The Custom of the Country Short Guide

The Custom of the Country by Edith Wharton

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Characters

In folklore, an undine is a water spirit, a mysterious, beautiful creature which can acquire a soul by marrying a mortal, but as Mrs. Spragg makes clear, she and Mr. Spragg knew nothing about water spirits when they called their child Undine.

Rather, the name was chosen for a hair waver that Undine's grandfather had invented the week of her birth ("undoolay" is "the French for crimping"). The confusion about the name suggests a great deal about Undine's role in the novel. She is mistaken a number of times for something that she is not, and at least some would claim she lacks a soul.

"Fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative," Undine is able to copy the style and manners of the social sets she wants to belong to, and she misleads her second and third husbands into thinking she is something that she is not.

Both husbands discover too late that Undine does not view the world as they do and that she is not able or willing to be guided by them. When they become disenchanted with her, Undine is distressed at the loss of power over them, but not at the loss of intimacy since she regards."intimacy as a pretext for escaping . . . into a total absence of expression." Undine is essentially a social creature. She is happiest when dominating an admiring crowd with her beauty, style, and power. Unfortunately, she has no interests beyond the pleasures of domination to keep her amused. Late in the novel, she learns that she and her French husband are not being invited to the best and most chic social gatherings primarily because people find her boring. People have found that she has nothing to talk about.

Undine possesses a practical business sense which is quite alien to her New York and Parisian husbands. Thus Ralph Marvell discovers on their honeymoon when they were short of funds that "it was always" Undine "who made the practical suggestion" for ways to find more money. Later in New York, when there is a chance for Ralph to make a small fortune in a real estate transaction, Undine does not think twice about introducing him to Elmer Moffatt, her first husband, without of course informing Ralph that there had been a first marriage. Later, after she has divorced Ralph, her father tells her she must return a set of valuable pearls to Peter Van Degen (with whom she has had an affair) since everyone knows where they come from and she can never wear them in public.

Undine very practically thinks that the pearls would be better disposed of by selling them to finance an escape from the censorious world of New York society. Later, when she wants to secure an annulment in order to make her acceptable as a French aristocrat's wife, she is quite willing to sell the custody of her son, leaving him with his father in exchange for a large sum of money. That this last transaction results in the suicide of Ralph Marvell is something that barely touches Undine's conscience. She feels "a vague sense of distress" when Ralph's name is mentioned even though his death has left her free to marry Raymond without getting an annulment. Nevertheless, she had not wanted Ralph to die—"at least not to die like that." Her marriage to Raymond de Chelles effectively comes to an end when she makes the practical

suggestion that they sell the chateau at Saint Desert (the large, drafty dwelling which drains the family income and where she is bored out of her mind for ten months a year) and when she has the famous Chelles tapestries appraised. But after she divorces him, Raymond de Chelles actually follows through with selling the tapestries when he needs to raise money to cover lost income from the economic collapse of his brother's American father-in-law. In all these examples, Undine displays a hardheadedness and independence that enable her to come up with a practical solution.

The four men in Undine's life may be categorized by their style and appearance.

Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles are refined, elegant men from the best families. Undine at first hardly takes notice of Ralph, calling him "a little fellow," but as she comes to appreciate Ralph's position as an eligible bachelor from one of New York's oldest families, she also comes to admire his style of good looks, seeing him as a model of "finish and refinement" and thinking that these qualities "might be even more agreeable in a man" than in a woman. As a descendant of two of New York's oldest families, Ralph had been raised to lead a life of "more or less cultivated inaction."

Marriage to Undine is a disaster for him. Forced to leave his gentleman's profession of law and to give up his pursuit of letters, he enters a real estate firm with the sole aim of making money, something which he lacks any aptitude for. Raymond de Chelles reminds Undine of Ralph. She thinks of both men as "sweet," Raymond blending Ralph's "fastidiousness and refinement" with his own "delightful foreign vivacity." However, there is a big difference between the two men. Ralph never challenges Undine.

