Edith Wharton's Evolutionary Monster: Undine Spragg of *The Custom of the Country*

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this project.

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Introduction

Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913) revolves around many complex issues that affected Wharton's own life, from the intensely personal issue of divorce to the vast exposé of American and French cultural differences. Wharton composed *The Custom of the Country* in interrupted intervals from 1908 to 1913, which was the longest amount of time she ever required to complete a novel (Lewis 345). After almost twenty-eight years of marriage, Wharton received her divorce from the Paris tribunal on April 16, 1913, and Scribner's published the novel in October 1913 (1313-14).[1] The close connection in time between Wharton's own divorce from Edward (Teddy) Wharton and the publication of the novel reveals that she was contemplating issues of marriage and divorce in both her personal and literary life during this time. R.W.B. Lewis, Wharton's eminent biographer, makes the likely assertion that "[t]he decision to divorce was the most painful one Edith Wharton was ever required to make" (333), and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, another notable biographer of Wharton, reinforces Lewis's view: "old New York's general squeamishness on the subject of divorce was very much in Wharton's mind just now, and the Aborigines' [conservative Old New Yorkers] sense of scandal at it appears more than once in this novel" (239-40). In many ways, Wharton's own attitudes toward marriage and divorce contrast with the callous attitudes toward marriage and divorce shown in *The Custom of the Country*, which satirizes the expedient use of divorce, the rapid series of remarriages, and the society that condones such abuses.

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[1]This information appears in the Chronology of The Library of America edition of *Edith Wharton: Novels*, edited by R.W.B. Lewis.

During this same time period, Wharton was severing her ties with America and establishing herself permanently in France; along with her divorce, this was another epoch event in her life. The sale of The Mount, Wharton's Lenox, Massachusetts, home entirely of her own creation, occurred in June of 1912, and, as Lewis notes, the sale of The Mount signified that "Edith Wharton's American life was at an end" (313). Wharton's intimate knowledge of both American and French societies allowed her to explore the differences between these two societies, and in *The Custom of the Country* she especially emphasizes the differing status of women in the two countries. The dissimilar status of women in America and France accordingly influences their roles and expectations within marriage. Wharton clearly favors the French views on women because she believes the French have a more integrated and valuable position for women in their society. American society suffers harsh condemnation from Wharton, mainly because women are excluded from what she considers the meaningful affairs of life, including business and cultural and intellectual conversation. The exploration of American and French attitudes toward women is throughly achieved in *The Custom of the Country* with its American and French characters and settings.

Wharton's fascination with the differences between American and French culture appears in her nonfiction as well as her fiction. The term Old New York derives from the title of Wharton's collection of four short stories, *Old New York* (1924), which recalls the world of her parent's and her own youth, and many scholars use the term to designate the conservative outlook and emphasis on good form that the elite social groups of New York from the 1840s to the 1880s valued. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), Wharton expresses her feelings that the aristocratic societies of Europe are much more kindred to Old New York: "in my

youth, the Americans of the original states, who in moments of crisis still shaped the national point of view, were the heirs of an old tradition of European culture" (781). The French *salons* and appreciation of art also attracted Wharton, especially the active role that women enjoyed in discussions within French *salons*. Reverence for the past and traditions derived from the long history of human experience is an attitude and manner of living that Wharton personally held most sacred, and she bestowed praise on the French for their deep reverence of these same values. Wharton's views on reverence for the past and traditions are particularly well formulated in three nonfiction works: *A Backward Glance*, *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908), and *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919). In *The Custom of the Country*, which is set around 1900 to 1912 (Showalter 88), Wharton depicts the clash between the older societies of Old New York and France and the new generation of American millionaires who infiltrate the older societies and antagonize the members of these traditional societies with their utter lack of reverence. In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton clearly criticizes American views of marriage, diagnosing the slight value placed on women by American men as the source of illness of American marriages. The book also illuminates Wharton's treatment of marriage in *The Custom of the Country*. Wharton's non-fiction not only reiterates her preference for French society but also elucidates themes that frequently appear in her fiction.

In both her American and French careers, Undine Spragg rises in her social career and economic status through the institution of marriage. In many ways, Undine Spragg is a modern version of Chaucer's character, the Wife of Bath, from *The Canterbury Tales*. Like the Wife of Bath, Undine understands the mercantile system of exchange, and she advances her position by trading on her physical appearance for increased wealth and social status through her marriages.

Undine's career readily falls into three phases, with her three main marriages marking the divisions of her career.

In Wharton's own words she describes her intent for the book, "I argued that in *The Custom of the Country* I was chronicling the career of a particular young woman, and that to whatever hemisphere her fortunes carried her, my task was to record her ravages and pass on to her next phase" (*A Backward Glance* 920). Chapter One explores Wharton's first task in the chronicle, and this involves tracing Undine's ascent from an obscure Midwestern town of Apex City to the elite section of Old New York through her marriage to Ralph Marvell, a member of one of Old New York's most prestigious families. Undine's desire for both varied amusements and an exorbitant allowance conflicts with Ralph's conservative and intellectual interests and his moderate allowance. Undine aspires to a more extravagant lifestyle than Ralph can provide for her, and she eventually sues him for divorce, leaving him devastated by the process.

Chapter Two examines Undine's travels across the Atlantic for her next conquest of aristocratic French society, which she achieves by marrying the Count Raymond de Chelles. The prestige of the French aristocracy outweighs that of Old New York, and the appeal of belonging to the French aristocracy temporary appeases Undine's appetite for amusing diversions. Much to her dismay, Undine soon realizes that membership in the French aristocracy entails the subordination of personal desires for the greater interest of the family, and she again finds financial restraints imposed upon her. Chapter Two relies on Wharton's nonfiction prose, *French Ways and Their Meaning*, *A Backward Glance*, and *A Motor-Flight Through France*, to elucidate the similarities between Old New York and France, and it uses the nonfiction prose to highlight the importance of reverence for the past and traditions that French culture especially

values. After Undine decides that she can no longer endure the stifling expectations placed on her as the wife of a French aristocrat, she defies French social and religious codes by divorcing Raymond.

Neither aristocratic Old New York nor aristocratic France totally pleases Undine, and she ultimately remarries her original--and now fourth--husband, Elmer Moffatt, a compatriot from Apex City. Chapter Three discusses the circular path of Undine's career, and it considers what type of progress Undine has made and what type of progress she has not made. Undine and Moffatt share many common traits, including ruthless behavior, a longing for ostentatious displays of wealth, and rampant consumerism, and, of all Undine's husbands, she and Moffatt seem to be the best match. Although Undine and Moffatt resemble each other and seem well-matched, complete happiness continues to elude her. Chapter Three concludes with the insight that Undine will never achieve happiness and contentment unless she reassesses her values and her goals in life.

Chapter I.

Old New York Society: Undine's Marriage to Ralph Marvell

The central character of *The Custom of the Country*, Undine Spragg, assumes the allegorical function of representing the vices of American notions of marriage and divorce. Undine's physical beauty is her only positive quality, and in *A Backward Glance* Wharton recalls her society's tremendous emphasis on beauty as "an almost pagan worship of physical beauty" (818). Undine's beauty is the asset that she markets to gain material wealth and social status through the institution of marriage. Divorce serves Undine in just as vital a capacity as marriage, and it acts as a convenient vehicle for her to discard one husband for the next, who she invariably believes promises to fulfill her rapacious appetite for wealth and prestige.

Like many American consumers of the early twentieth century, Undine is insatiable, and, even after three divorces and four marriages, she still feels that complete happiness eludes her. Husbands become commodities; remarriage and divorce become the equivalent of exchange and refund. The critic Debra Ann MacComb connects Undine's rapid remarriages with consumer trends and advertising strategies that advocated voracious and ceaseless consumption of products during the period of the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. MacComb's research of the period indicates that Undine's quest for the "new and improved" typifies consumer attitudes, particularly those of the upper class, and she reports on the theory of a professor of the period, Simon N. Patten, who perfectly articulates the prevailing outlook that Undine and members of her class held on consumerism: "'[t]he standard of life is determined, not so much by what a man has to enjoy, as by the rapidity with which he tires of the pleasure. To have a high standard

means to enjoy a pleasure intensely and to tire of it quickly'" (769-70). According to Patten's formula, Undine indubitably earns one of the highest scores for her "standard of life."

Undine embodies qualities that Wharton scorns in the new generation that is invading high society of New York and France, and, yet, R.W.B. Lewis observes that Undine and Wharton herself actually share some startling similarities. Lewis enumerates Wharton and Undine's common traits of "'playing lady before a mirror,'" the same youthful nickname of "'Puss,'" and that "Edith's long yearning for psychological freedom is queerly reflected in Undine's discovery that each of her marriages is no more than another mode of imprisonment" (350). Wharton's aggressive reputation amongst her publishers for driving hard contracts and demanding copious advertising of her books may well resemble Undine's aggressive ascent of the social ladder. MacComb also observes that, by producing books for commercial sale, Wharton participates in the same consumer cycle that she so harshly condemns in her book: "Although she proclaims an alliance with the 'real' of the old guard, the 'real' is presented in the commercial form of a book and with a character whose self-bartering figures what Wharton and her publishers will attempt to do with the book" (789-90). Wharton and Undine share similarities, especially in the aggressive pursuit of their goals, but they also differ significantly. In *A Backward Glance* Wharton admits that "vanity" is one of the "tremendous forces" (778) that shaped her own life, but, unlike Wharton, Undine lacks any redeeming qualities. For Undine, vanity and superficial pleasure are the driving forces of her life. Undine never reaches below the surface of her appearance; she is the most shallow of all Wharton's characters.

Throughout the novel, Wharton describes Undine before a mirror in many scenes, and the novel even closes with Undine examining her appearance in the mantelpiece mirror, "according

to her invariable habit" (1013). Undine plots to use her beauty in the most aggressive manner to penetrate the oldest and most elite families of Old New York, and, in the first of a series of mirror scenes, she rehearses her strategy before a mirror: "The taste had outlasted childhood, and she still practised the secret pantomime, gliding in, settling her skirts, swaying her fan, moving her lips in soundless talk and laughter" (635). In her "secret pantomime," Undine creates a spectacle of herself to call attention to her beauty with her physical actions, the "gliding in, settling her skirts, [and] swaying her fan." Undine uses coquettish gestures to market herself to the eligible bachelors of Old New York, but her assets are all physical. Undine emits "soundless talk and laughter" while performing her "secret pantomime," but her actual conversation is even less substantial. Instead of being "soundless," it is mindless.

In the same scene as Undine's rehearsal of her "secret pantomime," Wharton uses mirrors to reveal Undine's restless nature as well as her egocentrism and superficiality: "Her incessant movements were not the result of shyness: she thought it the correct thing to be animated in society, and noise and restlessness were her only notion of vivacity" (636). The key phrase is "incessant movements" because Undine is perpetually seeking something new. Undine's physical movements reflect her ambitions to ascend not only the economic ladder, but also the social ladder. The word "incessant" comments on Undine's insatiable appetite; she will always be striving after what she does not have. Wharton's description of "noise and restlessness" as Undine's "only notions of vivacity" is hardly flattering, for it reiterates Undine's shallow nature. Undine's idea of living focuses on purely physical sensations, and she lacks the capacity to commune with others on an intellectual or emotional level.

Undine completes her invasion of Old New York society with her engagement to Ralph

Marvell, a relative of the illustrious Dagonet family of Washington Square. In a revealing scene, Undine, Mrs. Spragg, and Mrs. Heeny, the social gossip and confidante to Mrs. Spragg, discuss Undine's engagement ring, and Wharton cleverly exposes Mrs. Spragg's and Undine's ignorance of Old New York's social conventions during the course of the conversation:

> Mrs. Heeny took up the hand again. "Them's old stones, Undine--they've got a different look," she said, examining the ring while she rubbed her cushioned palm over the girl's brilliant finger-tips. "And the setting's quaint--I wouldn't wonder but what it was one of old Gran'ma Dagonet's."
>
> Mrs. Spragg, hovering near in fond beatitude, looked up quickly.
>
> "Why, don't you s'pose he *bought* it for her, Mrs. Heeny? It came in a Tiff'ny box."
>
> The manicure [Mrs. Heeny] laughed again. "Of course he's had Tiff'ny rub it up. Ain't you ever heard of ancestral jewels, Mrs. Spragg? In the Eu-ropean aristocracy they never go out and *buy* engagement rings; and Undine's marrying into our aristocracy."
>
> Mrs. Spragg looked relieved. "Oh, I thought maybe they were trying to scrimp on the ring--" (678)

The narrative technique of first-person dialogue provides an unadulterated view of the origins of these characters through their speech. Mrs. Heeny and Mrs. Spragg use incorrect grammar and slang, which betrays their low social origins. As Wharton recalls her childhood and upbringing in *A Backward Glance*, she explains the tremendous significance her culture placed on both proper English and good manners: "But in justice to my parents I ought to have named a third element in my training; a reverence for the English language as spoken according to the best usage. Usage, in my childhood, was as authoritative an element in speaking English as tradition was in social conduct" (820). Mrs. Spragg and Mrs. Heeny's fail to show proper reverence for the linguistic and cultural "usages" of Old New York, and their lack of good English labels them as non-members of Old New York's aristocracy.

The thought that Ralph may not have bought the ring for Undine scandalizes Mrs. Spragg,

and it especially reveals her assumption that only things that are new and expensive are valuable. By italicizing the word "*bought*," Wharton conveys Mrs. Spragg's outrage that Undine would receive a second-hand ring. In Mrs. Heeny's response to Mrs. Spragg, italics appear again in the word "*buy*" to suggest how bourgeois it is to "*buy*" a ring. Mrs. Heeny must explain the value of "ancestral jewels" within aristocratic circles to Mrs. Spragg. The emphasis on buying reflects the obsession with consumerism typical of the Spraggs' class, and it illustrates their view that extravagant displays of wealth will gain them membership in the aristocratic circles of Old New York. Mrs. Spragg focuses on the "Tiff'ny" box, which is a status symbol, because it communicates to her the value of the ring in terms of wealth and prestige. The real value of the ring should be estimated by the fact that it was once "one of old Gran'ma Dagonet's," but Mrs. Spragg completely misses the significance of this. Mrs. Spragg's and Ralph Marvell's sets simply do not speak the same language. One can only imagine how vulgar the fashionable Marvells and Dagonets would think Mrs. Spragg if they overheard her insinuate that Ralph was "trying to scrimp on the ring."

Unlike Undine's mother and Mrs. Heeny, Wharton presents Undine's speech as proper English because Undine wants to be assimilated into the aristocratic society as quickly and as inconspicuously as possible. Undine realizes she must adopt the social conventions of the society which she aspires to join if she is to succeed in her goal. Wharton describes Undine as "fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative"(633); Undine's imitation of aristocratic speech shows her desire to ally herself with this class. Undine belongs to the generation of Westerner parvenus who intruded into Wharton's Old New York: "The first change came in the 'eighties, with the earliest detachment of big money-makers from the West, soon to be followed

by the lords of Pittsburgh. But their infiltration did not greatly affect old manners and customs, since the dearest ambition of the newcomers was to assimilate existing traditions" (*A Backward Glance* 780). In *The Custom of the Country* Wharton chronicles a historical event that she witnessed in her own lifetime, but in this fictional account, through the main character of Undine, Wharton imagines the opposite perspective from which she experienced this event as an Old New Yorker herself.

Ralph Marvell belongs to Wharton's class, and his opposition to Undine's resetting both of her engagement ring and of the diamond and pearl pendant, a wedding gift from Ralph's mother, designates him as a member of this class. Ralph feels a reverence for the past and traditions, whereas Undine is entirely indifferent and insensitive to these feelings. Undine's sapphire engagement ring is sacred and priceless to Ralph because it is a family heirloom, but Undine disregards Ralph's feelings to satisfy her whims. In Paris, Ralph discovers Undine meeting with a jeweler, and she claims to want "a few old things reset" (734). "[A] few old things" is a rather dismissive way to refer to her engagement ring and pendant, and it shows that Undine lacks emotional attachment to her jewels. Ralph specifically requests that Undine not have her engagement ring reset:

> He took the hand up and looked at the deep gleam of sapphires in the old family ring he had given her.
> "You won't have that reset?" he said, smiling and twisting the ring about on her finger (734)

Undine previously assures Ralph that she will not have the jewels reset if he is opposed, but she leaves this question of Ralph's ominously unanswered. "[T]he deep gleam of sapphires" suggests the rich heritage of the ring and the many generations that have proudly worn the ring,

but Undine is unaffected by these associations.

