

“Homo sapiens, Americanus”:  
Exploiting the New Logic of Capitalism in Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country*

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In 1913, *Scribner’s Magazine* introduced readers to Undine Spragg—the young and selfish Midwestern who climbs the echelons of society through marriage and divorce. Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* coincides with the era of the New Woman, a time in which readers’ attitudes were shifting about the role of women in society. Yet Undine’s rapacious nature unsettles critics from both the past and present. Wharton’s biographer Louis Auchincloss calls Undine an “evil force incarnate,” and relates her activity to disease as her actions infect American life (101). Edmund Wilson illustrates Undine in a hostile manner in 1929, and writes, “the prototype in fiction of the ‘gold-digger,’ of the international cocktail bitch” (202). In contemporary criticism, Ammons connects her to a modern Circe—“cruel, destructive, misandrous”—while others simply call her a monster as she rises to power through the marriage market (101). To read Undine as the villain misses the point of Wharton’s novel, which is simultaneously a critique of American capitalism and a representation of the looser constraints on a woman in the flux of modern American society. Wharton filed for divorce in 1913 from Teddy Wharton, who “misused their money and her affections” (Martin xiii). Wharton survived the embarrassment of a public divorce, but without the option of remarriage, Wharton became a social outcast and moved to France for the rest of her life (xiii). Wharton exhibits a kind of delight in the successes of Undine, who survives what Wharton suffered, and the narrator displays the culture of consumption and exchange as both a nightmare and an opportunity to display and subvert the oppression under the old order. Undine is not a monster, but a woman who takes advantage of new capitalism and the changes of American modernity.

*The Custom of the Country* takes place during a time of flux and transition, and divorce plays a critical role in a shift in traditional institutions. *The Custom of the Country* is about marriage and divorce, and the novel reflects the increasing rate of divorce in America and categorizes it as distinctly American. Freeman, MacComb, and Hadley identify Wharton's work as an American novel, and representative of the ways modern capitalism and marriage align in an era of social and economic transition. Undine manipulates marriage to her advantage, but the novel still reflects that marriage is necessary for a female to be accepted socially and possess the liberties of a wife. Once divorced, Undine must remarry in order to continue her climb; she cannot do it on her own. Undine marries Ralph Marvell, a member of an old aristocratic New York family who represents the traditional values and manners of America, and Undine is dissatisfied as his wife because she hopes for more social and financial power than his family can provide with their reputation. She therefore seeks divorce in the American West, where divorce legislation is less rigid. At dinner with the Dagonets—Ralph's family, who are emblematic of the dissolving American traditions—Undine alludes to the value of divorce and the mobility it provides for a woman. She tells Ralph about her western hometown, "Out in Apex, if a girl marries a man who don't come up to what she expected, people consider it's to her credit to want to change. *You'd* better think twice of that!" (CC 58). Undine's understanding of divorce displays an ambitious maneuvering of the institution of marriage. She takes advantage of the changing structures of hierarchies, influenced by the growth of capitalism and divorce, and uses the change to her benefit. Undine treats marriage like a commercial enterprise, and *The Custom of the Country* emphasizes the women's role in the flux and transition of consumer culture in American modernity.

Undine's marriages and divorces represent the triumph of the marketplace, and the institution of marriage, rather than being rejected for being simply a usurious and restrictive arrangement, shifts under capitalism to create forces of mobility and disruption of traditions and manners. Critics like Ammons in *Edith Wharton's Argument in America* see Undine Spragg as exploitative of the marriage market, and her insatiable desire for the next best option is shaped by the social forces of her era. The emerging modern capitalist ideals of America demonstrate an inclination towards disposal rather than contentment. Wharton provides a dichotomy in *The Custom of the Country* between the shifting attitudes and culture of the United States in comparison to the rigid contentment of French society. Undine's American marriages, along with her embrace of the distinctly American act of divorce, present the disruption of the hierarchies valued by traditional New York and French society. Divorce is the emphasized disruption of an institution, which suggests a greater shift in the structures of hierarchies and culture in America. Wharton is critical of capitalism by showing how it breaks down the old guard of traditions, manners, and institutions, which Wharton esteems in *The Custom of the Country*; however, the criticism of capitalism demonstrates that the breakdown makes space for new opportunities to navigate in a state of transition.

Undine Spragg is a selfish, exploitative, and rapacious woman in *The Custom of the Country*, and as many critics note, Undine represents emerging modern capitalist ideals. Undine views social situations and dynamics in terms of commerce and social capital, rather than upholding the traditions and manners that Wharton herself values. Wharton is explicitly critical of the modernity Undine represents, as both a warning and a prophecy of America's future. Despite this, Wharton crafts Undine as a woman who finds her role in a consumer culture. At the start of *The Custom of the Country*, Undine is the heroine of the novel, but as she begins to

exploit a society in flux due to capitalism, she becomes a device to demonstrate the disruptions the shift to capitalist modernity has on older hierarchies and their oppressions. Undine takes advantage of the new logic of capitalism and changes in legislation, and divorce functions as a mode of mobility within society. The culture of consumption, spectacle, and transaction in *The Custom of the Country* is both a disaster for tradition and an opportunity for women, such as Undine, to display and subvert the oppression of women and wives under the old order. Undine's ambition for more through marriage and divorce demonstrates how capitalism disrupts American hierarchies and its consequent transition allows Undine to seize power in a society in flux and transition.

### **The Modern Marriage Market**

By the publication of *The Custom of the Country* in 1913, divorce had become prevalent in the United States—the novel expands on the marriage market displayed in earlier novels such as *The House of Mirth* and introduces the turn of the century modern marriage market that Undine uses to her advantage. Government studies in the 1880s and 1890s reported a dizzying rise in the divorce rate as the population increased by 500 percent by the end of the nineteenth century. Between 1867 and 1929, the divorce rate rose 2000 percent, and throughout this time period, more divorces were sanctioned in America than all of Europe (Bentley 161). By the 1920s, about one in every six marriages was terminated in court (May 2). America became the leading nation of divorce, and divorce became a characterization of the nation. A majority of the divorces in America were filed by women—two-thirds of all suits—and “American divorce was formalized as a feminine institution” (Bentley 161). *The Custom of the Country* notes these defining characteristics of divorce through the French duchess, who says about Undine, “She’s

an American—she’s divorced,” and the narrator observes that she says this “as if she were merely stating the same fact in two different ways” (Wharton 238). As an American woman, the heroine of *The Custom of the Country* epitomizes the shift in the American institution of marriage and represents the growing culture of consumption and exchange that she harnesses to her advantage.

