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WHARTON'S WOMEN IN THE REEF AND THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT

WHARTON'S WOMEN IN THE REEF AND THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

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Criticism of Edith Wharton's novels has typically been more concerned with Wharton's male characters than her women characters. This thesis discusses the women in Wharton's The Reef (1912) and The Custom of the Country (1913) and analyses the ways in which the male characters perceive them. All three of the major women characters in these novels--Sophy Viner, Anna Leath, and Undine Spragg--are considerably more complex than the male characters perceive them to be. The simplistic ways in which the male characters view them are self-serving and cause tremendous difficulties for these women.

DEDICATION

To my husband, Curt Hadley, whose patience, support, and understanding frees me to do my work.

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INTRODUCTION

Criticism of Edith Wharton's fiction has typically dealt more extensively with her male characters than her female ones, and when critics have discussed women characters, they have tended to rely heavily on male characters' perceptions of them. For instance, in his discussion of The Reef, Geoffrey Walton accepts George Darrow's view of Anna Leath, saying that Anna "nags on and on to the verge of hysteria" and ultimately concludes, based on George's refusal to give Anna details of his affair with Sophy, that: "Darrow's moral stature has been growing as [Anna's] has declined, and he ends with a dignified repentence as well as an implied condemnation of her" (68-69). Walton's tone suggests that this attitude toward Anna is appropriate, that George's viewpoint is basically correct.

The effect of this tendency to view women characters from male characters' perspectives, as the above quote suggests, is to discourage any serious consideration of these women as complex, carefully drawn characters. Hence, for instance, there are many detailed critical studies of The Custom of the Country's Ralph Marvell, but until recently, relatively few of Undine Spragg. The exceptions are often the type of summary, dismissive opinion most notoriously exemplified by Edmund

Wilson, who calls Undine "the prototype in fiction of the 'gold-digger,' of the international cocktail bitch" (Ammons 101). Clearly this stereotype allows for no consideration of Undine as a three-dimensional character who, whether or not she has any redeeming qualities, may at least have complex motivations and needs.

Recently, critics such as Elizabeth Ammons, Mary Suzanne Schriber, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff have recognized the inappropriateness of viewing Wharton's women characters primarily through her male characters' eyes. Ammons, far from accepting Newland Archer's opposing views of May Welland and Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence, notes that he "mythicizes May after her death, and he does so out of fear of the dark, 'grown up' woman," Ellen (152). Similarly, Schriber discusses how Wharton's female characters' "behavior is often misconstrued" or "rendered invisible and therefore unappreciated if it in any way outstrips ordinary expectations of woman" (189). And Wolff astutely says of Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, "Both crave the reflecting reassurance of the mirror to assuage an otherwise intolerable inner loneliness, and both are immensely vulnerable to the standards of others" (248). These are not qualities which would be apparent for either character, if considered solely through the eyes of Lawrence Selden and Ralph Marvell or Raymond de Chelles.

Wolff's ability to look beyond male characters' perceptions and into the text itself also enables her to say of Undine, "she is not intended to be perceived as intrinsically monstrous: too much effort has gone into making the reader

intermittently sympathetic with her" (255). Our sympathy comes from understanding Undine's thoughts and the limitations placed on her, the first of which Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles are not privy to, and the second of which they do not perceive as a problem for a woman.

In fact, the interplay between Wharton's women characters as they are depicted in the texts, and the male characters' often erroneous perceptions of them, is what gives Wharton's fiction much of its interest. The House of Mirth, for example, would lose much of its poignancy if Lawrence Selden did not consistently judge Lily on the basis of such things as seeing her leave Gus Trenor's house at night, while the reader knows of Lily's innocence. And much of Wharton's irony is attributable to the mismatch between the reality of a woman character's motivation and attitudes and a male character's view of her, as in The Custom of the Country when Ralph perceives that Undine wants to be rescued from the social "Invaders," while this is precisely the group to which she schemes to belong. Another example of such irony is in The Age of Innocence, where Newland assumes May is ignorant of his feelings for Ellen, while she plots relentlessly to separate him from Ellen.

