

MARRIAGE AS A STOCK MARKET: CONSUMER CULTURE IN EDITH
WHARTON'S *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*

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Introduction

Edith Wharton once said “I could not believe that a girl like myself could ever write anything worth reading, and my friends would certainly have agreed with me” (Singley 64). However, not only did Wharton become one of the most talented and prominent writers of the early twentieth century, she is still one of the widely read and taught authors of our time. A recent article in *Vogue* magazine, one of the most influential fashion magazines of the world, confirms Wharton’s popularity in our time and refers to Wharton as “the chronicler of an age” (Vogue, 2012). Reading Wharton, it is as if one visits the early twentieth century New York upper class society which represents a culture of great desire for material goods and high social status. Women play a significant role in this consumer culture. Their identity is influenced by the commodity culture; women become the main consumers of material goods and through the purchase of material goods they create their self-image and social status. Women’s beauty is essential for their self-image and social status, and is treated as a selling point or as a key factor in the negotiation for a desirable marriage, wealth, leisure, and status. In a way, women, especially female members of the upper class in New York, are treated as beautiful jewels whose task is to display their beauty in order to obtain a desirable marriage and a luxurious life.

Wharton’s ninth novel *The Custom of the Country* was published in 1913. The novel follows the social progress of New York socialite Undine Spragg who is a member of the leisure class. She is a woman who appears “to live on change and excitement” (515). Undine Spragg is an exemplary product of the leisure class, which Thorstein Veblen theorizes in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899): she is a materially spoiled young woman, who defines herself in terms of property, and she is herself a product – a commodity that comes at a price to her parents and her various husbands. Undine has one ambition and that is to move up the social ladder. Women are seen as ornaments; they are expected to display their beauty. Undine

Spragg manages to display her beauty by illuminating it with beautiful dresses and she negotiates her social advancement by using her beauty. This thesis will examine how Undine Spragg fulfills her position as a woman in her society, and how she constructs her femininity. First, I will explore consumer culture and desire for conspicuous consumption in the historical context of the early twentieth century, and use Thorstein Veblen's book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) to theoretically frame the concepts consumerism, conspicuous consumption and the leisure class. The second chapter focuses on Undine Spragg in the context of Veblen's approach to gender and conspicuous consumption. It shows how young women in a patriarchic society are the chattel of men, who need to make themselves as beautiful as possible to retain their social status. The third chapter elaborates on women's dresses, in particular Undine's. This chapter discusses women's dress styles and the function of clothing as an index of wealth and social standing. Undine is a survivor regardless of her frivolous character and heartless actions to maintain her leisure class membership. She tries to sell herself dearly in her patriarchal world where women are seen as ornaments. Furthermore, Undine tries to do everything in her power to stay beautiful, attractive and loveable for everyone in her society. Although Undine does not educate herself, she is a career woman, ever unsatisfied with her achievements. She does not give up on her social dreams and does not have any desire whatsoever to settle for less than an ideal social success.

This research's significance lies in the fact that, while many things have changed and it is almost a century after *The Custom of the Country* was published, the ornamental function of women still remains similar. The *Vogue* magazine that pays tribute to Wharton and her work is the proof of this significance. There is still an implicit cultural assumption that women ought to be beautiful and display their wealth in order to maintain their class membership, especially in upper class circles.

Chapter 1: The Art of the Leisure Class and Their Way of Life

“She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them” (591). Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* (1913) depicts the story of a ruthless, materially spoiled, young woman named Undine Spragg who is a member of the early twentieth century leisure class nouveau riche New York.

Undine, the protagonist of *The Custom of the Country* is never content with the things she owns, the more she has or achieves the more she desires. She gives no thought whatsoever to how her actions affect those around her. Undine does everything to accomplish the most important goal she cares for in her life which is her dream to climb up the social ladder, marrying into high society to an eligible and rich man who can provide her with a luxurious life.

Undine Spragg and her family move to New York after Mr. Spragg, ventures into a successful business deal in Apex, a fictional Midwestern city, that makes the family a fortune. The main reason for their relocation to New York is to make sure Undine has a better future after her failed marriage to Elmer Moffatt who could not provide her with the luxurious way of life she desired. Clearly, Undine and her parents treat her marriage as a career to some extent. Despite the fact that her family is not as comparatively wealthy in New York as they were in Apex, Undine is determined to lead an extravagant life as a member of the ‘leisure class’ and she desperately wants to be and stay part of it. To achieve this Undine carelessly spends her father’s money and exploits a series of husbands from America to France in order to achieve social power, and material wealth.

Undine is an exemplary product of her class which Thorstein Veblen referred to as the leisure class. By ‘leisure’ Veblen means withdrawal from everyday or conventional activities such as work (Veblen 2). Leisure is something which is not beneficial for one’s society. In addition, leisure, unlike work, does not involve social responsibilities for the individual.

Being a member of the leisure class means you do not need to work because you have more than enough money already. In contrast to such an obligation as work, leisure indicates the notion of spending time by engaging in pleasurable activities which are highly admired and valued by the members of the early twentieth century's leisure class. Engaging in leisure activities can be understood as pleasurable or a way of life, exclusively to the leisure class. Furthermore, Veblen shows how its members consider leisure as one of their significant obligations, because it shows they can afford not to work (Veblen 43-44).

Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* depicts the story of one individual who represents the customs of the class and society she is a member of. *The Custom of the Country* deals with the behavior, traditions, customs, values and the characteristics of the upper class of the early twentieth century in the United States. The novel depicts how members of the leisure class define and fulfill their role in their society in terms of marriage and in particular Undine who treats divorce as a social advancement. Also Wharton satirizes the leisure class of the early twentieth century who are materialists and rampant consumers. This chapter explores consumer culture and the desire for conspicuous consumption in the historical context of the early twentieth century. Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) will be used as a theoretical framework to understand the concepts consumerism, conspicuous consumption and the leisure class.

The term 'leisure class' was coined by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). In his introductory chapter Veblen explains the evolution of cultural class systems along broad historical lines. In what he calls "early barbarian culture", "the distinction between classes is very rigorously observed" (Veblen 1). By barbarian culture Veblen means the "feudal and tribal societies" (Veblen 1) – societies that succeeded the pre-historical savage society, the primitive society which is the "lower stage of barbarism". The leisure class was not fully developed within the lower stage of barbarism. In the later

stage of barbarism, however, something like a leisure class evolved in a different form. Veblen describes this forerunner of the leisure class as “comprising the noble and the priestly classes, together with much of their retinue” (Veblen 2). Thus, for Veblen, members of the leisure class belong to the upper class, the wealthiest members of society who occupy higher positions. Veblen points out that, in barbarian culture “the occupations of the class are correspondingly diversified”, and suggests that, as a result, employment within the leisure class differs as well: one can hold a position of a priest or one can occupy a position of an officer in warfare. But these occupations have “a common characteristic of being non-industrial” (Veblen 2). Industrial jobs, such as manual labor, are done by the lower class.

Veblen spends so much time describing his concept of “barbarian society” because it “shows the usages, motives, and circumstances out of which the institution of the leisure class has arisen” (Veblen 3). In barbarian society, Veblen argues, “there is a differentiation of function” and this is how the distinctions within classes occurred (Veblen 3). At the same time, “the exemption of the superior class from work” was not yet evident enough to justify the term ‘leisure class’. Distinction in employment between men and women was irrelevant in the lower stage of barbarian culture. Women were “held to those employments out of which industrial occupations occurred” (Veblen 3). Men fulfilled more prestigious occupations, such as “warfare, hunting, sports, and devout observance” (Veblen 3).

The particular society Veblen refers to as the leisure class is the upper class in the United States. Like in the upper classes in barbarian cultures, it was common in the American leisure class for men to occupy a non-industrial occupation, such as for instance in the governmental or in warfare, where a member of the leisure class would fulfill the function of officer. So, the leisure class refers to the upper class, elite, who dominate society and have a high-status and position in society.

Veblen goes on to examine the lifestyle of the leisure class, how they live and dress; he also comments on their everyday activities. The men are in business or government, and by occupying such positions, members of the leisure class wield power over the lower classes, and express their high-standing within their society.

Women in the leisure class have a much lower status. They do not have access to formal power or ways to prove themselves worthy of that within their society. As previously mentioned, Veblen points out that within barbarian culture the first distinction between leisure class and working class arises “between men’s and women’s work in the lower stages of barbarism” (Veblen 22). The occupation of women consists of house-keeping, taking care of the children and their husbands. Furthermore, Veblen argues that the earliest form of ownership begins with “the ownership of the women by men who are capable of doing so” (Veblen 23).

In barbarian culture women are “useful as trophies” (Veblen 23). As Veblen points out, women are taken captive in particular situations such as in warfare and men are obligated to win them back (Veblen 23). In the American leisure class of the early twentieth century, this mechanism is mimicked metaphorically, resulting in “ownership – marriage” and households in which the male figure is the head of the family (Veblen 23). Not only are men the head of the household, but they practically own everything: the houses, cars, their wives, even the dresses their wives wear. The material goods owned by men are the measurements of his wealth. Material goods also include the wife who has the function of displaying the status of her husband in society, particularly within the leisure class.

Apart from developing the idea of the ‘leisure class’ Thorstein Veblen developed the concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’. Veblen argues that “any highly organized industrial community ultimately rests on pecuniary strength” (Veblen 84). By ‘pecuniary strength’ Veblen refers to the financial wealth of society’s members. When the financial state of a man

is well established he displays his pecuniary strength in order “to gain and retain a good name” within the society he lives in and this is accomplished by “leisure and a conspicuous consumption of luxurious and extravagant goods” (Veblen 84). According to Veblen, “conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentlemen of leisure” (Veblen 75). The term conspicuous consumption refers to the notion of displaying one’s wealth by purchasing valuable goods, dressing well and also by engaging in leisure activities. In order to keep up one’s social standing, reputation and a positive image among the leisure class members, it is not sufficient to only possess wealth and power but one also has to exhibit it to impress the other members of the leisure class. The purchase of expensive goods and living a lavish life also signals membership of the leisure class. The result of this superficial and frivolous behavior is a waste of time and money, according to Veblen. All that the leisure class cares about is their appearance and how they are perceived by others. Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out in the introduction to *The House of Mirth* that the only thing that is significant for the leisure class is the “flaunting of the fact that they have limitless money to spend” (Wharton ix). It is insignificant for the leisure class what kind of value the purchased goods have or how special the goods are for an individual, as long as they are able to show them off to one another. Acquaintances among each other take part in this by throwing extravagant parties in their extravagant mansions, dressing in most expensive clothes, giving expensive presents, all in order to display their wealth and power.