Divorce is a totem of American modernity in *The Custom of the Country*, as is remarriage. Undine being representative of modernity is likely why she was received so harshly by contemporary critics of the novel, just as divorce represented the downfall of society to many in the early twentieth century. The rise in divorce caused great concern, prompting public debates, antidivorce crusades, and efforts to add more restrictive legislation (Bentley 161). Public debate over divorce, however, started early in the nineteenth century, as the clergy and moralists blamed the erosion of the marital institution on “individual depravity.” Some believed that social forces contributed to the problem, with the main force being “the birth pangs of modern American culture” (May 2). Critic Elaine May notes the rise of the marketplace as a distinct factor of modern American culture, while Walter Willcox claimed in 1897 that the “emancipation of women” was a primary determinant of modern American culture. Willcox argued that the emancipation of women factored into the rising divorce rate—as women entered the economy, the “economic bond” was “relaxed” and they depended less on their husbands (66). Divorce also meant the erosion and corruption of the institution of marriage to some, along with the breakdown of domestic hierarchies. Marriage serves an organizational function under the government, which supports a patriarchal structure to establish “social order based on male-headed nuclear families” (Cott 92). Divorce disrupts the order, as a woman’s personal liberty is no longer dictated by her husband, and through divorce, she can become a

self-governing individual even if she still lives under the same patriarchal social order. Despite the potential freedom of divorce, remarriage remains the most viable option to be a useful and accepted female member of society to maintain the order set by patriarchal and heteronormative standards. Undine has no intention of maintaining social order when she remarries because she does so in order to gain wealth and power and to maximize her options in the marriage market. However, Undine recognizes divorce's disruption of the order that allows new opportunities for her to navigate. Undine asks her father to fund her trip to Europe after explaining she is unhappy in her marriage to Ralph Marvell, and if she was away from her husband, she explains, "I know just what I could do if I were free. I could marry the right man" (Wharton 147). Undine's conception of the freedom that divorce supplies is a reintegration into the marriage market in search of an upgrade. Undine's drive for remarriage is part of a new order of American modernity, not the old order conception of the marriage institution which does not include divorce. Her inclination to replace through remarriage reflects the rapacious consumerism of modern American society.

The concern over divorce was often focused on the divorce mills in more legislatively lenient states like Indiana, North Dakota, and Nevada, and the approval of "registered concubinage" or remarriage after divorce (Bentley 161). Legislature varied from state to state, and led to "migratory divorce" in which one or both individuals in a marriage would travel to another state to end their marriage legally. Indiana, a state that became famous for its notorious "divorce mill," had an omnibus clause with a moderate residency requirement. The clause sanctions a divorce in which a couple from New York could move to Indiana briefly, sue for divorce, publicize this divorce in Indiana newspapers, then obtain their divorce and separate (Cott 51). Undine's ascension relies on her ability to seize opportunity in times of flux, and the

rise of divorce as states “reiterated what composed [marriage]” offers an opportunity for Undine to seek a more advantageous husband (Cott 52). Each state had different stipulations for the parameters of divorce. Unable to get a divorce in New York, where divorce was only available in the case of adultery, Undine travels where she can file for divorce alone and with the reasoning that her husband was too absorbed in business to make her happy (Wharton 210).

Divorce itself proved to be a business of its own, like in South Dakota where Undine Spragg seeks divorce from Ralph Marvell. Champions of the divorce mill understood its hand in the beneficial economic factors that governed the state’s legislation, and divorce created an influx in affluent industry and “fashioned itself as an unexceptional parallel to more traditional businesses” (MacComb 133). Just as a person would travel to a town for a certain lawyer or business, individuals in search of divorce traveled to towns that benefitted from lenient marriage laws. Episcopal Bishop William Hare led the protest against South Dakota’s hand in the business of divorce, noting that the state closed their eyes to the “morally unnerving” conditions “because divorce mills are profitable.” He writes, “Divorce litigation has brought large money ... Thus, unconsciously, those who reap the harvest are led to throw an attractive guise over what, but for their self-interest, would wear a hideous form” (131). Hare suggests that commercial success is undeterred by moral depravity. The business in South Dakota further displays the indistinguishable relationship between marriage and business, which Hare considers the intermingling of sanctity and depravity. *The Custom of the Country* responds to Hare’s ideas of moral indignity with the vulgar Indiana Rolliver, who is also from Apex. Undine Spragg encounters newly remarried Rolliver in South Dakota, who admonishes Undine for not yet having been recycled back into the marriage market. She tells Undine regarding her divorce with Ralph and impending abandonment by her lover Van Degen, “a divorce is always a good thing to



have ... now you've got your divorce: anybody else it would come in handy for?" (212-213). While Hare considers marriage to be a sacred rite and institution, Rolliver treats marriage as a commodity or a thing one possesses and can dispose of. Divorce is also treated as a valuable tool—for a woman, divorce is useful to remarry. Rolliver uses divorce as a mechanism for mobility, and divorce is always a good thing to have because it represents getting more out of marriage in modernity.

The concern over the consequences of divorce contributes to the readings of Undine Spragg as an irredeemable, malicious siren, though Undine is born from the social forces of her era, specifically in regards to the institution of marriage and the relationship between husband and wife. Undine can easily be read as a villain, though Charlotte Perkins Gilman opens the door to a more sympathetic reading of Undine given the social circumstances. In Gilman's 1898 book *Women and Economics*, she argues that society's emphasis on sex distinction makes women passive, dependent on men, and useful only for their sex function:

The consuming female, debarred from any free productions, unable to estimate the labour involved in the making of what she so lightly destroys, and her consumption limited mainly to those things which minister to physical pleasure, creating a market for sensuous decoration and personal ornament, for all that is luxurious and enervation, and for a false and capricious vanity in such supplies, which operates as a deadly check to true industry and true art. (Gilman 121)

The scathing comments about Undine miss the point that Wharton emphasizes the construction of women in *The Custom of the Country* in their decadent and patriarchal society rather than

commenting on Undine's general behavior. Rather than Undine being a single force of disruption, she represents the corrosive effect of the custom of the country on marriages and society. The custom of the country is discussed by a male character and Bowen, a friend of the Dagonets who represent the upper class of old New York society. Bowen blames not Ralph Marvell or Undine for the fault in their marriage, but rather "the genus he belongs to: homo sapiens, Americanus. Why haven't we taught our women to take an interest in our work? Simply because we don't take enough interest in *them*" (Wharton 125). Bowen argues that women's interest in physical and social pleasure comes from the exclusion of women from "the real business of life" (125). The "real business" he speaks about is "serious affairs," concerning financial business or family matters beyond the role of a wife and mother. Undine is portrayed as heartless for her unsympathetic treatment of her husband as the custom of the country gives her freedom in the social sphere, but the distinction between the sexes gives space for women in the consumer market to participate in the marriage market. Given the relationship between husband and wife in capitalism, described by both Gilman and Bowen, Undine thrives in her sphere by working as a figure of agency through her participation in the marriage market and consumer culture.