Nor should the simple facts that Wharton was a woman writer creating these women characters, and that she expressed her concern with her characters' psychological development, be overlooked. In his biography of Wharton, R.W.B. Lewis tells of her assertion to a friend: "'I am never interested in the

misfortunes of my personages, only in their psychological evolution'" (325-26). Ammons has pointed out the difficulties Wharton had in developing empathetic male characters (14). But as a woman, Wharton could and did draw heavily on her own experiences and feelings in her development of women characters: Ellen Olenska, whose love of art, like Wharton's, is criticized by society; Anna Leath, introduced in The Reef as an ever-proper lady whose background sounds so similar to Wharton's; and so on. If Wharton was concerned with her characters' "psychological evolution," she must certainly have been concerned with that of her fictional women as well as her fictional men.

In The Reef and The Custom of the Country, Wharton creates particularly complex women characters and thoroughly explores the ways in which male characters perceive them. The two women of Ethan Frome prove to be quite similar to each other, although Ethan perceives them as opposites. There is Maddie, the young girl who Ethan considers fresh and impressionable, and Zeena, who he perceives as an old woman. Yet Maddie and Zeena are undeveloped characters, refracted through Ethan's, and his male narrator's, eyes. In The Reef, Wharton takes a situation that is similar in its basic elements--two women, one primary male character, in seclusion--and depicts two very complex women. The text shows both Anna and Sophy in a variety of roles and situations which belies George Darrows's simplistic categorization of them into two different "types."

The character of Undine Spragg is also very different

from what the men in her world expect. That Wharton was concerned with depicting a believable, three-dimensional Undine is suggested by the history of this novel's development. Blake Nevius, in his Wharton biography, documents that Wharton had actually started The Custom of the Country by 1908, before she wrote Ethan Frome (160). It has been said that Wharton needed to come to terms with the end of her own marriage before she could complete her novel about divorce.[1] But the way in which she returned to the motif of two women categorized as different types by a man--already dealt with in her 1907 The Fruit of the Tree--suggests that Wharton also needed to work out the issue of two separate, complex women more thoroughly before she was ready to handle such an extremely complicated single-woman character as Undine Spragg.[2]

Because of the setting of The Reef, Wharton could focus on Anna and Sophy without distractions. Then, in The Custom of the Country she could use the entire Western world as her setting, and bring in numerous other characters, without detracting from her depiction of Undine Spragg. Thus the intense psychological study of two women in The Reef may have prepared the way for Wharton's creating Undine.

Undine's story appears to be the successful counterpart to Lily Bart's, in The House of Mirth (1905). Lily descends in society, Undine ascends. But, while she can break into society in some ways, Undine can never overcome the barrier of her sex, which precludes her entering the male world. In this sense, Undine is very much like Anna Leath and Sophy Viner.

The complexity of all three women's characters is denied by the men around them, and this over-simplification effectively makes them outsiders to the male world.

Chapter One: The Reef

Passion is central to The Reef. It is the factor that most strongly connects Anna Leath and Sophy Viner, who are not the opposites George Darrow perceives them to be. Both women struggle to be true to their experiences; Anna, having paid for her silence in the past by losing George, attempts to communicate with him now, and Sophy refuses to deny her feelings for George. Conversely, George uses language as a tool of diplomacy, first as he seduces Sophy, and later as he attempts to downplay that affair to Anna. The two women are under constraints that do not affect George. For them, sexual passion is to be confined to marriage, and both Sophy and Anna suffer when they fail to honor this constraint. But as a man, George can dismiss his affair with Sophy as unimportant. He exempts himself from responsibility by viewing Anna and Sophy in ways that, in his mind, excuse his behavior.

The structure of The Reef suggests the conflict between women's characteristics and men's perceptions. Anna Leath is not directly presented until Book II, and even then she is initially shown through a narrator's eyes. The narrator speculates that "she seemed...to be looking about her with eyes to which, for some intimate inward reason, details long

since familiar had suddenly acquired an unwonted freshness" (81-82). That this "was in fact the exact sensation of which Mrs. Leath was conscious" is then confirmed, and much of the story is henceforth seen from Anna's perspective (82). By starting Book II with a narrator, as well as neglecting to name Anna at first, Wharton distances the reader from her. There is a sense of being still closer to George Darrow's perspective, which dominates the opening of the novel. We are initially shown Anna as he would see her: "a lady," calmly taking in her surroundings (81). The effect is to suggest not only Anna's reserve, but the complexity of her character.