Early in their marriage, he lets her have her way on their honeymoon when they leave Italy for Saint Moritz. Undine has found an agreeable social set at this resort, and Ralph does nothing to check her social progress. He does not approve of her cohorts, but he does not want to "mar her pleasure." This indulgence sets a pattern that remains consistent. Ralph never challenges Undine, even when he suspects she is having an affair with Peter Van Degen. He realizes that she has established the terms of their marriage and that she will always get her way in the end. In contrast, Raymond has no problem resisting Undine, even when he seems to be most ardently interested in her. Thus, Undine learns that her husband will not pay for her extravagant shopping sprees and that she is expected to live for ten months a year with her mother-in-law at the chateau in Saint Desert. When Raymond's sexual interest in her wanes, as had Ralph's, he is quite prepared to maintain an appearance of matrimonial harmony for the public, but he absents himself from any intimacy with Undine. She does her best to fight such a constricting marriage, but Undine soon learns that French custom goes against her desire for freedom.

The other two men in Undine's life are physically large and repulsive. Peter Van Degen bears a "grotesque saurian head, with eye-lids as thick as lips and lips as thick as ear-lobes." As he ages, he becomes broader and redder. She initially recognizes him because he looks like his picture that frequently appears in the society pages of the newspapers. His fashionable celebrity is enough to make him attractive to Undine. A

hedonist, he is quite willing to spend lavish amounts of money on her while she is married to Ralph. Undine makes the mistake of thinking he will marry her after he has had an affair with her, but Van Degen callously rejects her, using her cold abandonment of her husband when he was desperately ill as a pretext for leaving her in the lurch after she obtains a divorce from Ralph.

Elmer Moffatt is described several times, perhaps most vividly when Ralph Marvell comes to see him about the status of his investment in the Apex Consolidation scheme. A large, red, balding man, his solid presence makes Ralph feel a "mounting pang of physical nausea." Undine recognizes Moffatt's physical grossness and crude manners, but she is overwhelmed by his energy, resourcefulness, and power. In the second half of the novel he becomes her primary advisor, making practical suggestions that enable her to extricate herself from her unhappy marriages to Ralph and Raymond. At the end of the novel, Undine has remarried Elmer. Appropriately these two people from Apex City establish their own version of a court in Paris.

Elmer may lack the looks and manners to "fit into the picture" that Undine would create, but for the moment she seems almost content.

Social Concerns

The main settings of The Custom of the Country are New York and Paris, but the economic center is Apex City, Kansas. During the course of the novel, fortunes are made and lost in Apex City, and the winners of these fortunes spend their money in New York and Paris. Although no scenes take place in Apex City, what happens there determines much of the action in the other locations.

The natives of Apex City possess the classic American virtues of self-reliance, seemingly boundless energy, and business opportunism: Undine Spragg moves from Apex City to New York and then Paris with the aim of finding a place at the top of the social ladder while Elmer Moffatt goes from penniless young man to the world's greatest collector, capable of raising the price of pearls by fifty percent when he decides to buy them. These characters possess a practical business sense and drive which enables them to change and dominate (some would say destroy) the older societies they come into contact with. They look askance at complicated European living arrangements, and they are quite indifferent to the underlying values and social structures which govern the old New York families or the French aristocracy of the Faubourg Saint-Germain district. As Raymond de Chelles, Undine's third husband states, she and other Americans "come among us [i.e., the French] speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; . . . 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 life decent and honorable for us!"

Before she sets her sights on conquering Paris, Undine tackles New York society, which has been a part of her consciousness from her early days in Apex City. Her imagination "had been nurtured" on stories that appeared in the daily press of New York's old families and Fifth Avenue high society. Undine's immediate goals seem rather simple and easy to accommodate. She wants two things: "amusement and respectability."