Undine's role in *The Custom of the Country*, along with several of Wharton's novelistic critiques of American society, has a significant connection to the argument of Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Veblen's work argues that bourgeois women in capitalism are vehicles for the display of conspicuous consumption. The decorated, leisurely, and beautiful woman married to a wealthy man enhances his prestige, and his reputation is further demonstrated publicly and visually by his wife while he is working in the office (Veblen 43). Undine participates willingly in the culture of conspicuous consumption, and her ravenous

and never-ending desire for more contributes to her formation into the quintessential American divorcee. Undine challenges Veblen's idea of a woman's status because the possibility of divorce threatens the position of the wealthy man. The wife is an advertisement of her husband's success, but in *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton considers the success and agency of the wife. Undine does not quantify her success by her current marriage, but through the prospect of gaining more through divorce and remarriage. Undine gladly participates in Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption, but her continued participation in the marriage market demonstrates an ambitious search for greater wealth and power by switching out her husbands. Veblen speaks about the old leisure class, and the changing structures of hierarchies in modernity recontextualizes conspicuous consumption to consider women's changing roles in consumer culture and the institution of marriage.

Advertisements play a role in *The Custom of the Country* in demonstrating a capitalist consumption culture that pervades the economy into marriage and divorce. Divorce offers a space for women to be seen and remarketed back into the marriage market through divorce advertising. For example, Alva Vanderbilt boasted of her divorce from a rich man, saying, "I always do everything first. I blaze the trail for the rest to walk in" (Vanderbilt 150). Vanderbilt was an American socialite, and as a member of the Vanderbilt family, she is associated with the new money of New York, opposed to the old money of Ralph's Dagonet family. Vanderbilt's boasting of her divorce demonstrates the shift towards the new customs of families with modern capitalist ideals along with an emphasis on consumptive culture—Alva Vanderbilt is so rich that even a wealthy husband is disposable. Divorce demonstrates a shift from the importance of a traditional hierarchy and institution to the triumph of the marketplace in all matters of life, including marriage. In Vanderbilt's case, divorce advertising demonstrates a visibility of one's

wealth and influence, but divorce advertising also reflects the culture of consumption. MacComb argues in her book *Tales of Liberation* that Rolliver's line "a divorce is always a good thing to have," "expresses a trend in American advertising which emphasized the benefits derived from consumption of a product rather than the inherent qualities of the product itself" (124). *The Custom of the Country* reflects an acquisitive age that exists in the rise of industrialism and "the after-effects of the pioneering age" (Brooks 501). In the growing tendencies of capitalism, consumption supersedes the quality of the product because more is better. *The Custom of the Country* demonstrates how this mentality permeates into marriage and divorce, as the ability to switch out one spouse for another constructs a never-ending horizon of an abstract satisfaction of needs. Locke defines abstraction as what can be separated in the mind cannot be separated in reality, and in relation to Undine's insatiable desire and conception of happiness, her abstract conception of fulfillment results in an equivalency to her current state (Baxter 307). Abstract desire in *The Custom of the Country* displays the consumer culture of searching for improvement despite the current need or desire being satisfied. The infinite repeatability of the action makes the present circumstance replaceable. Simon Patten responds to this behavior of modernity, and writes in *The New Basis of Civilization* (1907), "The new morality does not consist in saving, but in expanding consumption ... not in the thought of the future, but in the utilization and expansion of the present" (215). MacComb's and Patten's arguments align with Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption, in which the modern American individual prizes the competition of the marketplace.

While divorce rates increased during Wharton's life, the number of marriages also increased during the era. Though the age of consent rose, the average age individuals married reduced for both sexes because they had the financial means to wed (May 77). Rather than

representing the demise of the marital institution, “the divorce rate in this period was a barometer for its rising popularity” (Bentley 161). Marriage and divorce go hand in hand, and the success of each represents the pleasure of consumption and the reality of disposal in a capitalist and consumer society. For Undine, marriage allows her social freedom and accumulation, and as a divorcee, Undine is able to run her marital life and repeat the process through divorce. What Bentley calls the “commercial circulation of women” through divorce and remarriage, the American divorcee in a capitalistic society defines modern marriage as the expansion of capitalism into the marriage market (163). *The Custom of the Country* shows that divorce is a product of American capitalism because capitalism permeates into the American way of life. Capitalism, competition, and the marketplace becomes the new traditions of America, and therefore influences the state of various institutions, such as the institution of marriage. While France esteems its traditions over the economy, the American capitalist economy becomes the force of disruption and the new logic of modern culture, and the new logic leads to a state of cultural and economic transition.

### **Old New York**

Undine Spragg’s relationship with the old New York family, the Dagonets, shows her disdain for the old manners and hierarchies that are quickly becoming unfashionable in the age of modernity. Undine is the daughter of a wealthy man, who having made new money in manufacturing and investments, seeks out an elevated reputation that one can only acquire through the association of old families of inherited wealth. Undine attempts not only to ascend financially but also socially, and the Spraggs move to New York in order to give Undine a better chance at success. New York is the pinnacle of American capitalism and society during the early

twentieth century—home of Wall Street and “a world that was mainly interested in size and numbers, in which ministers talked of their membership turnover” (Brooks 509). New York is home to old and new money, both expansive in wealth and influence, and the Dagonets represent old money. Undine catches the attention of Ralph Marvell, whose family represents the traditional American aristocracy that Wharton descended from (Kazin 80). Rather than making money during the age of industrialization and moving to New York as a result of financial success, families like the Dagonets came over on the Mayflower or immigrated from Europe—their money represents the traditional hierarchies and manners before the transition into modernity with the new American capitalism.

Undine’s desire to marry Ralph and join the reputable Dagonet family arises from reading the society newspapers, which establishes her identity as one molded through absorption, imitation, and upper-class identity as a spectacle. The Dagonets are stagnant in society and representative of the old order of social conduct, but Undine recognizes Ralph and his family as a beneficial match through the society newspapers she reads. The Dagonets, whether they are aware of it or not, feature in the society newspapers, and Undine recognizes their worth to her future as a result. Ralph’s significance in New York society is staked in the past, affiliated with inherited wealth and family heritage, but the society newspapers insert Ralph into the marriage market as an eligible bachelor due to his family reputation—the old New York families still have high social capital during this period (Brooks). Undine manipulates her behavior, based on social interactions and the media, to navigate her ascension into an old New York family.