In the same sentence that we are assured of Anna's perspective, she is also named--though as someone else's wife. The use of her married name leads naturally into "Mrs. Leath's" memories of her first marriage. Looking about her at Givré, Anna remembers her attitudes and expectations as a young bride. She had expected love to be a "magic bridge" from the "unreality" of her New York girlhood, into life (86). She had had "romantic associations" about the "chateau" and had expected a "noble and dignified" fate there (82). Elizabeth Ammons, discussing Wharton's use of fairy tales in Ethan Frome and The Reef, points out that Anna's earlier vision of marriage had been a "fantasy," "not of escaping but of passively being freed, being saved, being awakened and reborn into life by the love of a man--the fantasy, in short, of Sleeping Beauty's being awakened by Prince Charming..." (80). But in her life with the sedate Fraser Leath, Anna had found herself "farther than ever removed from the strong joys

and pangs for which she felt herself made," and she had since become used to the house as "the shell of a life slowly adjusted to its dwelling," a place where she was comfortable, though not happy (94, 83).

Anna's renewed way of looking at Givré as she anticipates George's arrival ironically mirrors her perception as a young bride. In trying to look at the house through George's eyes, Anna "seemed to be opening her own eyes upon it after a long interval of blindness" (83). She perceives of the court as "full of a latent life" and feels herself likewise filled with "a latent animation." Despite the disappointments of her first marriage, Anna is capable of anticipating her marriage to George with the same naive eagerness. Ammons explains Anna's perspective as follows: "Fraser Leath failed, but his widow blames the man, not the dream, and therefore looks forward to marriage with her old friend George Darrow." (82-83) Anna's "blindness" was her return to Sleeping Beauty's long sleep as Fraser Leath's wife and then his widow, from which she now expects George to awake her. Her blindness has the additional meaning of the inability to see how the experiences of her first marriage suggest caution in putting her life into a man's hands a second time. Ironically, the "veil" that had always existed between her and life, which Anna believes has now been lifted by George, will be lowered again by his deception (84).

The references to Anna's girlhood are essential to understanding her character.[3] In her parents' world, "people

with emotions were not visited," and Anna felt isolated in her interest in "the passions and sensations" of poetry. Anna became externally "conquered" by this society but developed a "visioned region of action and emotion" that contrasted with her increasing reserve (85). The one-dimensional tag with which George will label her had long ago been put in place; other mothers interpreted her reserve as "ladylike repression," just as George would later note the reticence of his "lady" (86).

As a result of these attitudes, the young Anna Summers had been unable to express her intense emotions to George. When they were together, she would behave coldly, "while hot and cold waves swept over her, and the things she really wanted to say choked in her throat and burned the palms of her hands." When they were apart, Anna would resolve to act differently (87). She wanted to overcome her parents' attitude toward emotions and expression, but was unable to do so; she was bound by a society which ensured that women, as Florence Nightingale said, "'must act the farce of hypocrisy, the lie that they are without passion'" (DeLamotte 217). Now, the adult Anna perceives herself as "not used to strong or full emotions," although she clearly was as a girl and as a young bride (83). She denies having those feelings which her parents' world shunned, even as she remembers several times when her emotions were extremely "full." Anna has conflated her feelings with her behavior in her own mind, so that she now thinks of herself in terms of the person she presents to others.

George's perceptions of the adult Anna also fail to go beyond this external self. His view of her implicitly relies on her coldness toward him as a girl. The novel begins with George's reaction to a telegraph from Anna, telling him to postpone his visit. He assumes "her 'reason', whatever it was, could, in this case, be nothing but a pretext; unless he leaned to the less flattering alternative that any reason seemed good enough for postponing him!" His thoughts continue, "She didn't want him, and had taken the shortest way to tell him so." (The Reef, 8) He is clearly insecure about his relationship with Anna, but rather than considering what his insecurity might suggest about himself, George focuses on Anna's character. He muses, "In such an existence as Mrs. Leath's, at once so ordered and so exposed, he knew how small a complication might assume the magnitude of an 'obstacle'..." (8). But his work keeps them apart for months at a time, and George is indignant that "She flung back the fortnight on his hands as if he had been an idler indifferent to dates, instead of an active young diplomatist who, to respond to her call, had had to hew his way through a very jungle of engagements!" (8) The implication is clear: George must not be inconvenienced in the least, but Anna should let nothing come between herself and a visit from this important man who has made tremendous sacrifices to be with her.