To understand the society of the early twentieth century, in particular the leisure class and their way of life one must also take into consideration the historical context of the early twentieth century. The American consumer culture originates in the late nineteenth-century. The Civil War between the Union of Northern states and the Southern Confederate states took place from 1861 until 1865. The Civil War was the most destructive and the bloodiest war in the American history. After, the country experienced many changes during the Reconstruction

Era (1867-1877), first and foremost in the wake of the emancipation of former slaves, but also in terms of economic expansion, which resulted in industrialization, urbanization and new waves of immigration. Moreover, cultural changes occurred during the Reconstruction Era which resulted in mass production, and this led to consumer culture.

American born citizens from the countryside, as well as immigrants from Europe moved to big cities, especially New York, in order to find employment. Henderson and Olasiji pose, the “push and pull hypothesis”, suggesting that mass migration occurs when people are no longer satisfied with the economic, political, and social conditions in their homeland and move to another country where the conditions are more promising (Henderson and Olasiji 2). The pull factor for immigrants to come to America were the better economic, political and social conditions; particularly the economic conditions attracted many immigrants. Due to the employment opportunities and the rapid economic expansion, immigrants were able to find good jobs and realize their ‘American Dream’.

The ‘American Dream’ was “apparently coined by James Truslow Adams” in his book *The Epic of America* in 1931 (Cullen 4). The definition of the American Dream given by James Truslow Adams is as follows: the American Dream is the dream of a land in which life is “better, richer, and happier for all our citizens of every rank and which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world” (Cullen 4). It is a dream for every citizen of America to be able to achieve success through hard work and determination.

As Meyer points out: “the American economy had completed a transformation from rural to urban and from agriculture to manufacturing” (Meyer 731). As a result, the country experienced a decline in agriculture, whereas the manufacturing industry grew during the Reconstruction Era. After the discovery of coal, gold, iron, also the building of railroads took place. A resonance of this novel can be seen in Elmer Moffatt, Undine’s first and fourth

husband from Apex, who becomes wealthy by investing and engaging in railroad business. As a result of the economic expansion society experiences dramatic changes. One new addition to the American society is the emergence of a class of 'nouveau riche' or 'new money'. In contrast to 'old money', the wealth of the 'new rich' is acquired within the same generation or by their parents who belong to a lower class; 'old money' refers to the upper class gentry or elite who have inherited their wealth. However, both social classes have several things in common. One of the most significant common aspects is that both classes are referred to as the 'leisure class'.

Not only did the economic expansion of the country pave the way for the development of this new class in American society, it also affected women and changed their social and cultural role. As mentioned in the previous paragraph women in particular play a significant role in displaying their husbands' wealth and power. According to Veblen, "the duties of vicarious leisure and consumption devolve upon the wife" (Veblen 80-81). Veblen argues, women's prescribed role is that of a conspicuous consumer: she is the one who consumes the material goods and men are the providers and breadwinners. In the leisure class, women are expected to display their husband's wealth by engaging in social activities and also by dressing in most fashionable and expensive clothes. In the following I will discuss Undine Spragg in the context of Veblen's approach to gender and conspicuous consumption, focusing on how young women in the patriarchic society of the US in the early twentieth century are the chattel of men, who are obliged to make themselves as beautiful as possible to retain their social status.

Chapter 2: Men Act and Women Exhibit

Undine's desire to climb up the social ladder is not only her own; it also represents the desire of the early twentieth century female members of the leisure class in the United States.

Female members of the leisure class in the early twentieth century were expected to marry a man of high financial and cultural status in order to preserve their prosperous lifestyle. Also after marriage, women had to meet the requirements of their ornamental function; they were expected to display their husband's wealth and retain their beauty as long as possible. In contrast to other female characters in the novel, Undine's course of action is different. Her many failed marriages are unlike the struggle of most women, because she does not see her marriages as eternal, but as stepping stones to even better matches. The second chapter focuses on Undine Spragg in the context of Veblen's approach to gender and conspicuous consumption. It shows how Undine cleverly negotiates a situation in which young women in a patriarchic society are the chattel of men, who need to make themselves as beautiful as possible to retain their social status.

Before Undine shakes it up, the establishment of gender roles in *The Custom of the Country* is very clear: men are the ones who take care of business matters, who work or go "down town", as Mrs. Spragg refers to it (16). They are the financial source of the household and female characters in the novel are supposed to keep up their extravagant appearances and maintain their social standing. Wharton portrays the female characters in the novel as completely dependent on their husbands or fathers in almost every aspect and most importantly in financial matters.

Charles Bowen, a kind of sociologist and narratorial voice in the novel, argues why women are so ignorant when it comes to the business life of men. He claims that it is the fault of the man who does not share his business life with his wife. Charles Bowen is an omniscient narrator, and a character in *The Custom of the Country*, a friend of Laura Fairford (Ralph

Marvell's sister), who observes his surroundings. He is well acquainted with the other characters in the novel from the leisure class. It is as if Bowen is a social analyst in the novel who comments on the characters and on society itself. In particular he comments on the ignorance of women about the work of their husbands, suggesting that this ignorance is the "whole problem of the American marriage" (205). The fact that women have no clue about the occupation of their husbands is according to Bowen, the reason why men look down on their wives. Furthermore, Bowen points out that it is men's fault, because they presume women have no interest in their business life and in their occupation.