Wharton presents a dichotomy between the styles of Undine and the Dagonets, which pairs with the expectation Undine has for Ralph’s family based on reading the society papers. The dichotomy represents a shift from the Dagonet’s old order to Undine’s new order fueled by

consumer culture. Undine is invited to dinner at the home of Ralph's sister, and at this event her education from the society papers falls flat. The traditional New York family is not as fashionable as she thought, considering their wealth and status. Her expectations and reality diverge at Mrs. Fairford's dinner party:

Undine was disappointed in the Fairford dinner ... she had expected to view the company through a bower of orchids and eat pretty-coloured entrees in ruffled papers. Instead, there was only a low centre-dish of ferns, and plain roasted and broiled meat that one could recognize—as if they'd been dyspeptics on a diet! With all the hints in the Sunday papers, she thought it dull of Mrs. Fairford not to have picked up something newer; and as the evening progressed she began to suspect that it wasn't a real 'dinner party,' and that they had just asked her in to share what they had when they were alone. (20-21)

The Fairford dinner does not demonstrate the opulence of the family's wealth, as Undine expects from her reading, because the food supplies are not in excess and the food is not fashionably displayed on fancy dishes. The Fairford family appears to value subtlety, and they rely on their family's reputation to signal their wealth rather than displaying waste for the utility of reputability described by Veblen (45). With the Dagonet family belonging to the leisure class, Veblen would consider the subtlety of their wealth to be a waste because their wealth is squandered on upholding the traditional display of financial success. Undine cannot understand the signs of traditional hosting decor and foods because she can only read the signs of the new version of the leisure class she reads about in society newspapers. Undine expects a dinner party to be a presentation of wealth rather than an old-fashioned, meager dinner. Undine looks down

on the Fairford's display of their wealth, and she sees their subtlety as a waste of their resources and her time, especially considering the formality of the dinner slows down the courtship between her and Ralph. Just as Undine composes herself in public, she expects all social engagements to be dictated by displaying one's capital in a consumer driven society.

Undine is also shocked by Mrs. Fairford's house, which is drastically different from the Spragg's decoration of their rooms at the Stentorian Hotel. Undine's criticisms of the home emphasize her lack of social propriety that would be expected in a traditional family like the Dagonets. Undine illustrates the Fairford home as old-fashioned to a fault:

The house, to begin with, was small and rather shabby. There was no gilding, no lavish diffusion of light: the room they sat in after dinner, with its green-shaded lamps making faint pools of brightness, and its rows of books from floor to ceiling, reminded Undine of the old circulating library at Apex, before the new marble building was put up. Then instead of a gas-log, or a polished grate with electric bulbs behind ruby glass, there was an old-fashioned wood-fire, like pictures of 'Back to the farm for Christmas' and when logs fell forward Mrs. Fairford or her brother had to jump up to push them in place, and the ashes scattered over the hearth untidily. (20)

Undine's description is dripping with judgment, yet Wharton expects the reader to judge Undine's inability to appreciate Mrs. Fairford's home. Undine does not believe the home depicts the family's wealth, and instead the scene conjures up images of pre-renovated spaces and rural aesthetics. Everything is old-fashioned and not reflective of modern design or decoration, and the scene illustrates past tastes rather than the current fashions reflective of Undine's malleable taste.



A home that is likely warm, traditional, and full of family history is a disappointment to Undine who keeps up with the latest fashions. Wharton is critical of Undine's taste and eye, which only pays attention to capital.

The Spragg's taste is informed by the latest fashions and trends, and their taste is meant to be a presentation of their high taste and wealth. The decor of the Spragg rooms is the product of consumer culture in capitalism, which is focused on the present and future trends, whereas the style of the Fairford home is reflective of past tastes. The Spragg family stays at the Hotel Stentorian, which is located on the Upper West Side where new money families reside (Brooks). The location of the Spraggs also contrasts the location of the residences of the Dagonets. The location itself forms a hierarchy in New York, and the Hotel Stentorian is an inferior location to the old leisure class. Wharton introduces Mrs. Spragg enthroned in one of the two heavy gilt armchairs:

The Spragg rooms were known as one of the Looey suits, and the drawing-room walls, above their wainscoting of highly-varnished mahogany, were hung with salmon-pink damask and adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette and the Princess de Lamballe. In the centre of the florid carpet a gilt table with a top of Mexican onyx sustained a palm in a gilt gasket tied with a pink bow. But for this ornament, and a copy of 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' which lay beside it, the room showed no traces of human use, and Mrs. Spragg herself wore an air of detachment as if she had been a wax figure in a show window. Her attire was fashionable enough to justify such a post... (3-4)

The decorative fixtures are dramatic and opulent, and the description of the room satirizes the Spragg's excess and spectacle of New York wealth. In comparison to the Fairford home, which is

warm and approved by Wharton through her criticism of Undine's judgment, the Spragg rooms are polished and filled with ornaments to the point of absurdity. The ornaments are carefully staged to suggest their family values. The portraits of Antoinette and Lamballe are there to perhaps signal to their visitors that they have European affiliations and interests, though to the reader, it signals a warning story about over consumption and selfishness. *The Hound of Baskervilles* is a popular novel of the period, so the Spraggs likely purchased the novel to display their fashionable intellect and ideas. The Spraggs do not have the money or the reputation of the Dagonet family, but they decorate in this fashion to act the part. The Spraggs perfectly encapsulate Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption, in which the individual purchases costly or fashionable items for the sole purpose of demonstrating a surplus of money. Wharton appreciates simplicity and respect for architectural structure rather than ornamentation and veneer in her book *The Decoration of Houses*, which suggests that Wharton depicts Undine with bad taste (McGee 75). The Spragg's styling, however, is likely a result of their absorption of taste from either those around them or the magazines they read. The taste of Undine reiterates her inclination towards consumption which feeds into the broader context of her lifestyle.

Undine recognizes the taste of the Dagonets to be of the past, whereas her own is reflective of current tastes molded by the consumer market. The Fairford's decor signals to Undine that the traditional family does not buy into the fashionable trends of hosting and styling, and Undine's opinion of their home displays a disdain for a family that is considered high in the social hierarchical order in New York. Wharton is critical of Undine's eye and disparages the Spragg's consumer tastes, but Wharton depicts Undine as aware of the shifting attitudes in consumer culture that the Dagonets do not contend with. Capitalism breaks down the old guard and creates a new space to navigate, and Undine acts as a device to disrupt the old order of the

Dagonet family. The Dagonet taste—rich with history, tradition, and subtlety—is old-fashioned, so in terms of the society newspapers Undine reads, the Dagonets do not measure up to the fashionable families that represent modern New York. In a space of shifting hierarchies dictated by social newspapers, Undine navigates in the space through imitation of the old order to blend in with the Dagonets.

Undine's behavior at the Fairford dinner demonstrates her interest in the market economy of the social sphere, which is informed by the growing economic market in New York and the marriage market. Undine resorts to imitation and absorption in order to perform in social spaces and appeal to the family. Wharton writes, "[Undine] wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met" (13). In a period of flux and the rise of consumer culture, Undine continuously molds herself to belong in social spaces in transition and treats herself as a commodity on the market to be admired and envied. Undine recognizes a capitalistic opportunity to advertise herself in order to make the most virtuous marriage match. McGee argues in "The Art of Being an Honored Guest" that to Undine, a "dinner party" is not the honor to be invited in the company of others but a "photogenic society event to celebrate the social standing of the guests" (74). Undine wishes to be seen and to attend an event that is worthy of a page in the society newspapers. To Undine, the point of these social occasions is to be invited and admired, but this is not a component of the Fairford dinner. The Fairford dinner party shocks Undine not only for its decor, but for its decorum. Undine says the wrong things, and in regard to more serious conversations and topics, her responses are meaningless and often inappropriate. At the dinner, Undine is embarrassed to answer with an uncomfortable laugh and "I don't care if I do" or "I wouldn't wonder," though only because she is underperforming at such an important opportunity for social and financial