George finds this postponement especially rankling because, as he perceives it, Anna had already "submitted so tamely to the disarrangement of their plans" within the

previous few weeks (8). He is referring to her "family obligations" which had interrupted their reunion. He remembers that, on their last evening together--together also with Anna's step-son Owen and her mother-in-law--"they had had an almost decisive exchange of words" (7). Yet his own memories show that <u>they</u> did not have any plans; he had not told Anna of his "calculations," but simply assumed that she was "walking to him down the years" and "would come straight to where he stood." Anna simply cannot win. George considers her at one moment too cold and reasonable because she has asked him to postpone his visit for, he assumes, a trifling reason; and at the next moment, he silently charges her with failure to use her "ingenuity" to overcome whatever is keeping them apart (8).

Much of George's frustration with Anna appears to stem from his lack of influence on her life thus far.[4] He believes he had missed his chance, when Anna was young, to "put warmth in her veins and light in her eyes: [he] would have made her a woman through and through." He speculates that Anna "was still afraid of life" because she has always been sheltered, and concludes,

> A love like his might have given her the divine gift of self-renewal; and now he saw her fated to wane into old age repeating the same gestures...and perhaps never guessing that, just outside her glazed and curtained consciousness, life rolled away, a vast blackness starred with lights, like the night landscape beyond the windows of the train. (29)

George thinks that without his early influence, Anna must be somehow incomplete. His disdain for her "curtained

consciousness" is ironic in light of George's later attempts to keep Anna ignorant of certain areas of his life, most notably his affair with Sophy Viner. All of these thoughts about Anna occur on the train to Paris, on which George shares a compartment with Sophy. He considers his traveling companion "free without hardness" (29). Finding himself disappointed by his fiance and in the company of a younger woman, George allows himself to compare the two women, to Anna's great disadvantage. This comparison paves the way for his affair with Sophy.

As a girl, Anna loses George because she cannot tell him what he means to her. Soon after George's arrival at Givré, we are told they are happy in each other's presence, "Yet Anna was intensely aware that as soon as they began to talk more intimately they would feel that they knew each other less well." (108) Anna correctly anticipates the same old problem of communication, but this time it is primarily caused by George's deceptiveness, rather than by her reserve. Their first real conversation since his arrival is based on George's interest in letting Anna think he read a letter from her which, in the midst of his affair with Sophy, he had in fact thrown on the fire unopened. Anna persists in trying to discuss this letter, and their misunderstanding about her telegram delaying his visit, because "'Between you and me everything matters,'"--she wants complete understanding between them--and because "she wanted no less than the whole of her happiness." (111) Anna senses that she is an outsider

to much of George's world and perceives of any secrets between them as a threat to her happiness. Her reference to their first romance carries a double meaning that she is as yet unaware of herself: "'It's curious how, in those first days, too, something that I didn't understand came between us.'" (110)

George's ability to have a casual flirtation, even a physical relationship, with another woman while courting her is what Anna couldn't understand in the past and, rather than the ostensible misunderstanding about their correspondence, is the underlying cause of her uneasiness now. Anna's attempt to deal with her perplexity shows that she remembers the lessons of their previous courtship and will not let George go so easily this time. Yet her obtuseness about George's affair indicates that, contrary to the complete understanding Anna claims to want, she is willing to pay the price of ignorance in some areas in order to keep him. When she mentions the pink cloak Owen said he saw at the theatre, Anna shows how accurate her instincts are. But when George does not immediately give her a full confession of his infidelity, Anna dismisses her suspicions (114-15). By denying her perceptions Anna protects herself from fully understanding the truth, even when it appears the truth should be most obvious to her, throughout most of the novel.

Their inability to communicate with each other belies George's earlier visions of rescuing Anna from the memory of her first marriage in which there had been no "communion" (4-5). He assumes this lack of communion, not because of any-

thing Anna says, but because "her very reticence betrayed her" (5). What Anna does not say to him, George takes as evidence of a lack of communion with Fraser. Anna's thoughts about Fraser prove George right, but in their case, Anna is the only one interested in honest communication, while George is snared by his lie about the letter from her which he never read. Even the "deeper feeling of communion" which George believes he and Anna had shared in an earlier meeting is a figment of George's "fancy," and is not based on speech (5).