Mrs. Fairford exemplifies the "the whole problem of the American marriage" when she says Undine would be "bored to death" if Ralph decided to tell her about his work (206). However, if Undine, who has a natural business instinct, would have been involved in her husband's business, she would probably have succeeded. Undine is well aware of the fact that the only thing she has to valorize is her beauty. Her appearance is her only marketable strength. She uses her beauty for her "social advancement through a series of marriages by manipulating men to get what she wants" (Pennell 38).

Undine's approach to men is similar to the perception of women by men. She seeks out and seduces men who are capable of giving her what she wants. As such she turns around the idea that males are natural subjects and females are objects, whenever this seems profitable to her. She does not care much for the appearances of men as they do care about her beauty. The only thing that matters to Undine is their wealth and status. When, at one point, she has no penny to spend, she finds her way back by selling her valuable pearls, which she received as a gift. When she decides to sell Chelles' antique tapestries to Moffatt, Undine knows that she will catch his attention by making a deal with him, but she also makes the deal because she knows that he is interested in antique. Explaining to Undine how business works

would not be difficult for men, but it would create a threat for them, because even just using her natural business instinct she is able to acquire power over them.

According to Bowen, Undine is the “monstrously perfect result of the system”: she has no idea where the money she spends comes from and how much effort it takes to earn it, she only thinks in terms of finance, creating more value through appearances. To achieve her social dream Undine uses her significant possessions and these possessions, according to Sassoubre, are “her beauty, her husbands, and later her son Paul” (Sassoubre 696). Undine’s beauty is her main strength enabling her to accomplish her desires. She knows how to illuminate her beauty by dressing in beautiful gowns that complement her beauty for the male gaze.

Furthermore, her personality is another strength which she possesses. Undine is capable of adapting herself to men; for instance, with her second husband Ralph she acts very innocent, sweet at times, and she is very fresh looking. She knows that these qualities are appealing to Ralph. She knows how to read people, in particular men. When she is in Paris with Peter von Degen she is very aware that she is sexually very appealing to Peter. Finally, Undine’s last possession is her son for whom she asks a great amount of money from Ralph after their divorce. Ralph is unable to pay her that amount of money in exchange to keep Paul with him and eventually she gets Paul. So, Undine’s beauty, character qualities as well as the people dear to her are a way for Undine to obtain whatever she wants. Furthermore, as Sassoubre points out “Undine collects and exchanges people instead of objects” (Sassoubre 696). Whenever, she sees an opportunity of using someone to get closer to achieving her social dream she does so without blinking an eye; for instance, she uses her parents to relocate to New York in order to gain access to the New York upper class, and she uses her third husband Raymond de Chelles to get recognition from the aristocracy.

When Undine is invited to a dinner party at the Fairford house, she feels very excited because the host is one of the most well-known members of the leisure class. Undine perceives this invitation as an opening to her new society in New York. She is determined to make an excellent impression on her new friends and demands from her father, Mr. Spragg, to buy her a new dress regardless of her many dresses hanging in the closet. As Veblen, argues “decency still requires the wife to consume some goods conspicuously for the reputability of the household and its head” (Veblen 83). Undine’s conspicuous consumption benefits the social status of the whole household. So, it is imposed on women to consume conspicuously in the interest of the head of the household. However, it is ironic that it is not Mr. Spragg who wants Undine to purchase a new dress for the dinner party, but it is Undine and her mother who insist on this. This is because Undine barter her own beauty with more ambition than her father. Because Undine is well aware of the fact that her beauty and appearance are her strength and her chance to enter the leisure class society of New York.

According to Veblen, women are considered to be “chattels of their husbands, as they were chattels of their fathers” (Veblen 55). Veblen means that men see women, including everything women own and wear, as their property.

In Undine’s case it is different. It is true that Undine as well as the other female characters are treated as a chattel, but Undine rejects the idea of being property of any man. Although she does display herself as an ornament, she always makes sure this enhances her own power. When she is asked to pose for a well-known painter among the leisure class, Mr. Popple, she feels honored and privileged, especially when everyone is astonished by the result. Undine is fond of her painting and “glanced up at it with a smile of conscious merit” (196). This is Undine’s way of displaying her beauty to the other members of the society.

Undine craves the attention she receives from men, because she knows that by displaying her beauty she will be adored by many men, and will gain a degree of power over

them. Undine proves this when she rejects her third husband's Raymond's traditional values. She refuses to stay in their castle outside of Paris, instead wanting to continue her former social engagements as a married woman. However, Raymond imposes on her the French traditions and values in which a married woman should not go anywhere without her husband. Undine refuses to listen to him and does as she pleases by engaging in her leisure activities.

From the very start Undine realized that her father was not financially capable of offering her the extravagant life she desires. So soon after she and her parents moved to New York she immediately started her quest for a suitable, financially well-established husband from a prestigious family. Throughout the novel, she succeeds in her every marriage goal she sets, and when a marriage does not develop as she desires Undine leaves everything behind and resumes her quest for her next husband.