ascension (Wharton 22). Undine depends on the envy of those around her to determine her success, which depends on physical beauty and social appearance at high profile events that will be featured in the society newspapers she reads. MacComb defines Undine's search for the "real thing," as "happiness as judged from the outside by others" (Wharton 60; MacComb 145). In terms of Veblen's conspicuous consumption, Undine's desire for the latest fashion and to receive jealous looks from those around her is fueled by the need to create an illusion of excess, even through beauty. When Undine's beauty does not communicate for her at the dinner, the conversation becomes confusing. Wharton writes, "All was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations; and she felt a violent longing to brush away the cobwebs and assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene" (23). Undine wishes to consume the attention of the dinner party with her very presence, but Mrs. Fairford's manners allow for a more equitable dispensation of attention to her guests: "with Mrs. Fairford conversation seemed to be a concert and not a solo. She kept drawing in the others, giving each a turn, beating time for them with her smile, and somehow harmonizing and linking together what they said" (22). Undine's "mistrust" of the hostess who subtly runs her event stems from clashing values. Undine agrees with Veblen's theory and believes that a social occasion of the leisure class should entice envy from their guests, who awe at one's possessions and status. Mrs. Fairford's equitable hostessing seems old-fashioned to Undine and opposes capitalism as a value system. Undine approves of competition in the marketplace, and the dinner baffles and bores her. Undine is bored from the start with Ralph and his family's lifestyle, and Undine's lack of interest demonstrates a shift towards a modern society more concerned in market interests. The Fairford dinner is an unproductive and frivolous demonstration of old manners, and without the benefit of the marketplace in the social sphere, Undine feels at a disadvantage by not being able to

adequately advertise her beauty to gain influence from a match with Ralph and therefore the Dagonet money.

Undine's manners with the Dagonet family display a transition away from the old traditions of the New York elite, as Undine considers their manners frivolous and unproductive in capitalism. Wharton considers the breakdown of the Dagonet's traditional manners as a threat to modernity, and Undine's manners, based on her ability to observe manners and fashions and adapt to them, are depicted as shallow. In the wake of transition makes space for new manners, and Undine exploits the new space created by capitalism to successfully integrate herself into the Dagonet family. From the Fairford dinner to meeting Ralph's mother and grandfather, "Her quickness in noting external differences had already taught her to modulate and lower her voice" and to switch out certain phrases with more appropriate ones she has learned through assimilation (Wharton 56). Her shifting appearance and behavior pairs with the social forces that shape her, but they also correspond with the variations of etiquette she encounters from her class aspirations. Undine is able to imitate what she observes, but she cannot understand the complexities of the integration of behavior into the class traditions. She notices "external differences," and fails to adapt internally as a result. Lindberg argues in *Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners* that the narrator sees what Undine cannot, and through Undine's eyes, the narrator values the customs of the elite that seem "alien" to Undine. In comparison to the Dagonet family, Undine is depicted as a capitalist intruder who cannot appreciate the traditions of old New York families and instead exploits the Dagonet family in her rise to power and wealth. Separate from the values of the Dagonets, Lindberg considers Undine safe from a moral fall. He writes, "[Wharton] sees Undine's climb as a series of splendid opportunities to develop new ways of seeing to discover deeper and more durable values. The thrust of the novel is that

Undine wastes all these opportunities, that she remains untouched” (72). This element contributes to the tone of the novel—its naturalism is destabilized by the comical allegory of Undine Spragg, whose realist downfall seems inevitable but never occurs because of her finesse in the marriage market (Fleissner). The breakdown of hierarchies and manners in the wake of transition creates space for Undine to shirk the consequences and instead navigate a society without the rigid structures that the Dagonets uphold and appreciate. The manners that shape and dictate the naturalistic and realistic novel are detached from any meaning or function in *The Custom of the Country*, and desire for more forces imitation without clear understanding of tradition. Wharton sees a modern society adrift without the tradition of manners because of the imitative practices of Undine Spragg, and Wharton’s frustrated narrative voice reflects a concern of manners becoming wasteful, unfashionable, and arbitrary. Wharton depicts the breakdown of the old guard due to capitalism as unfortunate, but recognizes that the traditional manners are becoming an artifact of the past. The true concern is what forms in the period of transition, and Undine’s adaptation to navigate the flux of hierarchy and manners demonstrates an alarming seizure of power through capitalistic values.

Ralph fails to understand Undine’s true motives in their marriage, just as his own intentions in their marriage are selfish and limited by the traditions he abides by. Ralph has a patronizing view of marriage, in which Undine is an object of his desire, but Undine does not uphold the same traditions as Ralph and breaks free from the hierarchical constraints he tries to impose on her by utilizing the social transitions of the period. Ralph believes he is saving Undine—from her parents, who are “‘plain people’ [that] had not yet learned to be ashamed of it,” and “Van Degenism,” which was “the ‘call’ for which his life had obscurely waited” (Wharton 50). Ralph’s latter statement is coded in the language of romantic chivalry, and this

behavior in modern society works to Ralph's disadvantage. Margaret McDowell argues that Ralph's romantic idealizations alienate him from Undine's true motivations. McDowell writes, Ralph "cannot fight against Undine Spragg's ruthless demands because he is imprisoned by a code of romantic chivalry which prevents him from honestly evaluating his wife until it is too late" (529). Ralph is a romantic, chivalric poet figure in *The Custom of the Country*, and Wharton associates him, along with Undine's next husband Raymond de Chelles later in the novel, with old, dusty, worn books. Considering he actually reads the novels opposed to the Spragg family, this suggests that Ralph has a passion for and interest in literature, history, and all the traditions that come with it. Though Wharton generally sympathizes with the husbands of Undine, Wharton does criticize Ralph for his romantic ideals because he falls behind in modernity and he is unwilling to see Undine as a woman with agency through the expansion of the marriage market. He considers Undine his muse at the start of their relationship, as Wharton writes, "Ralph had never felt more convinced of his power to write a great poem; but now it was Undine's hand which held the magic wand of expression," but Undine has no interest in the Romantics or the arts (87). The irony is that Ralph does not see that Undine possesses the power to manipulate Ralph's life due to the results of the hierarchical flux—rather than a muse, Undine controls her own narrative, as well as Ralph's, and seizes power outside the constraints of the traditional narrative Ralph writes. Deviating from her role as the heroine at the start of the novel, Undine begins to demonstrate the shift to capitalist modernity that disrupts the older hierarchies. She subverts the oppression of the old order on women and wives with her marriage to Ralph Marvell.