After returning from Paris, Ralph receives a bill from the Paris jeweler for the resetting of the ring and pendant. The realization that Undine has deliberately and callously acted against his wishes and that she has deceived him through her actions leads to a moment of profound "disillusionment" (762) for Ralph: "That they [ring and pendant] were both family relics, kept unchanged through several generations, scarcely mattered to him at the time: he felt only the stab of his wife's deception" (762). The word "stab" elicits the sense of emotional pain that Undine's insensitive action causes her husband, and it suggests the cliched expression of "a stab in the back" because Undine has betrayed Ralph and his family. Upon further reflection, Ralph recognizes an even graver difference between Undine and himself: "He no longer minded her having lied about the jeweller; what pained him was that she had been unconscious of the wound she inflicted in destroying the identity of the jewels" (763). Undine is a destroyer of the past's identity and a wounder of Ralph's sensitive nature, and the most devastating "wound" is her failure to understand the pain she inflicts on Ralph. Wharton describes Undine as "unconscious," and she is "unconscious" for two main reasons. Undine thinks only of herself; she is limited to an egocentric perspective. Secondly, the difference in class background affects the relations between Ralph and Undine. Undine is "unconscious of the wound she inflict[s]" because she and Ralph speak a different language. Undine, like her mother, fails to grasp the honor of receiving Dagonet heirlooms, and she harms Ralph in her irreverent mistreatment of these gifts.

The scene of gift-giving on the occasion of Paul Marvell's birthday provides a direct contrast of the attitudes toward gifts that Undine and Mrs. Spragg previously exhibit over the ring and pendant. Undine characteristically misses the celebration of her own son's birthday

because she is attending a tea at the painter Popple's for the display of her portrait, an exceedingly self-absorbed event. Clare Van Degen, Ralph's cousin, attends Paul's party and brings a gift for him. Wharton designs the presentation of Clare's gift to Paul as a mockery of Undine's and her mother's reaction to Ralph's gifts:

> "I knew it was the boy's birthday, and I've brought him a present: a vulgar expensive Van Degen offering. I've not enough imagination left to find the right thing, the thing it takes feeling and not money to buy. When I look for a present nowadays I never say to the shopman: 'I want this or that'-I simply say: 'Give me something that costs so much.'" She drew a parcel from her muff. "Where's the victim of my vulgarity? Let me crush him under the weight of my gold." (761)

Clare belongs to the same aristocratic class as Ralph, and she is intentionally mocking the vulgarity of expensive gifts that are devoid of emotional value. Clare speaks with brutal honesty about vulgar gifts, gifts which are not even selected by the giver but by a "shopman," because she wants to criticize gifts lacking a personal investment. The frank command of Clare's to the shopman to "Give me something that costs so much" is a direct attack on people like Undine and her mother, who assess the value of a gift solely in monetary terms.

Clare's gift to Paul proves her allegiance to the tribe of aristocratic Old New York and reminds the reader of the vast differences between Ralph and Undine. When Clare presents her gift for Paul to Ralph, she dissociates herself from those who give vulgar gifts because her gift to Paul is "the thing it takes feeling and not money to buy:"

> Clare gave him [Ralph] the parcel. "I'm sorry not to give it myself. I said what I did because I knew what you and Laura were thinking--but it's really a battered old Dagonet bowl that came down to me from our revered great-grandmother."
>
> "What--the heirloom you used to eat your porridge out of?" Ralph detained her hand to put a kiss on it. "That's dear of you!" (761)

Clare bestows on Paul a truly personal gift, and she laments that she is unable to deliver the gift

in person, which highlights the personal aspect of the gift. Clare sarcastically refers to the gift as "a battered old Dagonet bowl," which contributes to the jesting and mocking tone of the scene. The reader also recognizes the contrast between Clare's and Ralph's perception of the gift as a treasured heirloom and Undine's and her class's ironic misperception of the bowl as nothing more than "battered" and "old." A form of the word reverence appears in Clare's remark about "our revered great-grandmother," and this alludes to Wharton's emphasis on reverence for the past, tradition, and family. Ralph's enthusiastic reception of the gift is somewhat sentimental, but it illustrates the mutual inheritance and reverence for the family that Clare and Ralph share. Ralph instinctively appreciates Clare's gift and kisses her hand in his joy because, in contrast to Ralph's relationship with Undine, "the same blood and ... the same traditions" (763) allow him and Clare to communicate with "unspoken understanding" (763).

Before his marriage to Undine and arguably even during his marriage, Ralph cherishes a deep affection for Clare, and Clare reciprocates these feelings for Ralph. Clare contrasts with Undine in many ways, most importantly, in her ability to love selflessly, and she utilizes this ability by offering to help Ralph financially when Undine threatens to seize Paul. After Ralph and Undine divorce, Undine realizes that she needs more money for an annulment before she can marry her Catholic French fiancé, and she resorts to extortion of money from Ralph under the threat that she will assert her custody rights to Paul. Clare shows her compassion for Ralph not only by offering to help him financially but also by enlightening him with Undine's true motives:

> Ralph looked at her in surprise, and she continued: "Why do you suppose she's suddenly made up her mind she must have Paul?"
>
> "That's comprehensible enough to any one who knows her. She wants him because he'll give her the appearance of respectability. Having him will prove, as no mere assertions can, that all the rights are on her side and the 'wrongs' on

> mine."
>
> Clare considered. "Yes; that's the obvious answer. But shall I tell you what I think, my dear? You and I are both completely out-of-date. I don't believe Undine cares a straw for 'the appearance of respectability.' What she wants is the money for her annulment."
>
> Ralph uttered an incredulous exclamation. "But don't you see?" She hurried on. "It's her only hope--her last chance. She's much too clever to burden herself with the child merely to annoy you. What she wants is to make you buy him back from her." She stood up and came to him with outstretched hands. "Perhaps I can be of use to you at last!" (916-17)

Just as Clare's gift of "a battered old Dagonet bowl" is a gift of "feeling" (761), so too is her gesture of "outstretched hands" to Ralph in this crisis. Clare proves more deft at deciphering the motives behind Undine's actions than Ralph, and she forces Ralph to confront the baseness of Undine's nature with her crude assessment of Undine's objective: "'What she wants is to make you buy him back from her'" (917). Similar to the way Undine uses her beauty as an asset to gain wealth and power, she uses Paul as a bargaining tool in her effort to extort money. Even worse than the resetting of her ring and diamond and pearl pendant is Undine's exploitative use of her own child because it reveals that even human life is not sacred to her. Undine ultimately receives custody of Paul, and she refers to him as an "acquisition" (938), which further illustrates her disrespect for human life, even her own son's.

The exchange between Ralph and Clare concerning Paul's fate under Undine's threats also exposes the differences between Ralph's and Clare's class and Undine's class. Ralph and his class feel a reverence for certain codes of conduct, which include a sense of propriety for "the appearance of respectability" (916), and he naively believes that Undine shares this concern for "the appearance of respectability." Ironically, Ralph prefaces his declaration that Undine desires Paul for "the appearance of respectability" with the statement that her motives are

"comprehensible enough to any one who knows her" (916), but this statement actually proves that Ralph still misunderstands Undine's nature. Fortunately, Clare possesses a more accurate understanding of what Undine and her class value and the ruthless methods they execute to achieve their goals: "'You and I are both completely out-of-date. I don't believe Undine cares a straw for 'the appearance of respectability'" (916-17). Clare recognizes that the values of the invading class of Western millionaires are supplanting the more conservative values of Old New York, which are becoming "out-of-date." Undine simply does not reverence the same values that Ralph and his class consider sacred, and her lack of reverence for Old New York's conventions contributes to the demise of their marriage.

In addition to Undine's lack of reverence for the past and traditions plaguing her relationship with Ralph, her greed for material possessions and extravagant entertainments afflicts their marriage as well. Ralph lacks sufficient capital to provide for all of Undine's desires, and Undine ultimately divorces Ralph for his insufficient wealth. Undine expects Ralph to supply her with money for her wants, but she refuses to assume even the slightest fraction of responsibility for their household finances, especially her reckless spending: "She had met Ralph's first note of warning with the assurance that she 'didn't mean to worry;' and her tone implied that it was his business to do so for her" (719). The "first note of warning" is issued by Ralph while he and Undine are on their honeymoon in Italy, and this initial tension over money continues to escalate during the course of their brief marriage.

While still honeymooning at a fashionable resort in St. Moritz, Switzerland, another conflict over money occurs that necessitates Ralph's appeal to his sister for money, and the conflict serves as a prolepsis of the pain Undine inflicts on Ralph when she resets the priceless

family jewels: "Yes--he might ask Laura [Ralph's sister], no doubt: and whatever she had would be his. But the necessity was bitter to him, and Undine's unconsciousness of the fact hurt him more than her indifference to her father's misfortune" (730). Undine's father suffers a loss, the "misfortune," on the stock market. Undine characteristically feels no sympathy for her father, meaning she is "indifferent," and the sole impact of the news on Undine consists of her selfish concern that fewer funds are at her disposal. Wharton employs the literary device of the dash to show Ralph's hesitancy and reluctance to request a loan from his sister: "Yes--he might ask Laura," and the hypothetical phrasing of his response, "he might ask," indicates that such a request is hardly something he wishes to undertake. Undine's suggestion demonstrates her complete deficiency in sensitivity and propriety because her own selfish wants permit her to dismiss as unimportant the pain she inflicts on Ralph.

In addition to Undine's selfish desires leaving her "unconscious" of the "bitter[ness]" Ralph feels over asking his sister for money, the difference in class accounts for her crudeness in proposing that Ralph make such a request. Ralph belongs to the leisure class, in which men typically practice the profession of law but never business, and his means are wholly inadequate to appease Undine's greed. The scene between Mr. Dagonet, Ralph's grandfather, and Mr. Spragg reveals the different attitudes of aristocratic Old New York and the new Westerner millionaires toward business and consequently explains Ralph's and Undine's attitudes toward money:

> "Ralph don't make a living out of the law, you say? No, it didn't strike me he'd be likely to, from the talks I've had with him. Fact is, the law's a business that wants --" Mr. Spragg broke off, checked by a protest from Mr. Dagonet. "Oh, a *profession*, you call it? It ain't a business?" His smile grew more indulgent as this novel distinction dawned on him. "Why, I guess that's the whole trouble with

> Ralph. Nobody expects to make money in a *profession*; and if you've taught him to regard the law that way, he'd better go right into cooking-stoves and done with it. (702)

Like his wife Mrs. Spragg and the social gossip Mrs. Heeny, Mr. Spragg uses incorrect grammar and slang, which discloses his low social origins. Wharton's emphasis on the word "*profession*" functions as a nuance in language that distinguishes membership in a certain class, and for Mr. Spragg, who stumbles through the intricacies of Old New York's social code along with his wife and daughter, this nuance is a "novel distinction." Mr. Spragg accurately perceives the Old New York custom that discourages young men of the leisure class from entering business when he says, "Nobody expects to make money in a *profession*." The accumulation of massive amounts of money is important to the Spraggs and their class because they believe ostentatious displays of wealth will earn them acceptance by elite society. Money is especially crucial to Undine because of her obsession with consumerism. Undine requires a constant supply of money to purchase the latest commodity, whether it be a new dress or a new husband.

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton elaborates on the leisure class and the attitudes of its members toward business:

> But for the most part my father's contemporaries, and those of my brothers also, were men of leisure--a term now almost as obsolete as the state it describes. It will probably seem unbelievable to present-day readers that only one of my near relations, and not one of my husband's, was "in business." The group to which we belonged was composed of families to whom a middling prosperity had come, usually by the rapid rise in value of inherited real estate, and none of whom, apparently, aspired to be more than moderately well-off. (827)

Certainly, Wharton belongs to the privileged leisure class, and her estimation of "moderately well-off" is actually a very wealthy status. When the book was published in 1934, Wharton acknowledged that most readers would find it "unbelievable" to know so few people in business,

and, in 1997, her prophecy proves even more accurate. Wharton's "group" enjoyed the pleasure of being free both from financial worry and from pressure to work because of money earned effortlessly from "inherited real estate." The custom of inheritance indicates that membership in Wharton's class is a birthright, and, despite their tenacious exertions, members of the Spraggs' class never fully integrate themselves into Wharton's "group." The contentment with inherited wealth contrasts with the craze to earn money through speculation in the stock market, and the ambition to accumulate huge sums of money resembles Undine's perpetual striving for increased wealth and amusement. The quotation marks around the phrase "in business" suggests that Wharton and her class considered business a sort of stigma, and it conveys their regard for business and the ambition to make money as a vulgar pursuit.

In addition to Wharton's criticism of business promoting the desire to amass huge fortunes, she condemns business for separating men and women socially. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton observes that the Old New York world of her youth has vanished: "What I could not guess was that this little low-studded rectangular New York...would fifty years later be as much a vanished city as Atlantis or the lowest layer of Schliemann's Troy, or that the social organization which that prosaic setting had slowly secreted would have been swept to oblivion with the rest" (827). According to Wharton, Old New York's "social organization" valued "social amenity and financial incorruptibility" (799-800), and perhaps most importantly Old New York society encouraged meaningful relations between men and women: "when I hear that nowadays business life in New York is so strenuous that men and women never meet socially before the dinner hour, I remember the delightful week-day luncheons of my early married years, where the men were as numerous as the women" (827-828). "[N]owadays" refers to the time

period in which *The Custom of the Country* is set, and Wharton judges the separation of women from men as the most devastating consequence of business. While men fulfill important roles in the business world, women occupy their time with trivial concerns such as shopping and gossip, mainly because the new American business society affords them few other opportunities.

Wharton's nonfiction book on French society, called *French Ways and Their Meaning*, elaborates on Wharton's ideas on the importance of leisure and the dangers of business, which she presents in *The Custom of the Country* and *A Backward Glance*. *French Ways and Their Meaning* praises the French for maintaining leisure time in their lives, and it reinforces her condemnation of business practices that have the sole aim of acquiring tremendous sums of money:

> Americans are too prone to consider money-making as interesting in itself: they regard the fact that a man has made money as something intrinsically meritorious. ... If a man piles up millions in order to pile them up, having already all he needs to live humanly and decently, his occupation is neither interesting in itself, nor conducive to any sort of real social development in the money-maker or in those about him. ... For the immense majority of the French it is a far more modest ambition, and consists simply in the effort to earn one's living and put by enough for sickness, old age, and a good start in life for the children.
>
> This conception of "business" may seem a tame one to Americans; but its advantages are worth considering. In the first place, it has the immense superiority of leaving time for living, time for men and women both. The average French business man at the end of his life may not have made as much money as the American; but meanwhile he has had, every day, something the American has not had: Time. Time, in the middle of the day, to sit down to an excellent luncheon, to eat it quietly with his family, and to read his paper afterward; time to go off on Sundays and holidays on long pleasant country rambles; time, almost any day, to feel fresh and free enough for an evening at the theatre, after a dinner as good and leisurely as his luncheon. And there is one thing certain: the great mass of men and women grow up and reach real maturity only through contact with the material realities of living, with business, with industry, with all the great bread-winning activities; but the growth and the maturing take place *in the intervals between these activities*: and in lives where there are no such intervals there will be no real growth. (107-109)

Wharton composed the book for an American audience (*A Backward Glance* 1046-47), and, in very ingenuous terms, she attacks both Americans who devote their lives to business and Americans who are dazzled by immense wealth. Wharton's criticism begins by identifying the ailment of Americans, "Americans are too prone to consider money-making as interesting in itself," and then she proceeds to offer the French method of business as an alternative to the American approach to business. By recommending the French outlook on business and life as a remedy for the ills that business produces in American society, Wharton employs *French Ways and Their Meaning* as an instruction book for the reform of American society.

Wharton believes that French society resembles the Old New York society of her youth in many ways, and one very important resemblance consists of contentment with an economic and social position. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton comments on the lack of a consuming drive to earn ever larger fortunes, "and none of whom, apparently, aspired to be more than moderately well-off" (827). Admittedly, the members of Wharton's class certainly were very wealthy, but their de-emphasis on money resembles the French "modest ambition" to earn enough money to live comfortably and to provide for their children. The Spraggs and other members of the Western parvenu class differ from members of Wharton's class and members of the French aristocracy because of their obsession with amassing huge fortunes.