Once Anna begins to suspect what happened between George and Sophy, her feelings are in constant fluctuation. Richard Lawson says that Anna's real concern is whether or not her fiance is in love with the "other woman":

> Anna, true daughter of her society, can countenance, however reluctantly, George's having sown wild oats. But she fears and dreads the possibility that he might be in love with Sophy, despite his protests to the contrary. (58)

The text, however, does not at all support the idea that Anna could "countenance" this particular sowing of oats. Anna is especially devastated by the fact that George had this affair while he was on the way to her, to persuade her to marry him. She is also unable to accept the idea that George has no responsibility to Sophy. When he says, "there's nothing I can do for her that will help her half so much as your understanding her would," Anna responds, "Nothing you can do for her? You can marry her!" The exchange continues:

> "You certainly couldn't wish her a worse fate!"
> "It must have been what she expected...relied on..." He was silent, and she broke out: "Or what is she? What are you? It's too horrible! On your

> way here...to me..." She felt the tears in her throat and stopped. (The Reef 292)

Anna's view that George should marry Sophy indicates her failure to accept the standard by which men operate in her society; she is as much appalled at his actions as she is at Sophy's.

This is quite different from George's own perspective, by which he considers Sophy unsuitable for Owen but does not seem to have any compunctions about his own status as Anna's fiance.[5] George has already rationalized this double standard by classifying women according to "types." He "had had a fairly varied experience of feminine types, but the women he had frequented had either been pronouncedly 'ladies' or they had not" (25). And then we see George's arrogance (and Wharton's irony) at its height:

> Grateful to both for ministering to the more complex masculine nature, and disposed to assume that they had been evolved, if not designed, to that end, he had instinctively kept the two groups apart in his mind, avoiding that intermediate society which attempts to conciliate both theories of life. (25)

This extremely reductive view of women enables George to enjoy Sophy's sexual "ministering," on the basis of which he categorizes her as "not lady," without perceiving that their affair stigmatizes him in any way. The idea that George "liked his 'ladies' and their rivals to be equally unashamed of showing for exactly what they were" also suggests that George does not like the "rivals," such as Sophy, to attempt to cross over into the other category (25). This is later confirmed by George's "obscure indignation" at Sophy when he

discovers she is engaged to Owen Leath and his "doubt as to the disinterestedness of the woman who tries to rise above her past" (187).[6]

When Anna declines to view George's affair as he does, George changes tactics and tries to blame the affair on her.

> "I was on my way to you....At the very last minute you turned me back with a mere word....I'm not saying this to justify myself. I'm simply trying to make you understand." (293)

But clearly George is trying (as he does at the beginning of the novel) to take attention off of himself by focusing on Anna's faults. George also tells her that "a woman like you"--the lady-type he had earlier admired so greatly--could never understand the "miseries and humiliations" that influenced Sophy to have an affair with him: she is "too fine" to grasp the fullness of life of which his affair with Sophy Viner is a part (293, 295).[7] Thus George rationalizes his affair with Sophy on the basis of Anna's presumed coldness and her inability, as a "lady," to understand the complexities of life. But Anna has had miseries and humiliations directly related to George, of which he is not aware and would not understand. His earlier flirtation with another woman, when Anna had thought they would be together, is ironically the major experience that has influenced her to speak more openly with George in their new relationship.

Anna's conflicting urges,

> to shut out every sight and sound and suggestion of a world in which such things could be; and at the same time...to know more, to understand better, to feel herself less ignorant and inexpert in matters which made so much of the stuff of human experience (294),

also suggest a greater complexity to her character than George credits her with. And she can be much more insightful than her initial refusal to comprehend George's unfaithfulness suggests. Although Anna cannot view her fiance objectively, she does come to understand a great deal about him and the male world in which she lives. Listening to him explain his affair with Sophy,

> She wondered at his composure, his competence, at his knowing so exactly what to say. No doubt men often had to make such explanations: they had the formulas by heart ... A leaden lassitude descended on her. (294, Wharton's ellipsis)

This insight is so overwhelming to Anna that "For a moment she simply ceased to feel." (295) Her eyes are now also opened to other times when such "formulas" may have been at the ready but were unneeded because of her own blindness:

> It had never occurred to her that [Fraser] might have passions, interests, preoccupations of which she was absolutely ignorant....She tried to picture him...walking furtively down a quiet street, and looking about him before he slipped into a doorway. (321)

Anna can no more imagine this than she can understand what George's affair with Sophy was like. She realizes that, by supposing her first husband may have had affairs, she was "simply trying to justify Darrow" so that she "could hope to keep" what she "could not give up." (322). This is true, yet it is also true that Anna now understands much more about the male world--and her status, as woman, as an outsider to that world--than she ever had before, Fraser's actually being faithful or unfaithful notwithstanding.