Ralph's enamoredness with Undine suggests the triumph of advertising over art, and displays Undine's ability to seize power through consumer models. Ralph is drawn to beauty and

the Romantic, but his over-saturated view of reality blinds him from his wife's false front. Book II begins with Ralph and Undine's honeymoon in the hills near Siena:

To Ralph the Sieneſe air was not only breathable but intoxicating. The ſun, trading the earth like a vintager, drew from it heady fragrances, cruſhed out of it new colours. All the values of the temperate landscape were reversed: the noon high-lights were white, but the ſhadows had unimagined colour. (85-86)

Sharon Kim argues in her article "Eyes Filled with Splendor" that the overwhelming of the senses disrupts Ralph's ability to see steadily and whole. Ralph's observation of Siena is "the visibility produced through being, not analysis" (Kim 211). Kim mentions Jean-Luc Marion's saturated phenomenon, in which the presence of Being becomes full to "the extent of bedazzlement of vision" (213). Ralph's subjectivity and vision puts him in danger of Undine's advertised bedazzlement. The Sieneſe hills and landscape has an incredible effect on Ralph, but Undine is apathetic to the scenes Ralph finds remarkable. In fact, Undine is disappointed by the rural nature of the European wedding tour and constantly whines. She prefers the city, where others can see her and envy her as a newlywed attached to an important family. Though Undine values the grandiose, their time in Siena offers no way for Undine to display her new wealth. Kim's saturation defines Ralph, as his objectification of Undine eventually works against him in *The Custom of the Country*. In a grove in Siena, Ralph views Undine as a possession. Wharton writes, "he changed his position and looked at his wife," and taking her hand, he examines it "as if it had been a bit of precious porcelain or ivory" (86; 87). Ralph possesses through seeing, which is exactly Undine's process. Undine is well versed in the "game" of seeing and being seen,



which Ralph notes later when he says, “She would go on eluding and doubling, watching him as he watched her; and at that game she was sure to beat him in the end” (135). Many critics have noted Undine’s gaze in *The Custom of the Country*—what Undine sees, she acquires. Undine is aware of her appearance as an advertisement and as a mode to appeal to others in order to benefit from the connection, and Wharton demonstrates how Undine capitalizes on the consumer culture in attracting men in the marriage market. Ralph, however, is fooled by her appearance and comes to realize he could never own Undine due to her use of divorce and remarriage to ascend socially and financially.

Ralph and Undine’s opposing views of the institution of marriage demonstrates a shift towards modernity and how divorce destabilizes the traditional institution of marriage and its hierarchies. While Ralph marries for love, Undine views their union as a contract. Undine is in the business of marriage, and Ralph is “a victim when love had at last appeared clad in the attributes of romance” (Wharton 51). Victim is an important word considering Undine wants to use Ralph as a steppingstone to Van Degen once she tires of Ralph’s old, traditional ways. This notion connects to the common opinion that Undine is a monster, though Undine’s cruelty is only a means by which she can find a better husband. Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* serves as a warning of what happens when a woman does not participate in the business of marriage. Bart refuses marriage, and in the eyes of society, this makes her useless and, to Veblen, threatening. A woman without a husband disrupts the social order he posits in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. As a master of the social arts, Bart entertains and appeals to others, but without a husband, her skills are not transferable as a host or guest to represent the respectability and wealth of her husband. Without a husband, Lily Bart is vulnerable. Marriage is hardly a passage to freedom for women, and Elizabeth Ammons argues that Wharton uses Undine to comment on:

the attitudes implicit in leisure-class marriage, an institution that has long ... been the envy of women dreaming of freedom but that in fact encourages the husband to assert his autonomy as an international playboy ... while the wife, expected to be supportive and dependent, must channel her desires for self-assertion into the role of conspicuous consumer for him. (102)

With the expansion of the marriage market through divorce, Wharton extends the scope of Veblen's theory to include the wife in seeking a surplus to seem more extravagant. Instead of being a parasite to one husband, Undine is a parasite in the marriage market in search of greater happiness and wealth. Gilman discusses in *Women and Economics* that the business of marriage is not ideal for anyone—husband, wife, or the economy—and perverts the economic developments of the world by giving the wife the “instincts of savage individualism” through consumption (120). Divorce maximizes the consumption of a woman to more than one man, and fuels the consumer culture in the greater scope of modernity.

Undine's marriage to Ralph Marvell and her navigation of old New York society displays a shift away from the old guard, which creates a new opportunity for Undine to navigate the space and exploit the new systems—unconstrained by the old hierarchies—to her benefit. The breakdown of the old guard through capitalism releases the constraints on women and wives, which allows Undine to seek a marital improvement and more money. In the age of modernity, the culture shifts away from tradition and the Romantic and towards a consumer culture in capitalism. Undine's treatment of social spaces as marketplaces and of her own appearance as an advertisement demonstrates how she harnesses consumer culture in order to seize power and

gain wealth. Undine's divorce from Ralph and boredom with his lifestyle demonstrates a shift towards a modern society more interested in market interests and competition. Undine is inclined towards upward mobility, and she uses the transition into modernity as a mode to ascend. Even Ralph's suicide—which means the death of Romanticism, the plummet of the old money New York elite, and the failure of a man to maintain the male-headed nuclear family—gives Undine an opportunity to marry de Chelles without seeking annulment. Wharton writes about Undine's view on Ralph's death:

[Ralph's suicide] brought about a sudden change in her situation. She was now no longer a divorced woman struggling to obtain ecclesiastical sanction for her remarriage, but a widow whose conspicuous beauty and independent situation made her the object of lawful aspirations. (296)

Undine considers Ralph's suicide in terms of the social and financial benefits it offers her. Even as the root of Ralph's grievances, Undine seizes the moment and considers it helpful for her ascension into the French bourgeoisie as an American Marquise.

### **Discontented in France**

*The Custom of the Country* portrays France as a stagnant society, content in its customs, compared to an American society in flux. Wharton favors traditions with extended pedigree, so French customs are what fascinate her the most. French culture weighs in on the American marriage and divorce customs throughout Undine's time spent in France and her second marriage to Raymond de Chelles. Wharton wrote *A Motor-Flight Through France*, which celebrates her

journey through the country she admires for its French manners and social life. She appreciates the country for “fitting into a pattern,” which discloses her values of dignity, decorum, order, and social agreement (Wharton 29). While Undine’s display of manners demonstrates a society threatening to drift away from the rigid structure that Wharton esteems, France offers an example of a contented nation. Wharton’s own country experiences a cultural shift and a flux in hierarchy, so she romanticizes France in *Motor-Flight*. She writes, “That insistence on civic dignity and comeliness so miraculously maintained, through every torment of political passion, every change of social conviction, by a people resolutely addressed to the intelligent enjoyment of living” (29). Wharton also remarks on the superiority of their architectural structures and aesthetic judgment, commending the “French passion for form and fitness” (97). The description of the Spragg rooms at the Stentorian starts to read as an attack once compared to Wharton’s opinions of French style. Wharton does not seem to have anything disagreeable to say about France in *Motor-Flight*: “The first surprise is to find the place on the whole, so much more—shall one say? Dignified and decent, so much more conscious of social order and restraints, than the early years of the life led in it” (45). France in *The Custom of the Country*, however, is not perfect, and the customs Wharton upholds as decent, she depicts as restrictive for a woman in the novel.