Undine's own stylish looks and her ornamental appearance represent the demands for women in the consumer culture. Women exhibit their beauty in order to succeed on the marriage market, similar to consumer goods which are showcased on the business market. They have an ornamental function for the spectatorship of potential buyers. Undine's approach to marriage is as "an economic contract" (Kiloran 70). She is well aware of the power of her ornamental beauty and what it can accomplish for her in terms of marriage. Her first marriage is to Elmer Moffatt from her birthplace Apex. She divorces him because he fails to provide her with the extravagant life she desires, and she senses she could obtain a better match. Elmer keeps appearing in her life again in New York. Undine and her parents are worried that Elmer will not keep silent about Undine's past. However, he agrees to remain silent if Undine is willing to introduce him to influential members of the leisure class, another business deal Undine is happy to seize.

She marries her second husband Ralph Marvell, a member of 'old New York', not long after she moves there. She manages to make Ralph fall in love with her by acting very

innocent and sweet. Soon after her marriage to Ralph Undine realizes that he has no personal wealth. So, in a way they both made a false deal, exchanging seeming innocence for seeming wealth. She becomes frustrated and bored by Ralph's shortage of money, even though he tries to provide for her financially as best he can. Still, Undine is not content with Ralph's additional income and decides to leave her child and Ralph behind and travels to Paris with one of her admirers Peter von Degen, the extravagant Clare's husband. Meanwhile, Elmer and Ralph venture into a business deal that is profitable for both parties and for Undine. While in Paris she enjoys the time with Peter. She receives several letters from New York saying that her husband is ill, however, Undine chooses to ignore them. Peter and Undine spend some time out of the spotlight and when they return to New York in order for her to get a divorce he leaves her. Undine is excluded from the society and retreats to her parents in Malibron "brooding over possibilities of escape" (371).

Undine manages to escape from her misery and decides to sell the pearl necklace Peter had given her. Her first thought is to return to Paris where she again meets with her former admirer aristocrat Raymond de Chelles. Undine and Raymond get married after Ralph shoots himself which makes Undine a widow. After a while she feels trapped in her marriage with Raymond and his traditional way of living. In Paris, her first husband Elmer again enters Undine's life setting "her blood beating with curiosity" (535). Elmer is now a wealthy self-made man, one of the influential people in high society. Undine sees a more suitable match in Elmer for herself and proposes to have an affair with her now-rich ex-husband. But Elmer refuses and suggests marriage instead. Eventually, Undine agrees to marry because his market value has gone up, so now he is an entirely new business proposition to Undine. For a moment it seems that Undine has accomplished her social dreams in terms of wealth and high social status. However, just before the end, Undine realizes that there is one thing she could never accomplish, "something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy

for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife" (594). Thus her new aim is to become an Ambassador's wife. She considers this is out of her reach because she is a divorcée, but at the same time it is a new ambition she embarks upon realizing. This thought contradicts the sense that everything is coming full circle when she and Elmer are arranging a second marriage with each other. When Undine remarries Elmer one assumes that she is going back to her original choice. However, rather than staying true to one man, her desire to become the wife of an Ambassador suggests she stays true to her social dream and her desire to achieve more than she has.

To be able to accomplish her ambition Undine makes sure her beauty is noticed by everyone, in particular by men. She treats her beauty as an economic benefit she is willing to exchange for a union with a wealthy man. Undine is always prepared to sell her beauty to obtain a more luxurious life. So, in a way she prostitutes her beauty in order to achieve her dream. Undine does so more than other women in the novel and she is successful. She objectifies her beauty in the same way men objectify women and their beauty. Undine treats her husbands and men as objects as well. As Orlando points out, Undine "takes charge of her objectification" (Orlando 58). She makes sure she benefits from her beauty by posing both as the product and as the saleswoman on the market. According to Montgomery, Undine is comparable to a stockbroker in Wall Street. Montgomery argues that Undine is "aggressive and ruthless", she goes from one man to another "as a businessman buys and sells stocks" (Montgomery 60).

She is perceived as an opportunist, even a prostitute because she treats men as stepping stones, while men can be perfectly virtuous when they treat her the same. When Peter von Degen has an affair with Undine in Paris, his wife Clare is well aware of this, but she accepts it and stays married to him. Clare's acknowledgement and acceptance of her husband's adultery is due the fact that she rejects the idea of divorce. Moreover, Clare is too accustomed

to the luxurious life that Peter provides for her. Women are thus obliged to tolerate such behavior, because of the financial support of their husbands and the traditional customs, which forbid them to leave an unhappy marriage.

As Montgomery argues, in *The Custom of the Country* Wharton “hits out forcefully at the subservient role assigned to women of the upper class” (60). Even though Undine is an opportunist and a materially spoiled young woman, who defines herself in terms of property, she is the only woman who is empowered in the struggle for wealth and status. Undine makes very good use of the male gaze by exploiting herself and her beauty to men.

Just as the male gaze objectifies women by their beauty, Undine objectifies men by their financial value. As Singley explains, the term ‘male gaze’ refers to “not a gaze of an individual man but an effect of the male/subject – female/object structuring of the symbolic order which constitutes women as a pragmatic object” (Singley 262). The male gaze looks at women through the perspective of men, representing women as objects of desire, “something which men can own and define” (Pennell 38). What counts in the male gaze is the appearance of a woman; her beauty, dress style, and the way she displays herself. Furthermore, women’s market value is also significant for the male gaze, thence the perception of women as their chattel, a woman for a man has value as a possession. Undine’s approach to men is similar to the ‘male gaze’, her assessment of men is objectifying in the sense that it treats them as having a particular economic value in a trade economy, which is also why she feels justified to exchange them if that improves their and her own market value.