Wharton regards "Time" as the main "advantage" of French business practices, which are similar to Old New York's attitude toward business, and the repetition of the word "time" in the second paragraph of the quoted passage testifies to the great significance Wharton attaches to "time." Because members of French society and members of Old New York society do not expend exorbitant amounts of time on business, they have more leisure time to spend on cultural

and social activities like going to the theatre or enjoying relaxed meals. Wharton deems leisure time for cultural and social events such a crucial element because she believes people mature emotionally and intellectually through involvement in culture and society more than they mature through involvement in business, "the growth and the maturing take place *in the intervals between these* activities [of business and daily participation in "the material realities of living"] (109). As in France, people in Old New York enjoy leisure time, which also allows men and women to interact socially on frequent occasions, as Wharton recalls in *A Backward Glance*: "I remember the delightful week-day luncheons of my early married years, where the men were as numerous as the women " (828). Wharton insists that social contact between men and women produces a better society because men and women are mutually enhanced by each other's company. Business disrupts free social interaction between men and women by removing the men to business offices, and the Spraggs and members of their class lose the benefits of social interaction between men and women because of business.

A lifestyle of leisure is utterly unknown to the Spraggs and members of their class because their discontentment with their social and economic class prompts them to be continually laboring to acquire more money and a more elite social position. Ralph must relinquish his birthright, which entitles him to a privileged position in the leisured class, when he marries Undine: "It was understood that Ralph, on their return [from their honeymoon], should renounce the law for some more paying business" (719). At first, Ralph fails to recognize just how high the price is "for the privilege of calling Undine his wife"(719), but he soon learns when he must spend countless hours at the office to support Undine. Although Undine refuses to participate responsibly in financial matters, concerns over money preoccupy much of her

thoughts and debates over money consume much of her time with both her father and her husbands. Undine's obsession with money also identifies her as an outsider to Wharton's group because discussion of money was a taboo in Wharton's class: "one of the first rules of conversation was the one early instilled in me by my mother: 'Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible'" (*A Backward Glance* 828).

Undine disregards Ralph's efforts to succeed in the business world, persists in complaining about her limited resources, and is even so impudent as to reproach Ralph for his immersion in business affairs: "Always the same monotonous refrain!...Ralph seemed to have money on the brain: his business life had certainly deteriorated him" (809). Undine senses no injustice in Ralph's sacrifice of his time and health to work in his New York office while she travels in Europe. The only injustice Undine discerns lies in what she deems Ralph's tedious cautions, or "monotonous refrain," to curtail her exorbitant spending. Undine rightly claims that business "deteriorate[s]" Ralph--it costs him his health, robs him of time to spend with his family, and forces him to abandon his dream of becoming a writer. Undine assumes none of the blame for Ralph's deterioration; instead, she facilitates his deterioration with her continual demands for more money. Undine's treatment of Ralph particularly reveals her selfish nature.

Ralph's upbringing causes him to scorn divorce as a vulgar proceeding, but Undine publicizes and exploits her divorce with false claims for the sake of celebrity in society columns and newspaper headlines: "'Society Leader Gets Decree,' and beneath it the subordinate clause: 'Says Husband Too Absorbed In Business To Make Home Happy'" (847). The unfairness and audacity of Undine's accusation against Ralph testifies to her ruthless nature and willingness to use any means to gain her goals. The affordability and accessibility of newspapers make private

events public to a vast reading audience, and the flamboyance of a headline article must especially humiliate Ralph. Wharton frequently identifies newspapers with members of the invading Westerner class; for instance, Mrs. Heeny collects newspaper clippings of society events and Elmer Moffatt's desks at home and at his office are often cluttered with newspapers. Debra Ann MacComb discusses the importance of newspapers for advertising and consumerism (769,775), and newspapers themselves are products of mass consumption. Ralph first sees the headline that blatantly announces his divorce when commuting to work: "as he sat on the Subway on his way down-town, his eye was caught by his own name on the first page of the heavily head-lined paper which the unshaved occupant of the next seat held between grimy fists" (846). Ralph and his class value discretion and feel that divorce should not even be mentioned, and Undine's exploitation of the newspaper publicity shows her disrespect for another of Old New York's conventions. The description of the "unshaved occupant" and the "grimy fists" evokes the impression that a person of a low social class is reading the paper, and this airing of his private affairs to all classes makes Ralph realize how debased his marriage and divorce has become. The location of the subway, a form of public transportation, also stresses the publication of Ralph's affairs to the general public. The bitter irony, or, as Ralph expresses it the "unctuous irony" (847), of Undine's false pretense for divorce becomes even more excruciating for Ralph because of the scandal Undine intentionally creates.

Undine presents herself as the victim in the divorce, and Wharton implies that there is some veracity to Undine's claim because society has taught her to rely on males to furnish her monetary demands. By starting at the level of the family, Wharton shows that American society raises women to assume that men function exclusively in the business world. Wharton describes

Mrs. Spragg's awareness of business as "of the most elementary kind" (631), and Undine's paltry knowledge of and lack of interest in business derives from her mother's example. Both Undine and Mrs. Spragg demand that Mr. Spragg work endless hours in his office to earn money for them to spend: "Her eyes grew absent-minded, as they always did when he alluded to business. *That* was man's province; and what did men go 'down-town' for but to bring back the spoils to their women?" (650). Undine's "absent-minded" eyes mirror her absent mind--that is the absence of thought and attention to her father's discussion of business.

Wharton presents the dichotomy between the male business world and the female social world in terms of geography. Wall Street or "down-town" refers to the business world, and Fifth Avenue designates the fashionable social world. Wharton views the dichotomy between the two worlds as deleterious, and she expresses this view by voicing Undine's conception of business with primitive allusions. The image of men "bring[ing] back the spoils to their women" conjures up images of a Paleolithic society in which men return from the hunt to caves where their women await them, and it communicates Wharton's criticism of women's exclusion from the business facet of life. Wharton phrases Undine's attitude toward business in the form of a question to provoke the reader to question American culture's exclusion of women from business affairs, and she hopes the reader will recognize the culpability of American culture in producing Undine's childish attitude toward financial and business affairs.

Wharton advances the naturalistic idea that Undine is a product of her environment with Charles Bowen's tirade on "the whole problem of American marriages" (757). Although it is once mentioned that Bowen is married, he is generally presented without a marital partner, and his distance from the institution of marriage causes him to be the ideal character to deliver

Wharton's criticism of American marriages by allowing him to address the problem "impartially from the heights of pure speculation" (757). Bowen belongs to the same aristocratic circle as Wharton, and Wharton filters her opinions through Bowen, the detached observer. While awaiting the arrival of the other guests for Paul's birthday party, Bowen presents his analysis of American marriages to Mrs. Laura Fairford, Ralph's sister:

> He paused. "The fact that the average American looks down on his wife."
>
> Mrs. Fairford was up with a spring. "If that's where the paradox lands you!"
>
> Bowen mildly stood his ground. "Well--doesn't he prove it? How much does he let her share in the real business of life? How much does he rely on her judgment and help in the conduct of serious affairs? Take Ralph, for instance--you say his wife's extravagance forces him to work too hard; but that's not what's wrong. It's normal for a man to work hard for a woman--what's abnormal is his not caring to tell her anything about it."
>
> "To tell Undine? She'd be bored to death if he did!"
>
> "Just so; she'd even feel aggrieved. But why? Because it's against the custom of the country. And whose fault is that? The man's again--I don't mean Ralph, I mean 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*. (757)

Bowen blames the American male for excluding women from "the real business of life" and "serious affairs," and he attributes the failure of many American marriages to this exclusion.

The title of the novel derives from Bowen's diatribe on American marriages, and "the custom of the country" (757) is to prohibit women from participating in business and other meaningful affairs of life. Wharton presents much of Bowen's argument in the form of questions such as, "'How much does he let her share in the real business of life? How much does he rely on her judgment and help in the conduct of serious affairs?'" (757); Wharton wants to arouse her readers to ponder these same questions. Wharton's objective is to assess blame, and she accomplishes this with another of Bowen's questions: "'And whose fault is that [women's

indifference to business]? The man's again--I don't mean Ralph, I mean the genus he belongs to: homo sapiens, Americanus" (757). Wharton invents her own term, "Americanus," to focus attention on American culture, which she considers the basis of the problem in her indictment of American marriages.

Wharton creates Undine as an exaggerated figure who represents the portentous consequences of the new American business system on women, and she uses Undine to remonstrate against business practices and to remedy social ills caused by business. Undine is an exaggerated character in that she is so self-absorbed and so much like a spoiled child that she scarcely seems human. Bowen's assessment of Undine illustrates Wharton's intention for Undine to serve as an allegorical figure, representing the evils of the new American way of business: "'No--she's a monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph'" (759). Wharton's use of a form of the word "monster" dehumanizes Undine and supports the theory that Undine is designed for allegorical purposes, and the adverb "monstrously" encapsulates the essence of Undine's selfish and ruthless nature.

Under the new system, Undine thrives and advances to great heights on the social ladder, but Ralph, as Bowen dubs him, is "'the victim'" (759). Ralph's fate as the "victim" displays an ironic reversal from his previous vision of Undine as the victim of society: "he seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her; and himself whirling down on his winged horse" (676-77). Bowen exposes Undine's true nature as a "monster," but certainly Wharton also implicates the "monster Society," which produces Undine. In a way, Ralph correctly perceives Undine as a victim of society, but, nevertheless, she survives and even flourishes. The allusion to classical mythology

demonstrates Ralph's romantic notions and noble ambition to remove Undine from the corrupting influence of society, but Undine possesses no desire to be rescued. Ralph cherishes a fairy tale illusion about his love for Undine; sadly, the shattering of his illusion proves fatal. Instead of Ralph saving Undine, his love for her ultimately destroys him. Ralph, a member of Wharton's own aristocratic class, commits suicide while Undine rises to the greatest social pinnacle in the new business-oriented society.

In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton explores the evolution of New York society from the conservative, aristocratic society of Old New York to the Western *nouveaux riches* with their emphasis on business. The juxtaposition of Undine's and her class' triumph with Ralph's and his class' defeat suggests a Darwinian concept of survival of the fittest in the new type of society. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton confirms her interest in evolutionary theories as she discusses how pleased she was to receive these books from her friend Egerton Winthrop: "He it was who gave me Wallace's 'Darwin and Darwinism,' and 'The Origin of the Species,' and made known to me Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Romanes, Haeckel, Westermarck, and the various popular exponents of the great evolutionary movement" (856). Wharton implies that the ideals and conventions of behavior esteemed by Old New York are a hindrance to survival whereas the ruthless and exploitative behavior of the *nouveaux riches* advance their chances of survival. Wharton laments the extinction of Old New York's values, and her image of Ralph in medieval armor shows her grief that those values have no place in modern society: "He seemed to be stumbling about in his inherited prejudices like a modern man in medieval armour " (932). "[S]tumbling" conveys the image of an impeded form of progress, and Ralph's "inherited prejudices" become his handicap in the new business-oriented society. "[M]ediæval armour"

alludes to chivalric codes of honor and behavior, but neither armor nor chivalry can protect Ralph from the destructive force of Undine.

Chapter II.
French Society: Undine's Marriage to Raymond de Chelles

French society captivated Wharton's interest as well as the evolving society of New York, and France serves as the second major setting of *The Custom of the Country*. The title of the novel does not limit Wharton to American customs, and she thoroughly explores French customs through Undine's marriage to Count Raymond de Chelles. Wharton's nonfiction work *French Ways and Their Meaning* illuminates her views on French society, and it provides great insight into *The Custom of the Country*. *French Ways and Their Meaning* may strike the modern reader as an excessively quaint book, and Wharton herself confesses to the book's weakness in the Preface: "This book is essentially a desultory book, the result of intermittent observation, and often, no doubt, of rash assumption" (v). Despite the limitations, the book is a remarkably rich resource for understanding the problems that plague Undine's marriages to Ralph and to Count Raymond de Chelles. In the Preface, Wharton explains that she composed the book "in Paris, at odd moments, during the last two years of the war" (v), and it was published in 1919. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton describes her intention in writing *French Ways and Their Meaning*: "I was asked to write [this book] after our entry into the war, with the idea of making France and things French more intelligible to the American soldier" (1046-47). In addition to this, she endeavors both to explain the differences between the two cultures and to criticize the treatment of women in American culture. Although *French Ways and Their Meaning* was published six years after *The Custom of the Country*, both books address issues such as the status of women and their position in marriage, which confirms that these issues were profound concerns of

Wharton.

Wharton was never to renounce her American citizenship (Lewis 161), but she did live out her preference for French society by remaining in France permanently after the sale of the Mount in June of 1912 (Lewis 313). Shari Benstock, another notable biographer of Wharton, reports that "[s]he returned to the United States only twice between 1913 and her death in 1937: in December 1913, for Beatrix Jones's marriage to Max Farrand; in June 1923, to receive an honorary doctorate at Yale University" (27). The main reason Wharton furnishes for her preference of French society is the more valuable social status that French women hold. Wharton attributes the better social position of French women to the fact that they play a more integrated role in their husbands' lives, partly because French culture lacks the American obsession with business and the accumulation of colossal fortunes. In *The Custom of the Country* the minor character Bowen observes the different values of French and American cultures: "Where does the real life of most American men lie? In some woman's drawing-room or in their offices?...The emotional centre of gravity's not the same in the two hemispheres. In the effete societies it's love, in our new one it's business" (758). Bowen accurately comments on the crux of the difference between French and American societies with his analysis of the French emphasis on "love," meaning the love of culture and art as well as love between men and women, and the American emphasis on "business." Wharton frequently envisions dichotomies in terms of place--for example, Fifth Avenue as the female domain and Wall Street as the male territory, or a "woman's drawing-room" and a man's "office." The most important dichotomy of place, or geography, consists of America and France, and America serves as the constant point of comparison in *French Ways and Their Meaning*.

In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton provides evidence for her advocacy of the superior position of women in French culture, and her observation of the roles that women assume in business serves as her primary defense of this claim. In Chapter Six, "The New Frenchwoman," Wharton describes her views of the Frenchwoman's roles in business:

> There are several ways in which the Frenchwoman's relations with men may be called more important than those of her American sister. In the first place, in the commercial class, the Frenchwoman is always her husband's business partner. ... In small businesses the woman is always her husband's bookkeeper or clerk, or both; above all, she is his business adviser. (103-04)

In contrast to New York, where men do not even discuss business affairs with their wives, women participate as their "husband's business partner[s]" in France, and they assume responsible and important jobs of a "bookkeeper or clerk, or both." The description of the French woman as a "business adviser" demonstrates that the French man values and respects the opinion of his wife to the extent that he takes into consideration her opinion in the decision-making process. Certainly, the respect shown toward French women differs drastically from the "indifferent" attitude of American men toward American women as described by Bowen in *The Custom of the Country*. Wharton does not argue for equality between the sexes; she assumes that the male fulfills the dominant and primary role in business. Thus, Wharton always refers to the wife as "her husband's business partner" or "his business adviser;" she never reverses the order of deference by designating the husband as his wife's business partner or her business adviser. Wharton's deference to men in the business world may be the result of pervasive cultural attitudes of her times, or perhaps it reveals her own prejudices against women. Despite her deference to men, she still praises the French for including women in business affairs.

Wharton anticipates that many of her American readers may object to her assessment of

French society and the role of women in it. Americans tend to consider France a much more conservative country than America, and Americans might assume that they themselves possess a more liberal and progressive attitude toward the role of women in society. In Chapter Six, "The New Frenchwoman," Wharton addresses the objections and continues to assert her reasons for claiming that French women enjoy a better social position than American women:

> When it is said that the Frenchwoman of the middle class is her husband's business partner the statement must not be taken in too literal a sense. The French wife has less legal independence than the American or English wife, and is subject to a good many legal disqualifications from which women have freed themselves in other countries. That is the technical situation; but what is the practical fact? That the Frenchwoman has gone straight through these theoretical restrictions to the heart of reality, and become her husband's associate, because, for her children's sake if not her own, her heart is in his job, and because he has long since learned that the best business partner a man can have is one who has the same interests at stake as himself. (105-06)

Wharton uses a question to dismiss the objections that the more enlightened legal position of both American and English women results in a better social position for women of these nationalities: "That is the technical situation; but what is the practical fact?" (105). Wharton contends that cultural attitudes rather than laws determine the actual position of women in society, and it is the cultural attitudes of Americans toward women that she hopes to change by emphasizing the advantages of women in French society.