Undine finds herself severely restricted as the wife of de Chelles. In America, Undine experiences and exploits the breakdown of constraints on women’s lives because of the shift towards modernity, which relaxes the traditions through an importance of the marketplace over manners. In France, the effects of capitalism did not transform French culture the way it did American culture, so Undine is without the option to divorce de Chelles and recycle herself back into the marriage market once she is dissatisfied. Tradition and heritage remains the prominent value of French culture in *The Custom of the Country*, opposed to the fading values of Ralph and

his family in America, and Undine is forced to live in de Chelles's isolated family home and become a Catholic. Perhaps most damaging to Undine is her isolation from society, as she is unable to be seen by others and compete for attention and envy. *The Custom of the Country* depicts France as a restrictive space for women, and opposed to America, women are more confined by the traditions and manners of French culture. Without the permeating effect of American capitalism and consumer culture on society and marriage, Undine is denied the agency to ascend socially and financially by participating in the social marketplace and the option to advertise herself, even as a wife by Veblen's standards. Without the possibility of divorce, Undine remains stagnant, powerless, and discontented in France.

France offers the European tradition of adultery as a substitute for American divorce, though the American characters of *The Custom of the Country* look down on the practice—traditional New York elites only allow themselves the comfort of a lover when they are in Europe. As the hierarchical structure shifts, divorce allows mobility and supposedly an increase in happiness by finding a superior spouse, whereas adultery is considered immoral and useless. Undine falls in with a fashionable French crowd in Paris, as she is unwelcome in the New York group for being a divorcee, and they take her divorce as an indication of her sexual freedom. Freeman writes in *Love American Style*, “What attracts them is not the divorce itself, but that divorce indicates to Europeans a moral looseness and freedom, the risqué divorcee” (80). Undine is unsettled by this fact: “increasing enlightenment produced a revolt of the Apex puritanism which, despite some odd accommodations and compliances, still carried its head so high in her” (Wharton 216). Undine enjoys the freedoms afforded to her by marriage, considering her affair with Van Degen, but holding the reputation of a sexually liberated woman, even in a modern society, goes against her requirement of having both “amusement and

respectability” (216). Wharton presents adultery as representative of moral depravity, and though she is critical of divorce, divorce is considered somewhat better than adultery. Indiana Rolliver’s reappearance in the novel demonstrates the American disdain for having a lover when divorce is an option. She says in response to Clare Van Degen’s opinion that divorce is “wrong—or rather awfully vulgar”:

*Vulgar?* ... If that isn’t just too much! A woman who’s in love with another woman’s husband? What does she think refined, I’d like to know? Having a lover, I suppose—like the women in these nasty French plays? I’ve told Mr. Rolliver I won’t go to the theatre with him again in Paris—it’s too utterly low. And the swell society’s just as bad: it’s simply rotten. Thank goodness I was brought up in a place where there’s some sense of decency left! (213)

Wharton writes with a sense of irony about the lowliness of French art and society, but the comment makes an astute point about the stagnant quality of European marriage that can only change through the recycling of lovers. The French bourgeoisie rejects divorce, and according to Indiana Rolliver, the French have subjected themselves to a lowly substitute at the risk of their happiness. In the case of Undine, the French practice of adultery threatens her sense of respectability and, more importantly, her mobility.

Undine again finds herself in a marriage restricted by the past, despite Undine being forward thinking and modern, and married to de Chelles, Undine is also socially restricted without Veblen’s American leisure class concept of conspicuous consumption. De Chelles is similar to Ralph Marvell in that he venerates tradition, and his traditions date back drastically

farther than the Dagonet lineage in New York. Same with her marriage to Ralph, Undine falls short of the advertisement she displayed to de Chelles as a potential wife. The difference this time is that Undine's efforts in the marketplace are finished now that she is married to de Chelles. Wharton writes:

More than once, during their months in the country, she had had a startled sense of not giving him all he expected of her ... Raymond, to her surprise, had again developed a disturbing resemblance to his predecessor ... At first he tried—as Ralph had done—to tell her about what he was reading or what was happening in the world; but her sense of inadequacy made her slip away to other subjects. (310)

The passage comments on the striking similarity between Undine's marriage to Ralph, but the difference is that a French marriage has no options beyond taking a lover. Undine's dissatisfaction with Ralph is solved through divorce and remarriage. Undine again demonstrates an inability to care about tradition, whether it means appreciating literature or history. A blatant example is when Undine urges de Chelles to sell a family tapestry so he can pay for her to spend a season in Paris. She tells him, "In America we're not ashamed to sell what we can't afford to keep ... Why there's a fortune in this one room: you could get anything you chose for those tapestries" (Wharton 323). De Chelles responds in horror that Undine cannot understand, and this is true: to Undine, the tapestries are a commodity that can provide a way for Undine to be displayed in society. Undine does not see the sense in holding on to a valuable item that is rarely presented to others. To de Chelles, the tapestries are an attachment to his family name and ancestry. He lives for his family and something greater than himself, and his ownership over the

land and tapestries are not just assets but representative of his family lineage. This scene demonstrates how tradition restricts Undine—by not selling the tapestries, Undine is confined to Saint Desert and isolated from society. Though Wharton is wholly sympathetic to de Chelles in this scene, Undine remains powerless to her husband's traditions and is a sympathetic figure. Undine is unable to subvert the oppression of women and wives under the old order without the advantages of American capitalism.

The distinct quality of Undine's French marriage is her isolation as a wife, which is unmistakably un-American. Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* describes the American custom of the financially elite to display their wife in social settings as a means of showcasing their wealth, but Undine's isolation in the Saint Desert family home demonstrates the opposite of Veblen's theory. Carol Wershoven argues in her book *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton*, "This is a terrible punishment for Undine, who can define herself only through other people's eyes" (68). Undine's French marriage demonstrates the excessive restrictions of the female in a traditional society and family. Undine must sacrifice her identity in order to be de Chelles's wife: she adopts his customs and religion and must give up the pleasures of society to live at the lonely Saint Desert estate. Undine's manipulative power is drained in France and at Saint Desert. Wharton respects France for its cultural contentment and civic dignity, but she also recognizes in *The Custom of the Country* that France offers no mobility or agency for women in a culture that emphasizes its tradition and manners.

Wharton sympathizes with Ralph and de Chelles considering her appreciation for tradition, but she is critical of the limitations of tradition and how it creates a stagnant culture for its citizens. For a woman in America, the shifting culture towards modernity and changing structures of hierarchies allows for women's mobility in the marketplace. Wharton is particularly



critical of de Chelles and French tradition for the confinement it forces upon Undine, and her restriction in France demonstrates how the rise of American capitalism brings about changes to the social order. The changes offer Undine a chance to participate in consumer culture as a woman and seize the tides of transition to ascend socially and financially.