Chapter 3: Worth Dictated by Beauty and Dress

“Dress shabbily and they will remember the dress; dress impeccably and they will remember the woman” (Brescia 97). Undine represents herself to the public eye by making sure that her appearance is beautiful, rare, and expensive. Thereby she makes sure that she as a woman is memorable to men as well as her dresses are memorable to women. She even tries to put herself on an equal scale with Empress Josephine by mimicking her look. Fashion for Undine is a tool as well as a catalyst in fulfilling her desire for power; the more dresses she purchases, and the more she achieves to get closer to her dream, the more she desires. Undine owns many gowns, however, she continues to purchase the latest fashion, financed by her husbands and her father. For every occasion she insists on buying a new dress, even the unworn “dinner-dresses” hanging in her closet “seem disgustingly common-place” to her (20). According to Veblen, in the leisure class “nothing can be worn which is out of date” and “no outer garment may be worn more than once” (Veblen 4). Wearing last season’s dress is evidence of inability to purchase a new dress. Fashion keeps evolving and Undine is eager to dress beautifully and in the latest fashion in order to display her good looks. This final chapter elaborates on women’s dresses, in particular Undine’s. Furthermore this chapter discusses women’s dress styles and the function of clothing as an index of wealth and social standing.

Female members of the leisure class have an ornamental function, as pointed out previously. Not only their looks have an ornamental function, but also their whole appearances, in particular their dresses are the key index of wealth and social standing. One of the key products of conspicuous consumption is the dress, which has an economic factor as Veblen writes, and functions as “an index of wealth of its wearer” which is the wife, and by implication the husband (Veblen 2). He is the earner of the money and the one who purchases the dresses and finances everything else needed. In Undine’s case it is also her father, Mr. Spragg, who finances her dresses before she ties the knot with her numerous husbands.

It is Mr. Spragg who buys Undine's dress for the dinner party where she meets her second husband Ralph. At first Mr. Spragg refuses to purchase Undine a new gown and tells her to wear one of her old dresses hanging in the closet. Mr. Spragg's refusal is due to the fact that he has not much to spend, but Undine does not care about her father's financial issues. She succeeds as she usually does in guilt-tripping her father to buy her a new dress, saying: "Oh, well - if you want me to look like a scarecrow, and not get asked again, I've got a dress that'll do perfectly" (31). Undine insists on buying a new dress because she knows that if she dresses impeccably that is how the leisure class society will remember her and accept her among themselves. She knows that as a new member of the society she has to look flawless in order to be accepted, loved and admired by everyone. Undine is well aware of being under scrutiny and she knows that she is being observed by male as well as by female members of the leisure class.

Undine and dresses are not only the objects of scrutiny, she also engages in this kind of spectatorship herself. At the opera performance, during the intermission "Undine starts to look for familiar faces" (61). As Montgomery points out, "without hesitation or a shadow of self-consciousness she engages in scrutiny of other women" by observing the other boxes in the opera house (Montgomery 133). However, Undine's active observation is interrupted when she realizes that she is being observed as well "by the neighboring box" (Wharton 62). It is the "bulging stare" of Peter von Degen and the critical scrutiny by his lady companion observing Undine "through her eye-glass closely set with diamonds" (63). Among the members of the leisure class it is a common activity to observe one another and also showcase your fortune during the engagement in leisure class activities, such as visiting the opera. The leisure class observes and judges one another in terms of fashion, whether one is wearing the latest fashion, and sitting arrangements, and whether one has a box seat or not. Through materialistic goods, such as expensive and exclusive clothing, members of the leisure class

shape and express themselves. In Undine's case this is exactly what she implements through her dresses; she postulates her beauty through her beautiful gowns.

Later too, when she knows that Ralph is unable to buy her more dresses, she insists on purchasing more anyway: "I understand how little we've got to spend; but I left New York without a rag" (167). Even though, Undine possesses numerous beautiful gowns from the latest fashion she desires to buy more in Paris. She treats her beauty and her dresses as a business card when it comes to showing off her appearance.

Even as a child Undine was accustomed to admiring herself and playing "dress up" in one of her mother's Sunday skirts and "play lady" in front of a mirror (22). Already as a child Undine was socialized by her environment to behave as a jewel, as well to wear them. She practiced being a lady from a young age and she begins to appreciate dresses and jewels in the way these attributes compliment her beauty. Undine acts as if she is a jewel herself, because she is aware of her beauty and knows exactly how to exhibit and illuminate her beauty by wearing beautiful gowns.

One of the highlights in the novel is when Undine is invited to the Driscoll ball, not long after her divorce from Ralph. She has put a great effort into her dress: "she was to go as Empress Josephine, after the Prudhon portrait in the Louvre" (198). Undine always tries to look her best on occasions like these, because she knows this is the way to catch the male gaze: "what could be more delightful than to feel that, while all the women envied her dress, the men did not so much as look at it?" (228). On the contrary, men had all the admiration for Undine's beauty. The men in the novel approach women's dress different than the women do. The male gaze goes through the dress instead of just observing the dress itself, it does not consciously register it, but instead values the woman in economic and sexual terms. Thereby the male gaze, observes the woman from outside as well as inside. A woman in a beautiful

dress is perceived as a sexual object for pleasure and as an object which can be used, to display wealth.