Wharton accurately observes that the Frenchwoman is "the best business partner a man can have" because they both work for the same goals. The French husband and wife earn enough money to support themselves and their children, but Wharton believes they lack the desire for massive fortunes that so many Americans, especially Undine's class of Westerner parvenus, covet: "The lives of the French bourgeois couple are based on the primary necessity of getting

enough money to live on, and of giving their children educational and material advantages" (103). The participation in business affairs develops in French women a responsible and mature understanding of money and business whereas, as Wharton reveals through Undine, American women handle money irresponsibly and express no interest in business. Both French women and French men work for the sake of the family, and this contrasts with the attitude of many American women who place the burden of financially supporting a family solely on the husband. For example, Undine fails to realize how strenuous and exhausting business is, and she unfairly faults Ralph for his preoccupation with business affairs partly because her lack of experience in business prevents her from understanding the demands it places on him.

In the course of Undine's marriage to Count Raymond de Chelles, the conflicting attitudes toward money of the French husband and the American wife frequently erupt because Raymond expects Undine to sacrifice personal desires in the interest of the family:

> She was beginning to see that he felt her constitutional inability to understand anything about money as the deepest difference between them. It was a proficiency no one had ever expected her to acquire, and the lack of which she had even been encouraged to regard as a grace and to use as a pretext. During the interval between her divorce and her remarriage she had learned what things cost, but not how to do without them; and money still seemed to her like some mysterious and uncertain stream which occasionally vanished underground but was sure to bubble up again at one's feet. Now, however, she found herself in a world where it represented not the means of individual gratification but the substance binding together whole groups of interests, and where the uses to which it might be put in twenty years were considered before the reasons for spending it on the spot. (948)

The word "constitutional" suggests that Undine's immature and irresponsible attitude toward money results from an intrinsic flaw in her nature, and this reinforces Bowen's naturalistic claim that Undine is "a monstrously perfect result of the system" (759). Wharton refers to Undine's

upbringing in the passage to criticize American culture again for raising women to expect men to handle financial and business affairs: "It was a proficiency no one had ever expected her to acquire." Certainly, Undine's parents spoil her and indulge her every desire, and Ralph even renounces his lifestyle of leisure, as described by Wharton in *A Backward Glance,* to earn a larger income to satisfy Undine. The behavior of Mr. Spragg and Ralph teaches Undine to use manipulative behavior such as complaining and pouting to wheedle money out of her father or her husband, whichever male happens to be the primary figure at the time. When Undine argues with Raymond over money, Wharton comments on the failure of Undine's upbringing to prepare her for French society, which insists that women behave responsibly in financial matters: "It was impossible for Undine to understand a social organization which did not regard the indulging of woman as its first purpose, or to believe that any one taking another view was not moved by avarice or malice " (980). Thus, Undine simply fulfills American cultural expectations, but the significantly different cultural expectations of France create much strife between Undine and Raymond.

Undine's lack of exposure to business accounts for her misconceptions regarding monetary sources and their limits. French women of the bourgeois class, who participate in mercantile affairs, understand the system of exchange of goods or services for money because they witness these transactions on a daily basis in the conduct of business. Women of the French aristocracy, including the women of Raymond's family, comprehend the realities of financial concerns as well, and, like bourgeois women, the aristocratic women make sacrifices in the greater interest of the family. The Chelles family typically spends only the spring season in Paris in the Hôtel de Chelles and the remainder of the year in their country estate, Saint Désert. When

in Paris, the Chelles inhabit apartments of the Hôtel de Chelles that are less grand while renting the "*premier*" (948) apartment to earn money for the maintenance of the building. Because of the increased cost of living in the city, the Chelles only live in Paris for two months, and they conserve money by frugal living in Saint Désert, which involves modest meals and the use of only a limited number of rooms to save on the costs of heating and lighting. The French emphasis on the collective interests of the family largely accounts for their practical and frugal lifestyle.

Undine feels bewildered and indignant in the French society in which money "represent[s] not the means of individual gratification but the substance binding together whole groups of interests, and where the uses to which it might be put in twenty years were considered before the reasons for spending it on the spot" (948). Throughout Undine's childhood and marriage to Ralph, even her most outrageous whim has been met, and money has been "the means of individual gratification" that is spent impulsively or "on the spot." Undine's previous experiences with money teach her to regard it as a "mysterious and uncertain stream which occasionally vanished underground but was sure to bubble up again at one's feet" (948). The crucial adjective is "mysterious;" the "stream," or the source of money, is mysterious to Undine because business affairs are foreign to her experience. The comparison of money to a stream illustrates Undine's distorted view of money, and, by comparing money to a "stream," which is a force of nature, Wharton reveals Undine's philosophy that she lacks any control over money. In the same way that the unpredictable and uncontrollable natural forces of a flood or drought determine the availability of water, Undine feels that the capricious wills of men regulate the sources of money at her disposal.

In her relations with her father, Undine coaxes money out of him through childish tactics: "She had two ways of getting things out of him against his principles; the tender wheedling way, and the harsh-lipped and cold " (650). Undine plays the part of Daddy's little girl, or she subjects him to the silent treatment to coerce money from him. Undine utilizes similar methods in her marriage to Ralph, but she finds that her methods fail her in her marriage to Raymond because the customs of French society provide him with the necessary support to resist her unscrupulous techniques: "Hitherto she had had to contend with personal moods, now she was arguing against a policy; and she was gradually to learn that it was as natural to Raymond de Chelles to adore her and resist her as it had been to Ralph Marvell to adore her and let her have her way" (948). Undine defeats the "personal moods" of Mr. Spragg and Ralph, but the "policy" of Raymond, which is grounded in French culture, proves invincible to Undine's assaults.

After the scandal of her divorce from Ralph and her disastrous affair with Peter Van Degen, Undine believes that she attains a new level of glory by marrying into the French aristocracy, which far surpasses Old New York's aristocracy in terms of prestige. Shortly after her marriage, Undine realizes that her new position in the French aristocracy entails that she subordinate her personal ambitions to the family's interests, not only in financial affairs but also in personal matters:

> Raymond seemed to attach more importance to love, in all its manifestations, than was usual or convenient in a husband; and she gradually began to be aware that her domination over him involved a corresponding loss of independence. ...but she had never before been called upon to account to any one for the use of her time, and after the first amused surprise at Raymond's always wanting to know where she had been and whom she had seen she began to be oppressed by so exacting a devotion. ...It was therefore disconcerting to find that Raymond expected her to choose her friends, and even her acquaintances, in conformity not only with his personal tastes but with a definite and complicated

code of family prejudices and traditions (939-40)

Undine interprets Raymond's vigilant supervision of her time and social activities as a form of jealous love, but it is actually much more than that. The word "conformity" encapsulates the essence of Raymond's expectations for Undine's behavior; he requires that Undine comply with ancient codes that govern the relationships of members of the French aristocracy with members of other social groups. For instance, Raymond objects to Undine's visits to her mostly American friends at the ostentatiously fashionable Nouveau Luxe hotel because it violates the conventions for a French aristocrat's wife to frequent such a trendy establishment. Undine's friend, Madame de Trézac, informs Undine of the duties that accompany her position as an aristocrat's wife: "'My dear, a woman must adopt her husband's nationality whether she wants to or not. It's the law, and it's the custom besides. If you wanted to amuse yourself with your Nouveau Luxe friends you oughtn't to have married Raymond '" (942). Madame de Trézac reinforces Raymond's view of the proper way for Undine to conduct herself because Undine must adapt herself to French "custom[s]."

The "complicated code of family prejudices and traditions" become "oppres[sive]" to Undine, and this relates to R.W.B. Lewis' assertion concerning the similarities between Undine and Wharton that "Edith's long yearning for psychological freedom is queerly reflected in Undine's discovery that each of her marriages is no more than another mode of imprisonment" (350). Even though Undine is such a terribly superficial and vain character, in fairness to her it should be acknowledged that many of the rules governing the lives of the French aristocracy act in an oppressive manner. For instance, Undine cannot even invite her own friends to dinner because it would offend members of the family "genealogically entitled to the same attention"

(978). Undine also finds it intolerable that Raymond should assume responsibility for paying the gambling debts and other expenses of his younger brother, Hubert, and she is even more resentful of Raymond's leasing of the Hôtel de Chelles's much desired *premier* suite to Hubert and his rich American wife because she and Raymond possess the higher rank of Marquis and Marquise. In addition, Undine receives much censure from the family for her failure to produce an heir, and this criticism seems partially unwarranted because Undine truly wishes to provide Raymond with an heir, even if only to gain the family's esteem. Even though Wharton praises and admires French culture, her love for French culture does not blind her to its shortcomings, and she shows that Undine does indeed have legitimate grounds for complaint in her position as the wife of a French aristocrat.

The long months which Undine spends at Saint Désert are especially a trial for Undine because of the monotony and boredom of the days. The word "Désert" translates into English as desert, and this accurately describes Undine's experience at the country estate of Saint Désert because, in terms of social excitement, Saint Désert is as barren as a desert. The other women of the Chelles family occupy their time with knitting and embroidery, but Undine is hardly suited to such domestic pastimes:

> Thus Undine beheld her future laid out for her, not directly and in blunt words, but obliquely and affably, in the allusions, the assumptions, the insinuations of the amiable women among whom her days were spent. Their interminable conversations were carried on to the click of knitting-needles and the rise and fall of industrious fingers above embroidery-frames... (959)

The series of phrases, "the allusions, the assumptions, the insinuations" communicate to Undine and to the reader that Undine is expected to conform her lifestyle to the other women around her despite the fact that the domestic, tranquil lifestyle is contrary to Undine's nature. The other

women of the Chelles family passively accept the domestic lifestyle that countless women before them have also led, and this is a lifestyle that emphasizes routine and order, like the rhythmic "click of knitting-needles" and the cyclic "rise and fall of industrious fingers." The description of "interminable conversations" also conveys the sense of a ceaseless and unending existence. Undine resists assimilation into the lifestyle of domestic tranquility, which upsets the whole order of French aristocratic life.

In order to understand the extreme audacity of Undine's rebelliousness to the prescribed order of French life, which far surpasses her audacious resetting of the Dagonet heirlooms, it is necessary to grasp the tremendous weight of order and routine in French life. Wharton's travel book *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908) proves remarkably insightful on the importance of order in French life. While traveling through the Seine countryside, Wharton recounts her impressions of French people that she encountered as she passed through their villages:

> They [French villagers] each had their established niche in life, the frankly avowed interests and preoccupations of their order, their pride in the smartness of the canal-boat, the seductions of the show-window, the glaze of the *brioches*, the crispness of the lettuce. And this admirable *fitting into the pattern*, which seems almost as if it were a moral outcome of the universal French sense of form (28-29)

The phrase "established niche" refers to the structured lifestyle of the French, in which every person functions in a manner assigned by tradition and his or her station in life. When Wharton discusses "the frankly avowed interests and preoccupations of their order," she substitutes the word "order" for class. Wharton is definitely very class-conscious, and she feels quite comfortable in French society because French society, like Old New York society, dictates codes of behavior for people that are based on class. Wharton extols the class-based ordering of life by the French as revealed by her description of it as an "admirable *fitting into the pattern*" and "a

moral outcome of the universal French sense of form." The word "moral" suggests that Wharton believes it is just and good for people to remain in a certain class, and the phrase "*fitting into the pattern*" reveals Wharton's belief in a pervasive order or "universal French sense of form" in which life flows smoothly and harmoniously when people act according to their position. Undine clearly disrupts the harmoniously ordered life at Saint Désert because she defies the duties prescribed by the French system of order for a noble's wife.

Undine imagines that the actual country estate of Saint Désert itself acts an accomplice to the Chelles family in what she perceives as their attempt to subjugate her and to imprison her in the isolated and monotonous world of their family: "Some spell she could not have named seemed to emanate from the old house which had so long been the custodian of an unbroken tradition " (963). Wharton personifies the house, endowing it with the power to oppress Undine, to emphasize the pervasiveness and stability of French customs, which are rooted not only in the minds and hearts of the French people but also in the architecture. Undine refuses to acquiesce to the "spell" of French customs, and she resists the oppressive rules and unyielding order of aristocratic French society through childish measures, including the lighting of superfluous fires throughout the house, which members of the Chelles family fail to find persuasive. Undine's extravagant consumption of firewood succeeds only in irritating and alienating other members of the Chelles family, and the matriarch of the family, Raymond's mother, the Marquise, expresses her disapproval of Undine's actions by remaining upstairs in her bedroom without a fire. Although the Marquise almost reduces herself to an equally childish level by protesting Undine's wasteful use of firewood in a stubborn and immature manner, her silent disapproval elucidates the ineffectiveness of Undine's efforts to vanquish the established

order of French society.

Wharton advances the argument that in America women fill their time with trivial social events, gossip, and shopping because their exclusion from business and other meaningful pastimes limits them to these activities. In *The Custom of the Country*, when Bowen delivers his harangue on American marriages, he specifically enumerates the ways in which women compensate for their exclusion from business:

> "And what's the result--how do the women avenge themselves? All my sympathy's with them, poor deluded dears, when I see their fallacious little attempts to trick out the leavings tossed them by the preoccupied male--the money and the motors and the clothes--and pretend to themselves and each other that *that's* what really constitutes life!" (758-59)

In America, women "avenge themselves" by spending money on material products because "the preoccupied male" declines to pay them enough attention or respect to include them in more important aspects of life. Bowen presumes that the women are "deluded" and "pretend[ing] to themselves" that they live meaningful lives while, in reality, "the money and the motors and the clothes" are hardly an adequate substitute for the more substantial experiences of life enjoyed by men.

Similar to the way American women "avenge themselves" with "the money and the motors and the clothes," Undine attempts to retaliate against the stifling lifestyle of the Chelles family with extravagant and unnecessary purchases of clothes in addition to her wasteful consumption of firewood: "her dresses were more than ever her chief preoccupation: in Paris she spent hours at the dressmaker's, and in the country the arrival of a box of new gowns was the chief event of the vacant days" (965). Undine experiences childish delight and glee upon receiving her new gowns simply because she has nothing else to vary the monotony of her

"vacant days" in the country. Undine admits to herself that she spends too much money on clothes, but she is unwilling to curtail her spending because she feels it is the only pleasant diversion left in her life: "She knew she was spending too much money, and she had lost her youthful faith in providential solutions; but she had always had the habit of going out to buy something when she was bored, and never had she been in greater need of such solace" (966). At this point Undine realizes that limits exist to the money at her disposal, as the phrase "she had lost her faith in providential solutions" indicates, but she still refuses to act responsibly by spending within those limits, which illustrates that she persists in a childish attitude toward financial affairs. Undine differs from the women whom Bowen describes as "deluded" and "pretend[ing] to themselves" (758-59) because to her superficial nature material items such as "the money and the motors and the clothes" (758-59) truly do constitute the most important aspects of life. Shopping brings Undine "solace," and this discloses her shallow nature, which permits her to be comforted by material items.

Debra Ann MacComb explains that in the early decades of the twentieth century "shopping emerged as a major leisure activity in America" (769), and Undine eagerly participates in this "leisure activity." Wharton reports that Undine "had always had the habit of going out to buy something when she was bored" (966), and certainly her parents and first husband tolerate and even promote her excessive shopping habits. It has been previously established that American women resort to shopping as a means to occupy their time, but in France cultural codes decree that women use their time in more productive ways. Although it is unfair of Raymond to demand that Undine conform to a life of domestic tranquility involving knitting and embroidery in his ancestral home, it is completely reasonable of him to expect her to abandon her pampered

lifestyle of material indulgences that she enjoyed in America when she becomes his wife and a citizen of France.

Just as Undine fails to fit into the French aristocratic domestic life, so too does she fail in her efforts to participate in French aristocratic society, which is largely centered in the Faubourg St. Germain. Wharton herself lived at 58 Rue de Varenne of the Faubourg St. Germain (Lewis 174). R.W.B. Lewis provides two informative descriptions of the Faubourg St. Germain:

> Faubourg is a variously translatable word--"quarter" is perhaps the nearest English equivalent for this use of it; and as to the Faubourg St. Germain, it yields less to a geographical than to a social, historical, and intellectual definition. It was the town seat of the most imposing of the French nobility; an aristocratic society slowly being penetrated by bourgeois artists and intellectuals; the standard of social behavior for the other faubourgs in Paris; an atmosphere, a cluster of traditions, a wholly assured but to the outsider a strangely inconsistent human world. (174)

> The Faubourg also represented another combination upon which Edith Wharton's health of spirit depended: the sense of continuity and the sense of personal freedom. The stately houses, with their air of concealing some secret, had survived, virtually unchanged, since the days of the later Bourbon kings--the *hôtel* at 58 Rue de Varenne, as Edith had said, since 1750. More important for an observant American novelist of manners, the noble families retained their age-old pattern of domestic and social behavior: the Faubourg in the twentieth century, one commentator remarked, was "a piece of the *ancien régime* set in contemporary Paris." (176).