Being materialistic and competitive by nature, she also wants to be assured that she is more affluent than anyone else.

The combination of these relatively simple goals make her into a juggernaut, leaving a host of ruined lives in its wake.

At the end of the novel, having moved to Paris, Undine is remaking (or should one say remodeling) the world to accommodate her presence in it. Ensconced in her own Parisian hotel (a new one that has all the latest conveniences), in possession of the famous Chelles tapestries, and married to a large, crude man who can buy her anything she wants, Undine finds that her most pressing problems are that her husband does not fit into the picture she would present to her dinner guests and that she cannot become an ambassador's wife because her status as a divorced woman disqualifies her for that position.

Techniques

In The Custom of the Country, Wharton presents a broad panorama of life in the United States and France during the first decade of the twentieth century. She uses a variety of techniques to develop her material, so her novel is not easily classifiable, but the genres that are most appropriate are the picaresque novel and the novel of manners in which emphasis is placed on the customs and values of different social classes. In the picaresque novel of the eighteenth century, a male rogue moved through a series of adventures in which he was always triumphant.

There frequently was an element of burlesque in which the characters he encountered were presented in broad strokes emphasizing their foibles. These elements can be seen in The Custom of the Country, only the picaro has been replaced by a picara. Undine Spragg, with her tireless energy, passes through a number of experiences. Her ability to imitate and adapt to the manners of the social sets she finds herself with gives her a chameleonlike quality which makes her an excellent vehicle for exposing the weaknesses of society. Whatever reverses she seems to encounter, she always emerges triumphant over her circumstances, and she always emerges intact, basically unchanged.

The tone of the novel is not consistent, and some readers find this an unnerving element. Thus, in her delineation of the disintegrating marriage of Ralph and Undine, Wharton writes in a realistic mode, carefully presenting the story of two people who discover too late that they are unsuited to each other. At the other extreme, she presents other elements in Undine's life as a burlesque. For example, there is the rise of Indiana Frusk Binch Rolliver whose progress through several husbands parallels Undine's, even though Indiana's natural equipment is decidedly second class.

Undine notes when she meets Indiana in Paris that "one of her shoulders was still higher than the other." The satire can be savage at such moments. The inconsistency in tone reinforces Wharton's presentation of a world in transition in which there is no standard by which the characters may judge each other or themselves. The tone of particular scenes then veers from the melodramatic (the depiction of Ralph's suicide) to the farcical (the newspaper account of Undine's divorce from Chelles in Reno followed by her hasty remarriage to Moffatt). These contrasting elements suggest almost a tabloid view of American culture in which widely divergent elements coexist side by side like the sensational stories in a daily newspaper.

Themes

Modern American marriage customs and divorce are two of the main themes in Wharton's novel. As Charles Bowen, a character who serves as a social analyst, observes, it is "the custom of the country" for a man to slave away to pay for "his wife's extravagances" without ever telling her anything about the work he does. The consequence is that there is little if any shared life in many American marriages. The center of the man's life, the world of business, remains a mystery to his wife. The center of her life, a social world of opulent display, becomes an expensive drain on his resources when business is not going well. Undine early on gives her view of the purpose of American marriages when she observes that her friend Mabel Lipscomb will probably soon be getting a divorce since her husband has "been a disappointment to her." Mr. Lipscomb does not belong to "the right set," and Mabel will "never get anywhere till she gets rid of him."

Undine's words state succinctly what her view of marriage is and will remain for the rest of the novel. A husband is a means to an end, and when he does not fulfill his function, a smart woman gets rid of him.

Undine lives in a world where appearance is frequently confused with the real person. Undine's main asset in attracting a husband is her beauty. Essentially the same drama is played out twice in the novel. Undine attracts the attention of two elegant young men (one American, the other French) from good families because of her beauty. These men attract her attention because they belong to "the right set" and they show well in society.