### **Triumph of the Marketplace**

Undine's first, and supposedly, last marriage to Elmer Moffatt is antithetical to her unions with Ralph and de Chelles for being distinctly American and therefore valuing economics over all else. Their marriage displays the harmony of new capitalism and the institution of marriage, and both individuals represent the emerging modern capitalist ideals in America. Moffatt and Undine thrive under the new hierarchy dictated by capitalism and consumer culture rather than the oppression of the old guard, and the couple is able to climb socially and to accrue wealth through the new logic of capitalism. Also from Apex, where Undine and Moffatt first got married and then divorced, Moffatt prefers divorce to adultery. Undine knows that de Chelles has a mistress, so the American Marquise asks to be Moffatt's mistress to procure amusement in her lonesome marriage. Moffatt is horrified, and tells Undine, "You were my wife once, and you were my wife first—and if you want to come back you've got to come that way: not slink through the back way when there's no one watching, but walk in by the front door, with your head up, your Main Street look" (Wharton 350). Similar to Indiana Rolliver, Moffatt looks down on the French custom of adultery and private discretions. Moffatt does not desire a mistress—he specifically wants a wife. Moffatt understands the value of a wife in society, and in connection to Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, he recognizes that a wife is crucial to advertise the individual and their wealth. Divorce is a commodity to Moffatt, in which divorce allows for the

reestablishment of identity in a shifting culture along with mobility. Also, divorce contributes to Moffatt's inclination for renewal and the future. While Undine's French marriage is isolated from society, Moffatt offers a marriage that is the product of an open and public American divorce. Moffatt tells Undine in regards to selling the tapestries, "[De Chelles'] ancestors are *his* business: Wall Street's mine" (351). Moffatt esteems economics over tradition, and the public display of both the divorce and the marriage feeds into the American ideal of advertising and envy posed by Veblen.

Undine and Moffatt are well matched, as they both desire to be seen and be written about. Undine's obsession with society papers indicates her solipsism, and Moffatt's dedication to the news demonstrates his desire to be included in the events and economic successes recorded. While the newspapers report on current events, news also focuses on future implications, and when Wharton includes newspapers in Moffatt's environment, she suggests a competitive spirit in his reading in order to learn about what is current (347). Divorce itself is a process by which a person can recreate their image, and through the announcements in society papers and newspapers, divorce functions as a way in which an individual proves their mobility and demonstrates their wealth. The marriage announcement of Undine and Moffatt is an example of this:

Divorce and remarriage of Mrs. Undine Spragg-de Chelles. American Marquise renounces ancient French title to wed Railroad King. Quick work untying and tying. Boy and girl romance renewed.

Reno, November 23rd. The Marquise de Chelles, of Paris, France, formerly Mrs. Undine Spragg Marvell, of Apex City and New York, got a decree of divorce at special

session of the Court last night, and was remarried fifteen minutes later to Mr. Elmer Moffatt, the billionaire Railroad King, who was the Marquise's first husband. (358)

The gossip columnist goes on to say about the rate the couple got married following the divorce, "every record had been broken" (358). The marriage announcement emphasizes the economic success of Moffatt and crowns him a new monarch of modernity by calling him the "Railroad King." The announcement addresses the competitive spirit propelled by capitalism by focusing on the speed of their union, which is not represented as hasty or inappropriate but as a demonstration of Moffatt's prestigious network that expands into the west. Undine and Moffatt's titles also suggest a comical but critical analysis of the direction of American customs and manners. Undine is an "American Marquise," which does not make sense, and such titles suggest a dissolution of traditional hierarchies and manners in favor of economic prosperity. The marriage of Undine and Moffatt presents a shift to the capitalist modernity that disrupts older hierarchies, as Undine leaves Ralph and de Chelles behind for a man who also prizes competition and spectacle.

Undine's marriage to Moffatt is a modern American marriage—looking towards the future, flaunting wealth posed by Veblen's conspicuous consumption, and valuing economics over tradition. The end of Wharton's novel represents the triumph of the marketplace, as Undine uses divorce to move upwards in society to gain wealth and influence. Wharton's critique of capitalism in *The Custom of the Country* pairs with the result of capitalism in the changing structures of hierarchies, and Undine seizes the tides of transition to ascend the strata of society. Wharton poses a paradox at the end of the novel, though, which questions the span of capitalism's consequences on hierarchies and social order. While divorce has provided the means

by which Undine can climb socially, her status as a divorced and remarried woman disqualifies her from getting what she truly wants:

She had learned that there was something she could never get, some that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for. (364)

Undine can never truly leave her past behind, and her divorces will follow her into the future. Wharton suggests that despite the rapid pace and spread of modernity, some traditions hold true. On the other hand, Undine tends to get what she wants. Wharton poses an anxiety of the all-consuming effect of capitalism and economics upending traditions despite their long-lasting effect. The capitalist ideals of Undine and Moffat in *The Custom of the Country* are a nightmare and an opportunity to subvert oppression under the old order, and the ending of Wharton's novel displays the nightmare of a crumbling hierarchy that potentially allows Undine to acquire a distinguished status and the opportunity for women to climb the echelons of society given the loosened constraints.

## **Conclusion**

Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* is an overt criticism of capitalism. Capitalism creates a consumer culture, in which capital and competition is revered over tradition and manners. Capitalism creates insatiable monsters: Undine Spragg achieves in finding "the real

thing” with the successful Elmer Moffatt, the man who also represents the emerging modern capitalist ideals, but he is still not enough for her (Wharton 30):

Even now, however, she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew them. And there had been moments lately when she had had to confess to herself that Moffatt did not fit into this picture. (362)

*The Custom of the Country* illustrates the insatiable desire for more, even if the greater happiness Undine desires is abstract and not yet even conceived. Wharton shows that no marriage will ever be enough in a society that promotes the imitation of the economy and competition on Wall Street in the social sphere. In such a society, Wharton sees the collapse of American tradition and American manners. The new manners are disconnected from tradition, and the only tradition that informs modern American behavior is the rules of commerce under capitalism—competition and imitation. The character Undine represents an unsettling prophecy of the future of American tradition and manners.

Wharton’s critique of capitalism also signals a shift in hierarchical structure. Undine is not simply a monster molded by capitalism, but a woman who is able to take advantage of the new logic of capitalism and changes in marriage legislation. Undine is a figure of agency who seizes power by ascending through the market without the constraints imposed by the old order. Divorce has a significant effect on the social order, and Undine is allowed mobility due to the shift in the institution of marriage that changes American hierarchies. *The Custom of the Country* reflects a period in transition, in which capitalism shifts American priorities towards

modernity—or the triumph of the marketplace and the permeation of consumer culture into social life. Undine Spragg seizes the tide of transition to her benefit, and though Undine presents a warning about how the blindness of consumptive desire destroys everything in its path and has an unceasing path of destruction, Undine also illuminates a period in flux and that creates a new opportunity to navigate society with traditions, manners, and behaviors that reflect modernity.

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