Lewis's description of the Faubourg St. Germain conveys the impression of a very conservative society with ancient traditions that have scarcely changed through the passing of time, and the fictitious Hôtel de Chelles is located in this exclusive and traditional section of Paris.

The center of the social life in the Faubourg St. Germain is the *salon*. Wharton greatly esteemed French *salons*, and she discusses them at length in the chapter entitled "Paris" of *A Backward Glance*:

> It presupposed a moderate admixture of new elements, judiciously combined with the permanent ones, those which were called *de fondation*. But these recognized *salons* were based on the same belief that intimacy and continuity were the first requisites of social enjoyment. (980)
>
> The whole *raison d'être* of the French *salon* is based on the national taste for general conversation. ... In a French *salon* the women are expected to listen, and enjoy doing so, since they love good talk, and are prepared by a long social experience to seize every allusion, and when necessary to cap it by another. This power of absorbed and intelligent attention is one of the Frenchwoman's greatest gifts, and makes a perfect background for the talk of the men. (987-88)

Lewis comments on "the sense of continuity" as vital to "Edith Wharton's health of spirit" (176), and she certainly found "intimacy and continuity" (980) in the French *salons*. Certain people, *de fondation*, would always participate in the same *salons*, and this would allow for intimate relationships to develop among these people. The notions of "intimacy and continuity" conflict with Undine's lifestyle and preclude her participation in French *salons*. Undine's rapid changes in relationships oppose the notion of continuity, and her superficial nature prevents her from forming intimate relationships. Undine's inability to appreciate "intimacy and continuity" clearly differs from Wharton's own love of these notions.

Lewis describes Wharton's enthrallment with *salons*: "Edith discovered to her pleasure that it was an ensemble affair in which everyone participated as the occasion arose" (196). As previously discussed, Wharton nostalgically recalls Old New York society, which promoted meaningful relationships between men and women in *A Backward Glance*: "when I hear that nowadays business life in New York is so strenuous that men and women never meet socially before the dinner hour, I remember the delightful week-day luncheons of my early married years, where the men were as numerous as the women" (827-28). Wharton discovers in the French *salons* a replacement for the "luncheons...where the men were as numerous as the women"

because *salons* involve the participation of both men and women in a social gathering: "The famous French 'Salon,' the best school of talk and of ideas that the modern world has known, was based on the belief that the most stimulating conversation in the world is that between intelligent men and women" (*French Ways and Their Meaning* 116-17). The French *salons* are reminiscent of Old New York's engaging social interactions between men and women, and they provide an example of the affinity between Old New York and aristocratic French society.

Similar to the way Wharton assumes that the husband dominates in business affairs by referring to the wife as the subordinate, "her husband's business partner" (*French Ways and Their Meaning* 103), she assumes that males govern the conversation in French *salons* by claiming that a woman performing the more passive activity of listening "makes a perfect background for the talk of the men" (*A Backward Glance* 988). Although Wharton relegates women to a subordinate function, she still does insist on their importance in the conversation. Wharton asserts that women should listen intelligently, recognize allusions, and contribute further allusions when appropriate, but, for Undine, these tasks prove too taxing.

When Undine complains about the reduced frequency of invitations to social gatherings, Madame de Trézac, Undine's friend, explains to her that she and Raymond receive few invitations to social events because people find her a "bore" (979):

> "It's not that they don't admire you--your looks, I mean; they think you beautiful; they're delighted to bring you out at their big dinners, with the Sèvres and the plate. But a woman has got to be something more than good-looking to have a chance to be intimate with them: she's got to know what's being said about things. I watched you the other night at the Duchess's, and half the time you hadn't an idea what they were talking about." (979)

The French regard Undine as a beautiful possession to be displayed along with the fine porcelain,

"the Sèvres and the plate," but she lacks the intellectual and cultural depth to establish herself as worthy of a more significant status. Madame de Trézac informs Undine that her inability to participate in conversations serves as a severe impediment to her forming "intimate" relations, and apparently Undine cannot even listen effectively in conversations because Madame de Trézac observes that Undine "hadn't an idea what they were talking about."

Undine recognizes the truth of Madame de Trézac's appraisal of her social flaws, and she attempts to improve herself by attending "one or two lectures by a fashionable philosopher" and by visiting the Louvre (979). Undine hardly benefits from her efforts at self-improvement because she lacks both an understanding of what she learns and the discretion to apply her knowledge appropriately: "Her views, if abundant, were confused, and the more she said the more nebulous they seemed to grow" (980). After Undine's attempts to improve herself intellectually and culturally prove unsuccessful, she abandons these attempts and ignores Madame de Trézac's advice because she believes her greatest assets are physical:

> Remembering the attention she had attracted on her first appearance in Raymond's world she concluded that she had "gone off" or grown dowdy, and instead of wasting more time in museums and lecture-halls she prolonged her hours at the dress-maker's and gave up the rest of the day to the scientific cultivation of her beauty. (980)

Undine childishly refuses to acknowledge her own shortcomings, and she over-compensates for her poor conversation by focusing her energy on reinvigorating her physical appearance. Initially, Undine creates much sensation with her physical appearance alone, but French society requires more than surface appearances to sustain its interest. Undine resorts to American cultural standards, which place less emphasis on a woman's ability to converse on interesting subjects, by "prolong[ing] her hours at the dress-maker's" and "scientific[ally] cultivat[ing] ...

her beauty," but these methods prove fruitless in French society.

Wharton condemns Undine's American background, especially business practices and cultural traditions that separate men and women, because she claims this separation results in the retarded intellectual and cultural development of women. The retarded intellectual and cultural development of women is seen most clearly in Undine's inability to converse effectively in French *salons*. Wharton emphasizes the importance of meaningful relationships between men and women because she believes earnest relationships between men and women are the basis of a mature and prosperous society, as her assertion in *French Ways and Their Meaning* reveals: "No nation can have grown-up ideas till it has a ruling caste of grown-up men and women; and it is possible to have a ruling caste of grown-up men and women only in a civilisation where the power of each sex is balanced by that of the other" (113). In this instance, Wharton does argue for a measure of equality between the sexes by stating that in an ideal society "the power of each sex is balanced by that of the other," which indicates that each sex must have equal, even if different, forms of power. Wharton believes that the primary way French women, meaning "married women," exercise their "extraordinary social freedom" (*French Ways and Their Meaning* 116), which certainly qualifies as a form of power, consists of their participation in *salons*. Wharton clearly advocates the power of free discussion to influence society positively in all facets of life from politics to art, and she champions the ability of women to contribute effectively in French *salons* and beyond: "Think what an asset to the mental life of any country such a group of women forms!" (117).

Whereas Bowen avows that American men "don't take enough interest in [American women] (757), Wharton contends in *French Ways and Their Meaning* that French men exhibit a

substantially greater concern for French women: "For if Frenchmen care too much about other things to care as much as we do about making money, the chief reason is largely because their relations with women are more interesting" (111). The practical result of meaningful relations between men and women is the inclusion of women in the serious affairs of everyday life, whether it be the bourgeois woman's participation in the daily operations of business or the French aristocratic wife contributing to discussions in the *salon*.

In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton proposes that French women are more "*grown up*" (100) than American women because they play a more valuable role in the lives of men, from partners in business to members of *salons*:

> The reason why American women are not really "grown up" in comparison with the women of the most highly civilised countries--such as France--is that all their semblance of freedom, activity and authority bears not much more likeness to real living than the exercises of the Montessori infant. Real living, in any but the most elementary sense of the word, is a deep and complex and slowly-developed thing, the outcome of an old and rich social experience. It cannot be "got up" like gymnastics, or a proficiency in foreign languages; it has its roots in the fundamental things, and above all in close and constant and interesting and important relations between men and women. (101-102)

Wharton criticizes American culture for restricting women to a sheltered and isolated world, "the exercises of the Montessori infant," because she argues that American women merely have the appearance of freedom. Wharton acknowledges that American women may receive instruction in "gymnastics" and "foreign languages," but she deems this a false education compared to the "[r]eal living" of the French women. Again, Wharton stresses the importance of relationships between men and women as the core factor in her analysis of the more mature qualities of French women.

Undine proves Wharton's theory that American women are not "'grown up'" (101)

because she is the quintessential example of a spoiled child. Wharton exposes Undine's juvenile nature in an exchange between Undine and her childhood friend, Indiana Rolliver (maiden name Frusk):

> She wanted, passionately and persistently, two things which she believed should subsist together in any well-ordered life: amusement and respectability; and despite her surface-sophistication her notion of amusement was hardly less innocent than when she had hung on the plumber's fence with Indiana Frusk. (854)

Undine's desire for "amusement and respectability" hardly qualifies as deep goals to achieve in life; she desires "amusement" for entertainment and "respectability" because she wants people to esteem and admire her. Undine can still be amused by activities like shopping and ostentatious parties, which requires minimal intellectual activity, and Wharton reveals that her current diversions are just as simple as her childhood pastime of "[hanging] on the plumber's fence." The phrase "surface-sophistication" encapsulates the superficiality of Undine's nature; under her glamorous appearance, she is no more mature intellectually or emotionally than a child. Undine's lack of development results from her sheltered and pampered upbringing, and Wharton would largely attribute Undine's immaturity to her limited exposure to what Wharton refers to in *French Ways and Their Meaning* as "real living" (102).

Part of Undine's immaturity also involves a lack of reverence for the past and tradition, and her irreverence arises most prominently in regard to the prized heirloom of the Chelles family, the Boucher tapestries. The Boucher tapestries, which are described as composed of "fabulous blues and pinks of the great Boucher series" (950), enormously exceed the Dagonet heirlooms in terms of prestige and their importance in the place of history. Undine eventually connives to sell the Boucher tapestries, and this crime against reverence for the past and

traditions far outweighs her resetting of the Dagonet jewels. Undine relates to an art dealer Fleischhauer that the tapestries "were given by Louis the Fifteenth to the Marquis de Chelles" (971). The art dealer abruptly ends Undine's recital of the tapestries' history with the remark that "[t]heir history had been published" (971), which obviously indicates the value of the tapestries in terms of their historical importance and their monetary value.

Undine feels no appreciation for the historical value of the tapestries, for their beauty as works of art, and for the pride and honor the Chelles's family feels in possessing such treasured items. Undine even complains to Raymond that "the tapestries smell so of rain" (950), and to voice such a petty grievance against the tapestries reveals her utter disregard for their value. In a heated debate between Undine and Raymond, it becomes apparent that she assesses the value of the tapestries solely in monetary terms: "Her eyes fell on the storied hangings at his back. 'Why, there's a fortune in this one room: you could get anything you chose for those tapestries'" (969). Undine's amazingly brazen suggestion to Raymond that he sell the tapestries demonstrates that she possesses no sense of reverence for the value the family attaches to the tapestries.

Undine performs the even more brazen action of contacting the art dealer Fleischhauer for an appraisal of the tapestries, and, immediately before his arrival, she surveys the tapestries: "as she moved down the gallery her glance rested on the great tapestries, with their ineffable minglings of blue and rose, as complacently as though they had been mirrors reflecting her own image" (971). The word "ineffable" conveys the sacred quality of the tapestries, and Undine's complacent glance at the tapestries reveals that she is unaffected by their majesty. Wharton uses the simile comparing the tapestries to "mirrors reflecting her own image" because they both represent things that Undine is willing to barter to gain her ends of increased material wealth.

Undine solicits the art dealer's appraisal covertly, but Raymond learns of her deceitful action when he receives a letter offering him a large sum on behalf of Fleischhauer's client for the tapestries. Raymond experiences both horror and outrage when he confronts Undine about her inconceivable action, and a passionate verbal exchange ensues in which Undine senses the "menace" (981) in his voice. Undine's deceitful and irreverent action causes irreparable damage to her relationship with Raymond because it eradicates the love he feels for her and completely distances him from her:

> "[A]ll you've got to do is hold out your hand and have two million francs drop into it!"
>
> Her husband stood looking at her coldly and curiously, as though she were some alien apparition his eyes had never before beheld.
>
> "Ah, that's your answer--that's all you feel when you lay hands on things that are sacred to us!" (981)

Raymond views Undine "coldly," and coldness is associated with emotions of hatred, which probably reflects the emotion Raymond feels for Undine at this moment. Raymond also beholds Undine "curiously," almost with an air of scientific detachment, and his comparison of her to an "alien apparition" shows his distance from her. The image of an "alien apparition" also suggests that Undine is "inhuman" to feel so little for anyone other than herself and to propose so callously that Raymond sell the cherished possession of his family. Raymond now realizes Undine's ruthless nature because she urges him to part with a "sacred" family heirloom for her own selfish reasons.

The confrontation between Raymond and Undine over the tapestries quickly erupts into Raymond's denunciation of American lack of reverence for tradition, which surpasses even Bowen's diatribe on the problems of American marriages in its level of furious emotion:

> He stopped a moment, and then let his voice break out with the volume she had felt it to be gathering. "And you're all alike," he exclaimed, "every one of you. You come among us from a country we don't know, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the house you were born in--if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! ...--you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have--and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make our life decent and honourable for us! (982)

Raymond vents his anger over Undine's audacious action by delivering scathing criticism of Americans in general, and he echoes Wharton's own criticisms of Americans in this passage. As R.W.B. Lewis notes, Wharton felt great pride in her *hôtel* at 58 Rue de Varenne on account of its long history, as she was fond of boasting "since 1750" (176). Wharton also shares Raymond's feelings for the sanctity of the past and the beauty of preserving traditions, and in *A Backward Glance* she comments on the sadness she felt as a little girl upon returning to what she considered the ugliness of New York in comparison to the old-fashioned beauty of European cities: "Happy misfortune, which gave me, for the rest of my life, that background of beauty and old-established order! I did not know how deeply I had felt the nobility and harmony of the great European cities till our steamer was docked at New York" (817). Although Undine provokes Raymond's wrath, his opinions on Americans often seem unfair and unwarranted such as his condemnation of Americans as "'you're all alike,'" and Undine complains on a previous occasion about Raymond's tendency to stereotype Americans: "It was one of her grievances that he never attempted to discriminate between Americans" (952). Raymond and Wharton may express undue criticism of Americans and American customs, but it is mitigated by the fact that it stems from their dismay upon discovering the irreverence shown by Americans for the past and

tradition, which they both value tremendously.

Raymond and Wharton both perceive the French conservative desire to extol their heritage and the American liberal desire for change as the core difference between Americans and the French, which he summarizes in this remark, "the people [Americans] are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have" (982). The different attitudes of the French and Americans may partly be explained by the fact that America is a relatively young country whereas France possesses a history that stretches much farther back in time. In *French Ways and Their Meaning* Wharton presents an argument for the integration into American culture of the youthful tendencies of America and the old-fashioned inclinations of France:

> It was our English forbears who taught us to flout tradition and break away from their own great inheritance; France may teach us that, side by side with the qualities of enterprise and innovation that English blood has put in us, we should cultivate the sense of continuity, that "sense of the past" which enriches the present and binds us up with the world's great stabilising traditions of art and poetry and knowledge. (97)

The phrase "side by side" reveals that Wharton advocates a fusion of both progressive change, a value she believes Americans receive from their revolutionary "English forbears," and reverence for the past and tradition, a value she believes Americans should imitate from the French.

Wharton may criticize Americans so harshly and praise the French so strongly because of the changes she witnessed in American culture during her own time. Old New York society resembles French aristocratic society in many ways, including their mutual reverence for the past and traditions and their reverence for certain social codes of conduct, but invaders from the West, such as the Spraggs, erode Old New York society. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton discusses the extinction of Old New York society: "as much a vanished city as Atlantis or the lowest layer

of Schliemann's Troy" (824), and she comments on the moral value of Old New York: "The value of duration is slowly asserting itself against the welter of change, and sociologists without a drop of American blood in them have been the first to recognize what the traditions of three centuries have contributed to the moral wealth of our country" (780). The "value of duration" is essentially identical to "the sense of continuity" preached by Wharton in *French Ways and Their Meaning*, and she laments the loss of this value in American society. Wharton acts like a "sociologist" in her literary works by attempting to warn Americans against the loss of the moral value of reverence for the past and tradition, and perhaps she exaggerates the flaws of American society, in the same way that she exaggerates the character of Undine, to alert her readers to the dangerous social trends emerging in America.