She thinks by marrying them she will find an entree to the highest echelons of society. The problem is that neither has the income to support her. In addition, both have artistic inclinations (Marvell to be a writer, Chelles to dabble in painting and music) which Undine has no sympathy with. Her view of art is best represented by the society portraitist Claud Walsingham Popple whose specialties are "idealizing flesh and realizing dress fabrics"; his portraits make his subjects look uniformly elegant and "pleasing." Undine loses both husbands when they discover that the dazzling beauty they were so attracted to conceals a cold heart and a mind "as destitute of beauty and mystery as the prairie schoolhouse in which she had been educated."

Key Questions

The Custom of the Country lacks two things that are normally considered prerequisites for a popular work of fiction: a sympathetic leading character whom a reader may identify with, and a clear moral center of consciousness by which the actions of the leading characters may be judged. The absence of these two elements may account for why the novel is a puzzling experience for many readers who bring certain expectations to it as a work of realistic fiction. These two missing elements may also account for the novel's success. Wharton is tackling much of the same territory as she did in The House of Mirth (1905; see separate entry), but in this novel she does not have a heroine who is ill-suited to a transitional society that has lost its moral center.

Rather she has an ambitious, amoral, conniving, emotionally unresponsive female protagonist who is oblivious to the moral confusion about her and who takes advantage of every opportunity for advancement offered her. Discussions might be organized about the underlying social forces that produce and make possible an Undine Spragg, about the differences between male and female options in the early-twentieth-century American society, about the role of art in a commercial society, about the decline in European aristocratic values, and about the simple traditional Midwestern values that appear to be Undine's base line for judgment.

1. Epic, satire, and caricature have all been terms that have been applied to The Custom of the Country. Consider why they are or are not appropriate.

2. It is common for critics to call Undine Spragg a monster. Is this fair? If so, what is it that makes her monstrous? If she were a man making his way on Wall Street, would she be deemed a monster?

3. Consider the history of other girls from Undine's youth: Indiana Frusk, Mabel Lipscomb, and Nettie Wincher (later Mme. de Trezac). All of these women serve at various times as Undine's confidantes and rivals. How do they help the reader identify Undine as an American type?

4. Consider Undine's relations with her parents and her son. Are they simply the actions of a spoiled, cold-hearted young woman who lacks any tender feelings, or are they a reflection of a distinctly "American" attitude toward life?

5. How do the physical types of Ralph Marvell and Elmer Moffatt reflect their characters? Compare them to the male characterizations in The House of Mirth.

6. Compare the customs and values of old New York society represented by the Marvells and Dagonets with the customs and values of the French aristocracy represented by the de Chelles family.

7. Explain the relationship between Clare Van Degen and Ralph Marvell. Do they seem childlike? Are they financially astute?

8. Why does Peter Van Degen let Undine down? Is his behavior essentially moral, sentimental, cowardly, or exploitative?

9. Mrs. Heeny with her clippings is a continuing figure through the novel.

What use does Wharton make of the idea of newspaper coverage in this novel?

10. How do you respond to Ralph Marvell's suicide? What person(s) or thing(s) should be held responsible for this act of self destruction?

Literary Precedents

Blake Nevius has called The Custom of the Country Wharton's most Balzacian novel. He mentions Balzac's Pere Goriot (1835) and Thackeray's Vanity Fair (18471848) as particular antecedents. Undine Spragg, like Eugene de Rastignac and Becky Sharp, has a greedy, grasping energy, and her adventures reveal a society in which the old orders have become soft and weak.

The Custom of the Country can also be seen as Wharton's contribution to the idea of the "new woman," which had become popular in the novels of Robert Grant, Robert Herrick, David Graham Phillips, and Theodore Dreiser. All these writers created leading female characters who did not automatically accept the subservient, maternal role allotted to women in the popular, sentimental fiction of the day. Undine's reaction to becoming pregnant, her neglect of her child, her need to dominate, and her absorption in herself make her a quintessential "new woman."

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