Her presence has defined by egocentrism and impracticality in financial matters as she wishes to sell valuable possessions that belong to her French husband.

William Cloonan, a Professor of Modern Languages and Linguistics, notes that Undine is a quintessential "female American social climber" who marries a Frenchman and invents her own *Nouveau Luxe* vision of Paris. She ambitiously hopes to be at the top of the aristocratic social class, and her character flaws that beings drawn to powerful status and wealth. As a result, she marries Elmer Moffatt, a resident of Apex and her former lover, in her combining two. While she is a remarried woman of great social standing, her tactics of acquiring wealth cause strain in her marriage that eventually leads to Ralph's suicide, leaving her with their son Paul and her being a widow.

Undine's life has planned around maintaining her appearance, displaying her beautifully fitted form, attracting as many prominent admirers as she can, and increasing her riches so she can afford to do these three things. As a result, her world has now split into three categories: assets, obstacles, and individuals who are essentially non-existent because they fit neither description. Even though this is a cruel and painful way to live, Undine's actions may have gradually

developed more than a century after *The Custom of the Country* was published to become not just inspirational but feminist. What could be more progressive than learning how to defend her life story as one of a successful woman pursuing her ambitions today? Although this pitch would be nonsense, many people would buy it. Undine would have a million social media fans in the modern day. That would give her the gratification of knowing that others are observing her every move, which is what Wharton knew a woman like Undine to crave above all else.

In order to examine how American ideology operates under the influence of commercialism and consumerism and what causes a break between opposing ideas, the author uses a polished woman and the people around her, representative of the new American generation formed in her day of capitalism. Wharton's portrayals of heroines in the novel are conceptually connected and reflect a French characteristic. Concluded a feminist lens, Wharton historicises the French aristocracy by reflecting on woman at the turn of the century. Marriage creates friction, which is essential to the lives of the strong, independent female characters. This novel offers images of women who detest covert adultery, who desire sincere connections with men, and who understand that having an affair or being in a relationship without love and commitment is pointless. French settings are a common theme in Wharton's novels, which serve as a vital counterpoint to the shallows and devastation of the lives of the actual persons as the heroes struggle with their marriages. Although marriage has deeply ingrained in French society, the female characters frequently participate in relationships and control their own fate. She feels both disappointed and dissatisfied by Undine's attitude. To Undine's eyes, everything is "shabby," "dull," and "dowdy," lacking in the fashionable extravagance she had expected.

In this approach, Wharton provides an additional view of the nouveau riche in America and their insatiable need for wealth as a motivational tool. Undine displays this in certain ways since she prefers to spend the money now rather than put it away for later. Nevertheless, Wharton shows the contrasts in the European values of traditions and lengthy customs with the American fixation with economic comfort. Undine's dull conversation, opinions, and important values are true. Wharton's achievement is to give the wide-ranging picture of an energetic social scene, one woman's personal viewpoint, blind to the whole, came to a conclusion.

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