In Wharton's estimation, one of the most negative social trends emerging with the infiltration of Old New York by the Western parvenus is defined by Debra Ann MacComb as "'rotary consumerism'" (767). "'[R]otary consumerism'" involves the rapid consumption of goods, and MacComb advances the theory that "'rotary consumerism'" also affects the rapid pace of marriage and divorce in the United States (767-68). Undine certainly consumes commodities, whether they be new dresses or new husbands, at an alarmingly accelerated pace, and her entire lifestyle is the antithesis of the "value of duration" (*A Backward Glance* 780). If Undine represents the product of the new American culture, Wharton's fears for American culture may be justified.

Raymond's main criticism of American culture, specifically American towns, consists of its transiency, and transiency is quite the opposite of the "value of duration" (780). Raymond rants against the ease with which American towns are erected and destroyed: "the very house you

were born in...torn down before you knew it!," "towns as flimsy as paper," "the buildings are demolished before they're dry" (982). Raymond also insinuates that Americans show little pride in their towns by neglecting to name the streets: "where the streets haven't had time to be named" (982). Raymond expends great quantities of time, effort, and money to maintain Saint Désert and the Hôtel de Chelles, and his pride in these ancestral homes contrasts with the indifference of Americans toward their homes and towns. Wharton uses Raymond and Undine to symbolize the opposing forces of transiency and permanence, and she establishes that the French, including Raymond, treasure their ancestral homes. Undine's advice to Raymond to sell Saint Désert discloses her total lack of appreciation for Raymond's deep sentiments for his home:

> "You can always find the money to spend on this place. Why don't you sell it if it's so fearfully expensive?"
> "Sell it? Sell Saint Désert?"
> The suggestion seemed to strike him as something monstrously, almost fiendishly significant (969)

Raymond feels Undine's irreverence for his family's traditions embodied in the physical structure of Saint Désert so acutely that he views Undine as an evil creature such as a monster or a fiend, and this connects to Bowen's previous description of Undine as "a monstrously perfect result of the system" (759). Undine's utterly egocentric perspective and heartless treatment of others incite both men to view her as a "monster" of sorts.

The actual building of Saint Désert inspires in Raymond reverence for the past and family pride, and Wharton undergoes a similar emotional experience during her visit to Amiens Cathedral, which she relates in *A Motor-Flight Through France*:

> Yes--reverence is the most precious emotion that such a building inspires: reverence for the accumulated experiences of the past, readiness to puzzle out their meaning, unwillingness to disturb rashly results so powerfully willed, so

> laboriously arrived at--the desire, in short, to keep intact as many links as possible between yesterday and to-morrow, to lose, in the ardour of new experiment, the least that may be of the long rich heritage of human experience. This, at any rate, might seem to be the cathedral's word to the traveller from a land which has undertaken to get on without the past, or to regard it only as a "feature" of æsthetic interest, a sight to which one travels rather than a light by which one lives. (11)

Wharton's beautiful prose reflects her deep emotional response to the beauty of Amiens and testifies to her profound reverence for the heritage of the cathedral. Raymond's unwillingness to part with his ancestral home or his tapestries signifies his "desire...to keep intact as many links as possible between yesterday and to-morrow." Ownership of an ancestral home and family heirlooms connects the previous generations of "yesterday" with the future generations of "to-morrow" by encouraging all generations to take pride in their common ancestral home and heirlooms. In Raymond's tirade on American towns he condemns American tourists who "come ...from ...a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in" (982), and this echoes Wharton's description of "the traveller from a land which has undertaken to get on without the past" (11).

Despite Raymond's emphasis on "holding to what we have" (982) and Wharton's celebration of buildings that have stood unchanged for time immemorial, Wharton shows that even the conservative French family of the Chelles are more than willing to allow American money to finance the renovation of the Hôtel de Chelles. Raymond's brother, Hubert, marries a rich American heiress, Miss Looty Arlington, whose father provides the money to renovate the Hôtel de Chelles. Raymond informs Undine that the Arlington family derives from one of the nameless new towns that he speaks of in such a condescending tone in his diatribe on American towns: "'They come from some new state--the general apologized for its not yet being on the

map...'" (951). The Arlingtons may spring from a nebulous past, but Raymond overlooks the missing rich heritage in order to accept their money. The Arlingtons bestow what Wharton refers to in *French Ways and Their Meaning* as "enterprise and innovation" (97) on the Hôtel de Chelles in the form of modern electricity and plumbing: "the Hôtel de Chelles had been piped, heated and illuminated in accordance with the bride's requirements; ... the American bath-tubs and the Annamite bric-a-brac" (954). American money modernizes the Hôtel de Chelles, and Looty Arlington even uses her money to redecorate the family home. Wharton reveals that the most elite and aristocratic French societies can be penetrated by the sway of the American dollar. Wharton may also suggest a slight relationship of reciprocal aid between America and France. America offers improvements in technology to France, and France teaches America the importance of reverence for the past and tradition.

Looty Arlington provides the Chelles family with the means to renovate the Hôtel de Chelles, and she contributes to the Chelles family, whereas Undine does not. Raymond's and Undine's marriage deteriorates because Undine refuses to accept the restraints on her spending that Raymond demands of her as part of her personal sacrifices to the family. After Raymond finishes his tirade on the transiency of American towns and the irreverence of Americans, the pivotal point in the decline of Undine's and Raymond's marriage occurs because Undine shows inconceivable effrontery by acting amazed that Raymond is determined to reject the generous offer for the tapestries:

> Undine kept him waiting long enough to give the effect of having lost her cue--then she brought out, with a little soft stare of incredulity: "Do you mean to say you're going to refuse such an offer?"
>
> "Ah----!" He turned back from the door, and picking up the letter [from Fleischhauer making the offer] that lay on the table between them, tore it in pieces

and tossed the pieces on the floor. "That's how I refuse it!" (982)

The phrase "to give the effect of having lost her cue" indicates that Undine assumes the role of an actress, and she fakes innocence and bewilderment to create the sense that Raymond's rejection of the offer is incomprehensible to any rational person. Undine's innocent act, illustrated by her "soft stare of incredulity," completely infuriates Raymond, and he expresses his anger by tearing the letter to shreds. Wharton significantly places the letter "on the table between them" to symbolize the insurmountable differences between Raymond and Undine, and the tearing of the letter foreshadows the dissolution of their marriage.

Undine remains in the room after Raymond tears the letter, and she reflects on the state of her marriage:

> [E]verything would nevertheless go on in the same way--in *his* way--and that there was no more hope of shaking his resolve or altering his point of view than there would have been of transporting the deep-rooted masonry of Saint Désert by means of the wheeled supports on which Apex architecture performed its easy transits. (984)

Wharton again uses the metaphor of architecture, specifically Raymond's home of Saint Désert and Undine's hometown of Apex, to expose the different attitudes of the French and Americans toward cultural heritage. "[T]he deep-rooted masonry of Saint Désert" serves as a measure of the fervent reverence for tradition in French culture, and "the wheeled supports on which the Apex architecture performed its easy transits" suggests the transiency of Undine's relationships and her mobility as she moves from one husband to the next and one location to the next. Roman Catholicism and the conventions of aristocratic French society prohibit Raymond from seeking a divorce, but Undine feels no such restrictions. The image of "the wheeled supports" imparts circle imagery, and Undine's career of marriages follows a circular pattern as she marries Elmer

Moffatt, her first--and now her fourth--husband.

As Undine continues to contemplate her marriage, she ponders methods of redress available to her, and this leads her to the realization of the futility of resisting Raymond, which prompts her to seek a divorce: "One of her childish rages possessed her, sweeping away every feeling save the primitive impulse to hurt and destroy; but search as she would she could not find a crack in the strong armour of her husband's habits and prejudices" (984). Wharton explicitly remarks on Undine's "childish rages," which consists of her desire "to hurt and destroy," to reveal Undine's immaturity and inability to respond to intense emotion except through the release of "primitive" emotions. Raymond's "armour" proves invincible to Undine's assaults because its foundation rests on the strength of French values of continuity and reverence for their heritage. Undine's second husband, Ralph Marvell, also wears a type of armor, but his armor defeats him rather than protecting him from Undine: "He seemed to be stumbling about in his inherited prejudices like a modern man in mediæval armour" (932). Ralph's "inherited prejudices" stem from the social values of Old New York, which are eroding with the invasion of Western parvenus such as the Spraggs, and Undine's ruthless treatment of him causes him to commit suicide after learning from Moffatt that Undine was once his wife too. Ralph's more sensitive nature and the instability of Old New York's social codes result in his death, but Raymond survives his marriage to Undine because of his personal resolve and the strength of his "strong armour" based on French social codes.

Chapter III.
Nouveau Riche Society: Undine's Remarriage to Elmer Moffatt

In many ways, Undine Spragg and Elmer Moffatt form the perfect match, and a principal reason lies in their mutual claim to want "the best" (655, 976). Undine and Moffatt both trace their origins to small, obscure Midwestern towns, and they both belong to the same social class of Western parvenus, which overruns Wharton's Old New York. Undine and Moffatt treat people who impede their progress as expendable, and they exercise ruthless methods to attain their goals. For instance, it is Moffatt that suggests to Undine that she use Paul to extort money from Ralph for her annulment, which she needs before she can marry Raymond. Undine and Moffatt both achieve a substantial degree of success in their respective quests. Undine rises to the pinnacle of social stardom in the most elite societies, and Moffatt succeeds in the economic world by earning himself recognition as the most influential businessman on Wall Street. Undine and Moffatt resemble each other in their willingness to take risks, and this quality largely contributes to their success. Undine defies social conventions by receiving divorces and remarrying on several occasions, and Moffatt makes risky investments on the stock market. The glamorous life--ostentatious parties, rampant consumerism, and elegant balls--appeals to both Undine and Moffatt, and they enjoy this lifestyle during their second marriage. Undine and Moffatt appear so well-suited for each other that it almost seems possible that they both could be happy in such a union.

In a reminiscence that occurs after Undine's disastrous fight with Raymond over the tapestries, Undine recounts her first impressions of Moffatt in Apex. Undine's memories reveal

that Moffatt, like herself, dares to spurn social conventions on the occasion of his delivery of a speech in a drunken state at a temperance meeting in Apex. Undine discerns that Moffatt possesses an innate reserve of "power" (988), and she allies herself with him after his disgraceful conduct at the temperance meeting by agreeing to walk down Main Street with him in plain view of the residents of the town. The early incident of walking down Main Street foreshadows Undine's and Moffatt's re-alliance after the scandal that ensues from Undine's petition to divorce Raymond.

Undine elopes with Moffatt in a moment of youthful passion and romance, but her father's quick intervention soon concludes her brief first marriage to Moffatt. Mr. and Mrs. Spragg originally object to Undine's marriage to Moffatt because he lacks the financial resources and the social position to support Undine. However, Moffatt continues to appear in Undine's life because he too travels to New York to achieve wealth and fame. When Moffatt arrives in Paris, Undine recognizes the remarkable level of success achieved by Moffatt, and the poor state of her own marriage with Raymond sparks her to fantasize about the advantages she would enjoy as Moffatt's wife: "and she reflected that if she had still been Moffatt's wife he would have given her just such a setting [of wealth and extravagant possessions], and the power to live in it as became her" (984). Undine's predatory instincts enable her to see that Moffatt could provide her with many privileges that Raymond fails to supply.

Undine encounters Moffatt's power and wealth when he arrives at Saint Désert to examine the Boucher tapestries, and this scene reveals the connection between Undine and Moffatt. Undine unintentionally finds herself confessing to Moffatt that her marriage to Raymond fails to satisfy her because of "some underlying community of instinct" (975), and this

phrase attests to the innate, spontaneous bond between the two. Wharton views language as a crucial element of culture, and the dialogue exchanged by Undine and Moffatt shows that they originate from the same social class:

> "Oh, Raymond's absorbed in the estates--and we haven't got the money. This place eats it all up."
>
> "Well, that sounds aristocratic; but ain't it rather out of date? When the swells are hard-up nowadays they generally chip off an heirloom." He wheeled round again to the tapestries. "There are a good many Paris seasons hanging right here on this wall." (975)

Examples of incorrect grammar appear both in Undine's speech such as "we haven't got the money" and in Moffatt's speech such as "ain't," and Moffatt also employs many slang expressions such as "swells," "hard-up," and "chip off." Not only is the style of Undine's and Moffatt's speech similar, but the content of their speech displays resemblances. For example, Undine irreverently defines the value of the tapestries solely in monetary terms when she urges Raymond to sell them, and Moffatt repeats this action by translating the tapestries' value into monetary terms without regard for their value as family relics and works of art: "'There are a good many Paris seasons hanging right here on this wall'" (975). Undine immediately perceives that she and Moffatt use the same style of speech, and she notices that their minds operate in the same manner: "Here was some one who spoke her language, who knew her meanings" (975). Wharton uses the similarities in speech and mental reasoning to intimate the likelihood of Moffatt's becoming Undine's next husband.

Undine and Moffatt complement each other as the feminine and masculine side of the new type of society that is evolving in America. Undine reigns in the domain of Fifth Avenue, and Moffatt governs in the region of Wall Street. Together Undine and Moffatt form a

partnership in which he earns a tremendous income on Wall Street to furnish Undine with immense amounts of material possessions purchased on Fifth Avenue: "Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue, and while he talked of building up railways she was building up palaces, and picturing all the multiple lives he would lead in them" (976). Although Undine knows little about business, she realizes that Moffatt's business success could provide her with the money that neither Ralph nor Raymond is able to provide for her. Undine translates "Wall Street term[s]" into "the language of Fifth Avenue," and she realizes that Moffatt may have the potential to satiate her ravenous consumer appetite.

In addition, Undine's interest in owning many "things"serves as another example of her immaturity, and Wharton explains this view in *French Ways and Their Meaning*:

> We are too ready to estimate business successes by their individual results: a point of view revealed in our national awe of large fortunes. That is an immature and even childish way of estimating success. In terms of civilisation it is the total and ultimate result of a nation's business effort that matters, not the fact of Mr. Smith's being able to build a marble villa in place of his wooden cottage. (110-11)

Wharton explicitly condemns "awe of large fortunes" as "immature and even childish," which shows that she must vehemently object to Undine's ambitions "[t]o have things" (976) and her wonder at Moffatt's fortune. Wharton claims that success should not be measured by the ability to replace old possessions with "new and improved" possessions because she believes it leads to a destructive cycle of consumption and waste. Like Mr. Smith, who upgrades his "wooden cottage" to "a marble villa," Undine upgrades her social position and wealth through marriage, and yet she is never totally satisfied with what she has. Perhaps Wharton fears that the cycle of "'rotary consumerism'" (MacComb 767) develops a class of people obsessed with money

because of their insatiable desires to purchase the seemingly limitless products available to consumers.

While Undine is still married to Raymond, she contemplates the surrounding physical environment of Saint Désert: "She liked to see such things [beautiful and expensive antiques and other art work] about her--without any real sense of their meaning she felt them to be the appropriate setting of a pretty woman" (984). Undine fails to experience any refined sentiments for the artistic and aesthetic value of her surroundings, she only values material possessions such as clothes, jewels, houses, and art as means to enhance and validate her own beauty and worth. Wharton contrasts Undine's superficial appraisal of her surroundings with Moffatt's deeper appreciation for art, and this occurs when Undine uses her position as a French aristocrat's wife to gain admittance for herself and Moffatt to exclusive art works:

> When she took him to see some inaccessible picture, or went with him to inspect the treasures of a famous dealer, she saw that the things he looked at moved him in a way she could not understand, and that the actual touching of rare textures--bronze or marble, or velvets flushed with the bloom of age--gave him sensations like her own beauty had once raised in him. (994)

The phrase "she saw that the things he looked at moved him in a way she could not understand" captures the difference between Undine's inability to appreciate anything outside of herself and Moffatt's more sensitive nature, which the critic Elaine Showalter describes as "an aesthetic sense that is more than restlessness, brute acquisitiveness, or greed" (94). Undine's point of reference for the beauty of art is her own beauty, as the phrase "gave him sensations like her own beauty had once raised in him" reveals, and this once again affirms her egocentric and immature perspective. Wharton almost endows Moffatt with a sense of reverence for the past when she describes the powerful "sensations" produced in him by tangible contact with art objects "flushed

with the bloom of age," but his ruthless activity on the stock market and his lack of reverence for social codes undermines his sensitivity to art.