Throughout *The Custom of the Country* dress is perceived as an index of wealth if it is of the latest fashion, and is made of the best materials. The details of the accessories around the actual dress also contribute to the overall value of the wearer; the hat, the lace, the artificial flowers used on the dress and the accessories, such as a brooch which decorates the dress. The male gaze does not take notice of all these details, he only sees the dress and accessories as a wrap around a jewel and focuses only on the jewel. Women, on the contrary, observe other women's dresses by paying attention to the details of a dress; the material of the dress, accessories worn to match it and whether the dress complements the wearer's figure and whether it is suitable for her to wear a particular dress.

Dress has culturally been read as one of the most significant indicators of people's – especially women's – beauty, personality and social status. First, clothing serves as a cover-up for the bodies and second, it displays culture, economic standing, identity, and social values. Dresses as well as other clothing items, suits, shoes, hats, jackets display identity and can be self-transforming for an individual. Especially a dress can transform a female instantly and shed a completely different light on her appearance. A dress of a woman is symbolic of who she is; the fabric and the design of a dress indicate the social standing, tastes and character of its wearer.

Men's clothing is often more subtle and practical with neutral dark colors, such as grey, black, brown, and dark blue, whereas women's clothing is beautiful but impractical. For instance, one of the most impractical garments is the corset, as Veblen points out “the corset is, in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject's vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work” (Veblen 172). Lowering the practical value of women as members of the workforce is common for leisure

class women because that stressed their wealth. From a young age women in the leisure class are brought up for the purpose of marrying a wealthy man in order to embellish their lives. This is the custom of the country; women are beautiful jewels beside their husbands who are the head of the household. Women's only occupation within that is to consume goods conspicuously in order to keep up the appearance. Not only the corset but other the features of women's fashion, such as hats and shoes restrict women from being suitable for work.

Charlotte Gilman also addresses the unpracticality of women's clothing. Gilman points out that the gear of men is "most modified by physical conditions" whereas "the clothing of women is most modified by psychic conditions" (Gilman 11). The S-shaped gowns and constricting corsets restricted women to limited activity in everyday life and also "their personal comfort was of no importance to anyone" as long as they looked good (Gilman 11). Men are accustomed to comfortable, practical clothing whereas women are obliged to keep up their appearance by wearing expensive and extravagant gowns, decorated with jewels.

Women are treated as jewels in a box by their fathers and husbands. They are restricted from business life to the home and their everyday activities consist of gossiping, occasional shopping trips, and leisure class activities. However, in the early twentieth century the restriction of women to the private sphere changed. According to Montgomery, women began to indulge themselves in the "increasingly public nature of leisure enjoyed in heterosocial settings, such as restaurants, cabarets, or skating clubs," this gave women more freedom and access to the public sphere (Montgomery 11).

Moreover, the newly established department stores, inspired by the Parisian "Bon Marche", also contributed to the emancipation of women due to the fact that women changed their private sphere for the public sphere; they went shopping in new established department stores (Miller 21). The department stores were essential for displaying consumer goods and attracting consumers, particularly in women's fashion. The consumer goods are exhibited in

the most attractive and eye-catching ways for the consumer. The department stores of the early twentieth century were aimed at women of the leisure class because they were the ones who were able to afford the time and the money to purchase the clothes on sale, and in particular they were also capable of participating in conspicuous consumption. They had no occupation nor education to engage in other activities such as work. As mentioned, men kept their business life to themselves and did not involve their wives in their business affairs. Instead, the materially oriented shopping culture was very appealing to women. Undine is an example of this new public shopping culture, almost nothing makes her happier than her precious dresses: “at last she felt herself alive and young again, and it became a joy to look in her glass and to try on her new hats and dresses” (401). In a way shopping became women’s job; men accumulated wealth whereas women spent it on shopping in order to put the wealth of the husband in evidence.

This way women were able to indulge in glamour as Undine does by purchasing the latest fashion, luxurious goods and in addition this paves the way for women to transform their lives. Shopping, moreover, gave women a reason to leave home and experience and explore the public sphere. Undine experiences and explores the public life every time she has the chance. For Undine shopping is a business ingredient, like her marriages. While in Paris she is even willing to stay in a “stuffy little hotel” with Ralph so she can save some money to buy new dresses. She experiences buying dresses and bargaining for them as a business deal, and feels satisfied when she triumphs through her bargaining skills; “you ought to see how I’ve beaten them down” (167). So, fashion is a significant aspect in Undine’s life, she gets the desired attention of men and also social status by exhibiting herself and her beauty.

However, the fascination for glamour and luxurious goods and the purchase of these material goods do not only make women good consumers but it also means that they are perceived as commodities themselves. To look flawless and beautiful in a dress that

complements women's physique is the central aim of dressing. For Undine packaging and marketing her beauty is her job, and dresses are her main tool. She attracts attention wherever she appears by exhibiting her beautiful features, such as her reddish hair, her expressive, grey eyes and she engages as much as possible in leisure activities and dresses as extravagant as she can.