An incident that occurs between Undine and Moffatt before Moffatt returns to the United States also reveals that Moffatt adheres to slightly more strict standards of behavior than Undine. Undine's realization that Raymond will never compromise or acquiesce to her wishes causes her to offer herself to Moffatt as his mistress in exchange for his agreement to remain in Paris. Undine hopes that if Moffatt remains in Paris he will provide her with companionship and, more importantly, money to satisfy her material wants, but Moffatt rejects Undine's proposition: "'There are things a man doesn't do. I understand why your husband won't sell those tapestries--till he's got to. His ancestors are *his* business: Wall Street's mine'" (1001). Moffatt's appreciation for art and his understanding of business commitments enables him to understand Raymond's ardent reluctance to sell his tapestries. Moffatt perceives Raymond's interest in preserving his family's heritage as the French parallel to American business on Wall Street, but Undine's lack of exposure to business, along with her egocentric personality, prevents her from recognizing and understanding the implications of this parallel. The sentence, "'There are things a man doesn't do'" implies that different standards of conduct exist for men and women. Moffatt will not abandon business or accept Undine as anything less than his wife because exposure to the business world forces him to face reality more practically.

The tone and language of Moffatt's proposal of marriage to Undine sounds like a business ultimatum: "'See here, Undine,' he said slowly, ..., 'I guess it had better be yes or no right here. ... If you want to come back to me, come--if you don't, we'll shake hands on it now'" (1002). Moffatt uses the imperative mood to present Undine with the two alternative answers,

"yes or no," and he forces her into a position where she must make an immediate decision. Moffatt's proposal of marriage utilizes many tough business tactics, and his offer to "shake hands on it" implies a certain emotional detachment from his proposal to accept a rejection of his offer so rationally and painlessly. The tone of Moffatt's proposal establishes the basis of his marriage to Undine, a marriage which is not based on love but a mutual interest in love and success.

Wharton concludes the chapter containing the scene of Moffatt's proposal to Undine with suspension; she chooses not to reveal Undine's answer to Moffatt's ultimatum until the next and final chapter. Chapter Forty-Six, the concluding chapter of the novel, makes a rather startling shift, both in perspective and in time. The chapter opens two years after Undine's and Moffatt's marriage with Undine's son, Paul Marvell, who is "now a big boy of nearly nine" (1003), surveying his mother's and stepfather's *hôtel*, and Wharton locates the *hôtel* in "one of the new quarters of Paris" (1003), symbolizing Undine's rejection of French aristocratic codes centered in the older Faubourg St. Germain section of Paris. The abrupt time elapse and shift in perspective somewhat unsettles the reader, the reader's unsettled feeling mirrors Paul's unsettled and isolated feeling as he tries to acquaint himself with his new surroundings.

Upon his arrival at the *hôtel*, neither Undine nor Moffatt is present to greet Paul, and he proceeds on a solitary tour of the house. Paul encounters Van Dyck's *Grey Boy* in one of Moffatt's room, and his identification with this painted figure reveals his loneliness: "he looked so infinitely noble and charming, and yet...so sad and lonely that he too might have come home that very day to a strange house in which none of his old things could be found" (1004). The ecphrastic image of the painting conveys Paul's sense of alienation in his new home, and his dismay increases as he realizes that he cannot even occupy his lonely hours with reading. Paul

inherits his penchant for reading from his father, Ralph Marvell, but he discovers that all the books remain locked in the library bookcases: "not a single volume had slipped its golden prison" (1005). Wharton compares the bookcases to a "golden prison," and the gold conveys the expensive value of the books. The "prison" suggests that intellectual and artistic pursuits are barred, both literally and metaphorically, in the wealthy Moffatt *hôtel*, and for Paul, who enjoys reading, life without books is as dreary as life in a prison cell.

Paul resorts to visiting with Mrs. Heeny, the social gossip from New York who is staying with Undine in Paris, in the hopes of finding a refuge from the loneliness he feels, but her clippings from society columns, detailing Undine's ascent of the social ladder, hardly provide him with solace. Other than an occasional telegram, Paul rarely has contact with his mother, and Mrs. Heeny's newspaper clippings serve as the most informative education he ever receives about his mother's social career. Newspapers are transient objects of consumer consumption, and they symbolize aspects of Undine's own life. Undine forms transient relationships with other persons, and she subscribes to the ceaseless cycle of consumerism. The clippings relating to the circumstances of his mother's divorce from Raymond de Chelles, whom Paul affectionately refers to as "his dear French father" (1009), upset him with the unavoidable knowledge that Undine tells lies about Raymond: "She said things that weren't true. . .That was what he had always feared to find out" (1009). Paul's disillusionment with his mother further isolates him and increases his loneliness.

The presence of the Saint Désert tapestries hanging in the ballroom of Undine's and Moffatt's *hôtel* exceeds the effect of the loneliness and isolation produced on Paul by the locked books and the newspaper clippings. The splendid tapestries are the central attraction of the

ballroom, and they absorb Undine's and Moffatt's attention as Paul arrives to greet them: "His mother and Mr. Moffatt stood in the middle of the shining floor, looking up at the walls; and Paul's heart gave a wondering bound, for there, set in great gilt panels, were the tapestries that had always hung in the gallery at Saint Désert" (1009). Undine focuses her attention on the tapestries and disregards Paul, even as he shares with her his joyous news in "'[taking] a prize in composition'" (1010). Undine characteristically devotes her attention to her material possessions, namely the tapestries, rather than an individual's needs (even her own son's), and Undine's rejection of Paul's efforts to communicate with her amplifies his isolation.

Paul associates the tapestries with "his dear French father," and he naively hopes that the presence of the tapestries in his new environment signifies a continuing link to Raymond: "a hope he dared not utter that, since the tapestries were there, his French father might be coming too" (1010). The ultimate realization that his mother's remarriage to Moffatt severs all ties with Raymond obliterates Paul's "hope" of seeing Raymond again, and his complete devastation ends with him sobbing: "he could only sob and sob as the great surges of loneliness broke over him" (1011). The scene of the isolated and lonely figure of Paul sobbing reminds the reader of Ralph's disillusionment and despair over the failure of his marriage, and Paul, like his father, becomes another victim of Undine's self-absorbed and selfish behavior.

Moffatt shows more compassion than Undine for Paul, and he even reproaches her for paying little heed to Paul: "'Can't you ever give him a minute's time, Undine?'" (1010). Despite his honest intentions to comfort Paul, Moffatt's boastful speech to Paul about capturing the tapestries actually precipitates Paul's breakdown. Moffatt uses harsh business tactics, which involve both capitalizing on the weaknesses of his adversaries and employing deceitful methods,

and, through these methods, Moffatt acquires Raymond's tapestries. Elaine Showalter accurately compares Moffatt to Donald Trump, and, in her quotation from Trump's book, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, she observes that they both feel pride and delight in ruthless business practices: "Trump is of course eloquent on the subject of deal making: 'Deals are my art form. ... I like making deals, preferably big deals. That's how I get my kicks'" (88). The acquisition of the Chelles tapestries represents a "'big deal'" for Moffatt, and he brags to Paul that "'It was like drawing teeth for him to let them go'" (1011). In the same way that Trump gets his "'kicks'" from "'making deals,'" the success of procuring the tapestries elates Moffatt, and the comparison of Moffatt to Trump emphasizes that Moffatt's business involvement corrupts him and makes him callous and insensitive to individuals.

The image of "drawing teeth" (1011) conveys the extreme pain that Raymond must have felt over the necessity of relinquishing the family heirloom, and Moffatt's delight over inflicting such a wound on Raymond shows his insensitivity. Paul perceives Moffatt's insensitivity to "his dear French father" (1009), and he feels "a rage of hate for him" and "burst[s] into tears" (1011). Moffatt fails to understand the cause of Paul's tears, and, as he tries to comfort the crying child, his consoling words to Paul reveal that his business perspective distorts his view of human needs: "'And it looks as if one of these days you'd be the richest boy in America...'" (1011). Money may please Undine and Moffatt, but Paul's more sensitive nature craves more than money and material possessions.

In the final paragraphs of her last chapter, Wharton unsettles her reader once more with a shift back to Undine's perspective. Undine apparently makes no effort to console Paul, and the next scene opens with her contemplating the final preparations for the evening's gala. Undine

especially admires the tapestries hanging in her ballroom, and, like Moffatt, she also delights in capturing the tapestries, or the spoils from her divorce. Undine's pleasure over possessing the tapestries again reflects her insensitive and shameless nature:

> She knew that Raymond de Chelles had told the dealers he would sell his tapestries to anyone but Mr. Elmer Moffatt, or a buyer acting for him; and it amused her to think that, thanks to Elmer's astuteness, they were under her roof after all, and that Raymond and all his clan were by this time aware of it. (1013)

Undine savors her revenge on Raymond and his family by transplanting the tapestries from Saint Désert to her new Paris apartment. Because Undine previously fights with Raymond so bitterly over the tapestries, she realizes the tremendous feeling he has for them, and most people with even the slightest amount of compassion would not part Raymond from his tapestries. Undine, however, feels neither compassion nor compunction about appropriating Raymond's tapestries, but perhaps Undine is not actually capable of experiencing such emotions. The key word is "amused." "[A]mused" suggests pleasant connotations, not a sinister sense of revenge, and it indicates a sort of childish glee. Undine's amusement over capturing the tapestries reiterates her superficial and childish nature.

Undine exults in possessing the tapestries, observing that "they made her ballroom the handsomest in Paris" (1011), but ironically she too becomes a possession in Moffatt's collection of beautiful items. Moffatt is described as "'the greatest collector in America'" (1007), and his wife becomes one of his prized possessions. Before Undine marries Raymond, she accidentally meets Moffatt in Paris, and the conversation between the two forecasts their ultimate marriage:

> "Don't you ever mean to get married?"
>
> Moffatt gave her a quick look. "Why I shouldn't wonder--one of these days. Millionaires always collect something; but I've got to collect my millions first." (899)

At the time, Undine does not realize that her question to Moffatt will be reversed when he proposes that they should remarry. Moffatt's answer that "'[m]illionaires always collect something'" mentions nothing about love or companionship, and it depersonalizes the wife by referring to his future mate as "something," an inanimate and neuter word. Moffatt, like Undine, considers money his first priority as evidenced by his qualification to his affirmative response that he will someday marry, "'but I've got to collect my millions first.'"

At first Moffatt's wealth and business achievements succeed in appeasing Undine's appetite for material possessions, and the rapidity of her divorce from Raymond and of her remarriage to Moffatt temporarily overwhelms her. A newspaper account reports that "'No case has ever been railroaded through the divorce courts of this State at a higher rate of speed'" (1008), and the word "railroaded" reveals that Moffatt handles his marriage in the same way that he deals with business transactions. Moffatt controls much of the aggressive railroad development, and the use of the same word to describe the speed of his marriage endows the ceremony with a vulgar and crude atmosphere. As time progresses, it dawns on Undine more and more lucidly that Moffatt lacks the refinement of manners and social conventions that her previous two husbands possessed: "Now and then she caught herself thinking that his two predecessors--who were gradually becoming merged in her memory--would have said this or that differently, behaved otherwise in such and such a case. And the comparison was almost always to Moffatt's disadvantage" (1012). Undine characteristically cannot even remember distinctly either Ralph or Raymond as the phrase "who were gradually becoming merged in her memory" reveals, and this again shows that she fails to consider individuals as worthy of respect. In addition, the "comparison" of Moffatt to Ralph or Raymond shows Moffatt's crudeness against

the cultivated manners and conventions of Ralph's and Raymond's behavior because, unlike Moffatt, they need not create false pretenses. Ralph and Raymond trace their origins to aristocratic classes whereas Moffatt does not. Even Moffatt is not able to buy himself the nuances of manners and behavior that distinguish membership in an elite class because they derive from genuine aristocratic breeding.

Undine's discontentment with Moffatt culminates when she learns that her divorces bar her from ever becoming an ambassador's wife. In the very beginning of the novel, Wharton reveals the prophecy of Undine's fate: "She once said to herself, afterward, that it was always her fate to find out just too late about the 'something beyond'" (656-57). Just as the heroes and heroines of a Greek tragedy cannot escape their fate, neither can Undine. Wharton echoes the prophecy of Undine's fate near the conclusion of the novel to emphasize the circular pattern of the novel and to hint to the reader the likely conclusion of the novel: "She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them" (1012).

The prophecy is fulfilled when Moffatt informs Undine that she can never become an ambassador's wife, and this knowledge mars Undine's happiness:

> She turned to give herself a last look in the glass, saw the blaze of her rubies, the glitter of her hair, and remembered the brilliant names on her list.
>
> But under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remained. She had learned that there was something she could never get, something 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. (1014)

Wharton uses the image of the mirror to emphasize the importance of surface appearances to Undine, and, on the surface, Undine appears to have everything she could possibly desire--

beauty, jewels, an impressive guest list, and immense wealth. Because Undine fails to look beyond appearances, the mirror does not yield a moment of self-knowledge, and she makes no progress intellectually or emotionally. Wharton ends the book on a negative note with the image of "a tiny black cloud," which signifies Undine's discontentment with her social position, and Wharton provides not even the slightest hint of reform for Undine. Instead of enjoying everything that she has, Undine focuses on the one thing she doesn't have, and Wharton clearly suggests that no conditions exist in which Undine would ever be totally happy. The vicious nature of the consumer cycle thrives on the knowledge that there is always "'something beyond'" (656-57), and as long as Undine subscribes to this cycle complete happiness will elude her.

Wharton suggests the profound limitations of Undine's development through the narrative pattern, for the path of Undine's career follows a circle. The novel concludes with Undine remarried to her original--and now fourth--husband. Certainly, Undine possesses greater wealth and social position than at the beginning of her career, but the measure of her happiness hardly increases. In the beginning of the novel, Undine writes on her "new pigeon-blood note-paper" (633), which she falsely considers the latest trend in high society, and, at the conclusion of the novel, she wears her "'necklace and tiara of pigeon-blood rubies belonging to Queen Marie Antoinette'" (1009), which in terms of monetary and historical value far exceed the "pigeon blood note-paper." The repeated use of the unusual color links the objects of the note-paper and the necklace and tiara, and the connection of these items attests to Undine's material advancement in her career. Yet, the color of "pigeon blood" conveys negative associations. Pigeons are common, perhaps even vulgar birds, and blood suggests violence and death. The vulgarity of Undine's career lies in her flagrant abuse of the institutions of marriage and divorce,

and the victims are her previous husbands--Ralph, who commits suicide, and Raymond, whom Undine wounds by betraying his family. Wharton hopes that her reader will learn the lesson that Undine never learns: nothing will ever completely please Undine because she seeks the wrong things.

The social criticism contained in Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* consists of the warning against perpetual consumerism, which flourishes on large fortunes and the immature desires of people for "new and improved products," because Wharton believes that perpetual consumerism results in the erosion of moral values. In *A Backward Glance*, *A Motor-Flight Through France*, and *French Ways and Their Meanings*, Wharton praises the values of continuity and reverence for the past and its traditions, and she laments the loss of these values in the new society of *nouveaux riches* that she saw emerging in America. Wharton creates Undine's character as an exaggerated figure, or a type of evolutionary monster, to show the callous and selfish individuals the new society is capable of producing. Elaine Showalter insightfully argues that many of Wharton's prophecies regarding the type of individual produced by the new society can be seen in contemporary America:

> They could come from the "Style" section of the Sunday *New York Times* or from Donald Trump's first memoir and how-to-succeed-in-business guide, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, but of course they are Elmer Moffatt and Undine Spragg, from *The Custom of the Country*. Set about 1900 to 1912, Wharton's novel seems uncannily familiar as a portrait of the mythology of class in the American 1980s as well. (88)

The accuracy of Wharton's prophecies and fears for American society should unsettle the reader, and Wharton's ability to analyze social trends so shrewdly reveals her remarkable genius for understanding both social trends and human nature. Wharton hopes to use her writings to

encourage her readers to preserve the values of continuity and reverence for the past and traditions because she believes it is only possible to achieve true happiness in societies which cherish these values.

Conclusion

The influence of society on individuals is a profound concern of *The Custom of the Country*. Bowen declares that Undine is "'a monstrously perfect result of the system'" (759), and Wharton provides much evidence that Undine's cruel selfishness derives from the society that produces her. Undine's parents, the Spraggs, spoil her and indulge her every whim, and her American husband Ralph attempts to do the same. Undine finds life with her French husband Raymond intolerable because he refuses to accommodate her insatiable demands. In her marriage to the American, Moffatt, her original and fourth husband, Undine becomes nothing more than an item in his extensive and fabulous collections. Undine's experiences with her parents and Ralph teach her to act like a spoiled child to gain her ends, and her experience with Moffatt reveals to her that her only duties are to dress handsomely and to look beautiful. Raymond, the representative of French culture, demands that Undine sacrifice her own interests for the sake of the family, and he expects her to interact intelligently and interestingly in French aristocratic social gatherings. Undine's American upbringing dooms her to failure in French aristocratic society, and Wharton shows that Undine never achieves happiness or satisfaction in any of her marriages, both to American men and a French man, because she is a product of a warped American society.

Mirrors comprise the dominant image pattern of the novel, and Wharton uses mirrors not only to symbolize Undine's obsession with her beauty and surface appearances but also to illustrate that Undine is a product of her corrupt society. Mirrors reflect images placed in front of them, and Undine reflects the society that produces her. Wharton describes Undine as

"passionately imitative" (633), and Undine imitates many of the negative qualities, including selfishness, perpetual and destructive consumerism, and an utter lack of piety for revered traditions, that Wharton connects with the new social class of Westerner parvenus invading her Old New York. The critic Margaret McDowell comments on Undine's imitativeness: "When Undine changes her life-style by changing her friends and husbands, she does so in order to find more significant mirrors for her beauty and untried ranges of behavior to copy" (53). McDowell's insight on Undine's dependence on mirrors reveals that Undine is a product of her society because she must imitate the appearance and behavior of others as a model for herself. Another critic and biographer of Wharton, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, also views Undine as a reflection of the evils of the society which spawns her, and she offers this interpretation of Wharton's vision of Undine's character: "'Do you want an image of your corruption? Look at what you have produced! Look at Undine Spragg!'" (230). The word "'image'" evokes mirrors, suggesting that Undine simply mirrors the worst qualities of her own society.

The central character of *The House of Mirth* (1905), Lily Bart, also testifies to Wharton's belief in the powerful effects of society on individuals. In many ways, Lily Bart acts as the exact opposite of Undine Spragg, but the two resemble each other very significantly because society determines each of their fates. Similar to Bowen's naturalistic claim that Undine is "'a monstrously perfect result of the system'" (759), Wharton depicts Lily in equally naturalistic terms in one of her earliest portraits of Lily: "She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (7). The simile comparing "the links of her bracelet" to "manacles" conveys the sense that Lily is a prisoner of her society, and it discloses Lily's inability to exercise her personal freedom

against the social forces which restrict her. Wharton explicitly states that Lily "was ... the victim of the civilization which had produced her," and, in *A Backward Glance*, she also discusses the power of Old New York society, which destines Lily to her death: "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implications lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart" (940). The "frivolous society" of Old New York trains Lily to believe that she must marry a rich man, who can provide her with fashionable clothes and entertainments comparable to those of her other rich friends, but she longs to marry her true love, Lawrence Selden. Like Undine, Lily never enjoys happiness because she fluctuates between the alternatives of marrying a rich but unappealing husband or marrying a poor but appealing husband.

Wolff refers to *The Custom of the Country* as "a companion-piece" (230) to *The House of Mirth*, and the critic Millicent Bell also remarks on the connection between the two novels with her apt summary of Undine and Lily: "Gentle Lily Bart, victim rather than victor in the savage social game, was recalled wistfully as a type one would rather read about [in comparison to Undine]" ("Introduction" 2). Lily Bart as "victim" and Undine Spragg as "victor" establish the two polar opposites of "type[s]" of individuals that a society is capable of producing. The setting of *The House of Mirth* falls before the invasion of the Western *nouveaux riches*, and the stricter adherence to social codes inhibits Lily from marrying Lawrence. The setting of *The Custom of the Country* establishes a new social scene, as Old New York's social codes erode rapidly. The erosion allows Undine to disregard previous rigid conventions, and she certainly defies conventions with her three divorces and four marriages. Unlike Undine, Lily submits to conventions rather than pursuing her own personal desires, even to the point of death. Less

stringent social codes and Undine's force of character enable her to marry whomever she pleases, but, like Lily, she remains unhappy and unfulfilled.

Wolff observes that the change from the rigid and repressive social codes of Old New York to the relaxed social codes of the newly rich Westerner invaders forms the basis of *The Custom of the Country*: "The novel is poised precariously upon the moment of change ... *The Custom of the Country* is a money novel, a business novel, that is true. However, above all, it is a novel of energy, of initiative" (233). Undine embodies the qualities of "energy" and "initiative." Undine's "incessant movements" (636) indicate the forces of "energy" and "initiative" animating her, and, as Ralph becomes acquainted with Undine, he applies the phrase, "*divers et ondoyant*" (674) from Montaigne's *Essays* to her, which means "'[d]iverse and ever in motion'" (1326).[2] Montaigne's phrase pertains to Undine because she constantly changes her situation in life, moving from one location to the next and one marriage to the next.

Wharton does value Undine's ability to change because, unlike Lily, she refuses to allow social conventions to serve as an obstacle to her personal desires. In many of Wharton's novels, the power of social conventions paralyzes relationships from developing or maturing because of an inability to overcome the restraints of society, and Wolff comments on this in regard to *The Custom of the Country*: "Clare, like Ralph--like virtually every descendant of old New York--has lost the capacity for initiative" (238). Lily Bart lacks the strength to fulfill her desires by committing a bold action in the eyes of her society by marrying Lawrence Selden, and Clare Van Degen and Ralph Marvell similarly lack sufficient courage both to face their dread of divorce and

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[2]This information appears in the Notes of The Library of America edition of *Edith Wharton: Novels*, edited by R.W.B. Lewis.

to end the unhappy marriages with their respective partners. The negative effect of social conventions on a love relationship is perhaps seen most powerfully in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), in which Newland Archer and Madame Ellen Olenska both choose to live their lives in accordance with Old New York's social conventions, sacrificing their strong desires for an active love relationship with each other. For Ralph Marvell and Clare Van Degen as well as for Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska, relationships fail because of social conventions inhibiting the fulfillment of personal desires. Society is again at fault in destroying Undine's ability to form a successful relationship because society creates her as a type of evolutionary monster who cannot overcome her own selfishness to interact intimately with another person. In much of her fiction, Wharton explores the negative effects of society on love relationships between men and women, and she acknowledges that society can both destroy and create individuals who are unfit for love relationships.

In her nonfiction works as well as her personal life, Wharton also reveals her preoccupation with the effect of society on relationships between men and women. In *A Backward Glance* and especially in *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton emphasizes the need for close and meaningful relationships between men and women for the good of the individuals involved and for the good of society in general. Wharton struggled with the issue of relationships between men and women in her personal life as well as in her literary life, and she had three main relationships during her life. Wharton's marriage to Teddy Wharton disintegrated into a painful relationship for both of them, and she faced the censure and scandal of Old New York when she decided she must divorce Teddy (Lewis 333). An adulterous affair with the American journalist, Morton Fullerton, comprised Wharton's second relationship, and, in this

relationship, she first experienced sexual passion and the fury of love (Lewis 183, 220-23). Wharton's relationship with Walter Berry consisted of her most significant and lasting love relationship and deep, personal friendship, which Wharton movingly describes in *A Backward Glance*: "I cannot picture what the life of the spirit would have been to me without him [Walter Berry]. ... It is such comradeships, made of seeing and dreaming, and thinking and laughing together, that make one feel that for those who have shared them there can be no parting" (872-73). Wharton's loving account of her relationship with Berry indicates the importance she attached to love relationships, and her relationships with all three men, Teddy Wharton, Morton Fullerton, and Walter Berry, largely explain her interest in exploring relationships between men and women in her fiction because much of her personal life was absorbed in attempts to establish and maintain a successful relationship.

In addition to examining the effect of society on love relationships between men and women, Wharton investigates the influence of society on the position of women. In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton throughly asserts her belief in the negative effects of business on society, and especially on the position of women in society, through Bowen's tirade on American marriages. Wharton suggests that Undine's "energy" and "initiative" (Wolff 233) are funneled into trivial and destructive pursuits of shopping and social climbing because her society denies her opportunities to contribute more productively and fruitfully. R.W.B. Lewis remarks that Henry James, a close friend of Wharton's, noticed in her the same qualities of exuberant energy that Undine possesses: "The more James knew and observed Edith Wharton, the more some part of him grew positively alarmed by her energy, her curious insatiable zest for life, and what seemed to him her 'fantastic freedom'" (247). Like Undine, Wharton possessed "'fantastic

freedom'" in her willingness to spurn social conventions, as evidenced by her divorce from Teddy, and she aggressively pursued many of her desires, including her desire to travel, to enter into different relationships, and, most importantly, her desire to write. Wharton exhibited many of Undine's aggressive traits with her publishers, as Millicent Bell observes: "she built her literary career like any entrepreneur of nonartistic goods, shrewd and alert in her dealings with her publishers, aware of the market for which she was an industrious producer" ("Edith Wharton" 65). While Undine expends her "energy" on the negative goals of rising socially and materially, Wharton channeled her "energy" into her prolific writing career, and Wharton achieves a much greater level of accomplishment and gratification from her success in her writing career than Undine achieves from her success in her social career because Wharton uses her energy for more worthwhile goals than Undine does.

French Ways and Their Meaning presents Wharton's views on the advantages of French society, which includes women in business affairs and allows women an intellectual and cultural role in society through their participation in *salons*. Wharton expressed her preference for French culture by residing permanently in France from approximately 1912 until the end of her life in 1937 (Lewis 313, 532) because she felt women held a more valuable position in France. In American society, Wharton faced the double burden of not only being a woman but also being an artist. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton claims that "the arts [were] simply nonexistent" (874) in Old New York society, and she reveals that her literary success labeled her as a type of pariah in her childhood society: "My literary success puzzled and embarrassed my old friends far more than it impressed them, and in my own family it created a kind of constraint which increased with the years. ... as though it were a kind of family disgrace, which might be condoned but could not

be forgotten" (891). Old New York society's rejection of Wharton's literary career certainly alienated her from this society, and it precipitated her decision to establish herself in France, where she received support and encouragement for her literary ambitions: "In Paris no one could live without literature, and the fact that I was a professional writer, instead of frightening my fashionable friends, interested them" (*A Backward Glance* 979). French society permitted women greater social and intellectual freedom, and this was a pivotal factor in Wharton's preference for French society.

Before Wharton could attain happiness, she had to find a society in which she felt comfortable and accepted, and in that respect Wharton's quest for happiness resembles the quest of many of her fictional characters for happiness, especially Lily Bart and Undine Spragg. Lily seeks the noble goal of finding "a kind of republic of the spirit" (71), which represents the quest for an ideal society without inhibiting social conventions, but, sadly, Lily never realizes her goal. The negative qualities of Undine's society are manifest in her character, and, despite the weakened social conventions, happiness eludes her too. The scholar of Wharton's works should be troubled by the fact that in neither Old New York society nor the new society emerging in the midst of the Westerner invaders can women find happiness, as evidenced by the death of Lily and the discontentment of Undine, respectively. Old New York's social conventions may have inhibited love relationships, but they also emphasized positive values, including reverence for the past and tradition and a higher moral regard for principles of honesty and commitment. The *nouveau riche* society of Undine's New York may allow for greater personal autonomy, but the increase in personal freedom corresponds with a loss of Old New York's positive values, which results in a society that is merely different, not improved from the previous one. Wharton

declines to present a solution; instead, she presents the problems associated with each of the two extreme societies depicted in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*. Although she does not state it explicitly, it seems probable that Wharton would advocate retaining the positive values of Old New York and incorporating the increased personal freedom of the new society to form an ideal society.

The evolution of the rigid but moral social codes of Old New York to the relaxed but permissive social codes of the Westerner parvenus invading New York captivated Wharton's attention, and she appeared to feel ambivalent about the changes in society that she witnessed. As Newland Archer of *The Age of Innocence* surveys the changes that have occurred within Old New York during his own lifetime, his ambivalent comments echo Wharton's own sentiments: "After all, there was good in the old ways" (1291) and, just a few paragraphs later: "There was good in the new order too" (1292). Wharton's ability to recognize the positive and negative attributes of both societies testifies to her own wisdom, and the remarkable changes that she witnessed prompted her to examine the overall progress of society. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton recounts many of the changes she experienced, beginning with the invasion of the Westerner parvenus: "The first change came in the 'eighties, with the earliest detachment of big money-makers from the West" (780), and this is the change she depicts in *The Custom of the Country* with the Spraggs infiltrating Old New York society. World War I proved to have an even more devastating effect on Wharton's Old New York and the "*la belle époque*" society of France, which refers to "that time of seemingly permanent grandeur between the turn of the century and the outbreak of war in 1914" (Lewis 6). The sweeping social changes caused Wharton to appreciate the value of Old New York society, and she determined to use her writings

to preserve and to immortalize both the positive and negative aspects of that society:

> Not until the successive upheavals which culminated in the catastrophe of 1914 had 'cut all likeness from the name' of my old New York, did I begin to see its pathetic picturesqueness. ... The compact world of my youth has receded into a past from which it can only be dug up in bits by the assiduous relic-hunter; and its smallest fragments begin to be worth collecting and putting together before the last of those who knew the live structure are swept away with it. (780-81)

The extinction of her childhood society of Old New York produces its value in Wharton's estimation, and, in her writings, she becomes "the assiduous relic-hunter," preserving and explaining the old civilization, because to her imagination it remains a "live structure."

Social changes caused Wharton to weigh the value of Old New York against the value of the new society emerging in New York. Likewise, changes in the literary world, notably the development of modernism, provoked Wharton to assess her own position as a writer, as R.W.B. Lewis notes: "As the decades of the 1920s went forward, one of the major phenomena Edith Wharton had to take stock of was the new literary age presided over in good part by James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. To do so was to measure herself against it, to reappraise herself and her reputation as a writer" (442). Wharton chose not to interact with the modernists living in Paris, possibly because she felt threatened by the differences between their style of writing and her own:

> [Wharton] would have nothing whatsoever to do with those founders of literary modernism in her own language who were so much in Paris in her time--Hemingway and Stein, as well as Joyce and Pound. ...
>
> That she chose her company from the most conservative French elements probably reflected her lingering regard for the traditionalism of her own Old New York (Bell "Edith Wharton" 69)

Even in her literary career, Wharton felt a profound tension between the old and new orders.

Just as Wharton wisely recognized the waves of social change transforming Old New

York, she also acknowledged changes in the literary world. Wharton's recognition of literary change is apparent in her letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, expressing her praise for *The Great Gatsby*: "I am touched at your sending me a copy, for I feel that to your generation, which has taken such a flying leap into the future, I must represent the literary equivalent of tufted furniture and gas chandeliers" (R.W.B. and Nancy Lewis 481). Wharton compares herself to "tufted furniture and gas chandeliers" as a sign of her acceptance of belonging to an earlier generation than Fitzgerald, and the critics Robert Martin and Linda Wagner-Martin contend that the letter is "the more remarkable for its obvious distancing of herself as a writer of the previous generation" (98).

With the exception of Wharton's closure techniques, her literary style lacked the innovations seen in much modernist fiction, but her subject matter often rivaled the subject matter found in modernist texts: "*The Gods Arrive* features Halo Tarrant's out-of-wedlock pregnancy, *A Mother's Recompense* has a run-away mother looking for complete sexual satisfaction, and *The Children* deals, discretely, with the theme that Nabokov was to make a fortune from years later in *Lolita* (Martin and Wagner-Martin 108). Much of Wharton's fiction deals with scandalous and controversial subjects and may connect her with the modernist movement. In many of Wharton's novels, perhaps most dramatically *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton's closure techniques for the novel involve a striking change in perspective and time, and this unsettling method resembles modernist techniques of juxtaposition and contrast. In *The Custom of the Country*, the novel advances two years and largely shifts to Paul's perspective, and in *The Age of Innocence* the novel advances at least twenty years and focuses on the relationship between Archer and his son, Dallas. Significantly, Wharton emphasizes the perspectives of the younger generations in the final chapters of the two novels, and, similar to her recognition of

Fitzgerald as belonging to a new generation of writers, she acknowledges, particularly in *The Age of Innocence*, that a new generation with new values is emerging and forging a new society. Thus, Wharton links modernist techniques with the new generation, but both her controversial and daring subject matter and her startling methods of closure suggest that she incorporates modernist methods into her own writings.

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