As Veblen points out it is "our apparel which is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance" (Veblen 77). Clothes are the first evidence, the first thing others observe in public or during a leisure activity. There is a difference in how dress functions for males and females. For men their clothing is "plain, utilitarian, and static", according to Shannon (Shannon 4). Men do not pay too much attention to their clothing, as long as it is practical, neat and does not restrict them of any movement. This phenomenon is also pointed out by Shannon "men are believed to exhibit little interest in decoration or style, dressing instead in for comfort and utility" (Shannon 5). On the contrary, women have more interest for decoration and style of a dress. Because of all the conspicuous and eye-catching features men consider a dress as an economic factor of their wealth which is displayed by their wives.

For Undine, as a female member of the leisure class dressing up is significant due to the fact that it displays her best quality, her beauty which she uses to climb up the social ladder. She attracts attention to her beauty by displaying her best features in S-shaped gowns. She is keen on leaving the best impression of herself and expects the best of everything, for instance when she first gets acquainted with the Marvells she asks Mrs. Heeny whether they are "as swell" as Mrs. Heeny has mentioned before and that she "wants the best" (17). Undine assumes that she is entitled to have the best of everything regardless whether it is a dress or her numerous husbands. Moreover, not only does Undine wants the best from others she also always tries to display the best of herself. In order to be loved and admired by the other

members of the leisure class, especially by men. The best Undine can offer the world is her beauty, because she is not educated enough to offer something else. She desires to be surrounded by people who admire her, entertain her and supply her financially.

When Undine gets acquainted with Raymond she attracts his attention by her beauty. However, Madame de Trezac who is well acquainted with the French aristocrat Raymond and his family points out to Undine that she does not fit in his intellectual world due to the fact that she is not educated enough to keep up “it’s not that they don’t admire you - your looks, I mean; they think you beautiful” (541). Undine is struck by Madam de Trezac’s comments and she is determined to improve herself by visiting the Louvre and going to “one or two lectures by a fashionable philosopher” (542). Undine’s attempts to educate herself do not help her: “their expression did not excite the interest she had hoped” everyone in her company already knew the things she had discovered. (542). Soon Undine realizes that her educational effort is not going to work in her advantage. So, she concludes that she has “gone off” and decides to waste no more time in museums or in “lecture-halls” and goes back to spending hours “at the dress-maker’s and gave up the rest of the day to the scientific cultivation of her beauty” (542). This is one of Undine’s specialties, she is capable of adapting herself to any occasion as long as it is suitable for her and as long as she can profit from it. Whether she accomplishes her ultimate ambition or not, Undine can always count on her beauty and on her dresses to illuminate her beauty: “success is beauty and romance to her” (554).

Conclusion

“She wanted, passionately and persistently, two things which she believed should subsist together in any well-ordered life: amusement and respectability” (354). The protagonist of *The Custom of the Country* lives for entertainment and her great ambition, high social standing. Undine is a woman who will continue to outbid herself in every marriage negotiation and social advancement, even if she does succeed in her achievements, she will never stop. It is about the game for her, she never feels content and longs for more, because if she is happy and has enough she would have to end her game. Undine is in this sense a business woman for whom the sky is the limit. This is even true until the last word of the novel where she intends to pursue a career of becoming Ambassador’s wife. She seeks every opportunity to realize her social advancement. With her fourth and apparently last husband Undine acts like a stock broker. The self-made, railroad billionaire Elmer is more attractive for Undine because his market value has gone up. This is also true for Undine herself. Her own market value has gone up as well; she now belongs to the high society of New York and to French aristocracy.

Her pro-active policy of marriage and divorce resembles a kind of ‘survival of the fittest’ race to the top. As such she in a way forms a critique on her society which can be seen as a characteristic of Darwinian theory. Darwin argues that the fittest and the ones who adapts the best will survive. This is what Undine stands for, she is a “dominant figure” unlike Ralph who stays true to Undine and his traditional way of living (Fisher, Gianquitto 110). Undine possess the talent to survive, a necessary Darwinian talent and an instinct to adapt to every situation.

Undine fulfills her position in her society as a woman who knows what she wants and does everything in her power to achieve her dream. Undine negotiates a situation in which young women in a patriarchic society are the chattel of men, who need to make themselves as

beautiful as possible to retain their social status. Instead of being treated as a stepping stone by men Undine turns the roles around and treats men as stepping stones. Though she is completely dependent on her husbands and on her father in almost every aspect and most importantly in financial matters, she manages to get what she wants without being treated as chattel by the male figures in her life. Undine's approach to men is similar to the perception of women by men. She seeks out and seduces men who are capable of giving her what she wants. Her business-like vision and her beauty help her along the way. She illuminates her beauty by dressing beautifully in the latest fashion to compliment her body for the male gaze and then manages to make that pay off for herself rather than just for men.

By being ruthless and focused entirely on material wealth and gain Undine is successful in the patriarchic society she is a member of. In fact, she is much more successful than the custom of the country allows, despite the fact that she achieves her success by perfecting her command of the rules of the game. She manages to fulfill her dream and continue her marriage career even when it seems that she has realized her dream by marrying into old money, an aristocrat, and finally a billionaire. Undine resumes her quest for happiness and social progress. She is like a diamond that shines under the pressure of the patriarchic society, making her extremely rich and powerful, even though that society does not mean her to profit from her own success.

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