Anna resents her new insight and becomes extremely upset

with herself for seeking the truth; "...suddenly she was filled with anger at her blindness, and then at her disastrous attempt to see. Why had she forced the truth out of Darrow? If only she had held her tongue nothing need ever have been known," and "there flashed through her the longing to return to her old state of fearless ignorance" (322). Ironically, while George attempts to make others responsible for his actions, Anna focuses bitterly on herself just for demanding to <u>know</u>.

George attempts to reassure Anna of his committment to her by dismissing his affair as "a moment's folly" (293). But as Margaret McDowell comments,

> Anna is not at all reassured when Darrow makes light of the affair as only a moment's diversion. For Anna, such an admission is only a sign of Darrow's callousness, insensitivity, and masculine complacency. (60)

Anna's new perspective completely undermines the rest of her interactions with George. She begins to see manipulative intentions in everything he says and does. She distrusts his explanation of how he was able to return to Givre, because "he had looked and spoken in the same way when he had answered her probing questions about Sophy Viner," and Anna realizes "she would never again know if he were speaking the truth or not" (324-25). When he had first returned, Anna noticed that "'he always knows what to do,'" but rather than comforting her, "The idea that his tact was a kind of professional expertness filled her with repugnance..." (323).[8]

Later, as they sit together before the fire, Anna's tranquility is disrupted when she realizes "that she knew

nothing of the inner thoughts of this man who was sitting by her as a husband might" (330). What had not mattered with Fraser has become essential with George, since his duplicity regarding his affair has taught her not to assume their thoughts will always be in harmony.

The idea that she cannot know George's mind is extremely threatening to Anna. She begins to question the depth of his love and worries that he will leave her when she ages.

> He loved her now; she had no doubt of that; but how could she hope to keep him?....She thought with a pang of bitterness; `He won't grow any older because he doesn't feel things; and because he doesn't, I shall..." (331, Wharton's end ellipsis).

Her musings appear to focus on inadequacies Anna perceives in herself; she may not grow old gracefully, and "She put no faith in her own arts" to hold George (331). But Anna did not have such concerns until she knew about George's affair with the young and beautiful Sophy, and her real concern is that she may be unequal to overcoming George's shallowness. Anna expects to age more quickly as she internalizes all the pain she associates with George's insensitivity, as she has already internalized both the knowledge of his affair and his nonchalance about it.

Anna's anxiety about her appearance is in contrast to her earlier confidence in George's love, which had made her feel that "as she was, with her flattened hair, her tired pallor...he would like her even better, feel her nearer, dearer, more desirable, than in all the splendours she might put on for him" (124). The irony of this contrast is

heightened by the fact that Sophy's naturalness--to which George had compared Anna--was one of the major factors that had attracted him to her (27-28). Anna's fears are especially poignant in that she is looking ahead to a time when George may stop loving her, and comparing that time to a present in which he can have an affair with another woman while he still loves her.

Anna's feelings are complicated by her strong sexual passion for George. Even before she has any hint of his unfaithfulness, this passion overwhelms her. In her essay about The Reef, McDowell says:

> every detail that connects [Anna] with Darrow becomes sexually charged: she finds that his letters give a keener edge to her senses as she touches the paper;...she hears his voice from a distance before anyone else does. As he approaches, she feels the plants that she arranges become suffused with vital energy. (59)

McDowell is right to stress the importance of Anna's passion, for it continues to guide her after the revelation of George's affair makes her wish she could break away from him completely. When George accuses Anna of not understanding "'the strings that pull us,'" she thinks, "'I do understand. I've understood ever since you've been here.!'"

> For she was aware, in her own bosom, of sensations so separate from her romantic thoughts of him that she saw her body and soul divided against themselves....in herself, she discerned for the first time instincts and desires, which, mute and unmarked, had gone to and fro in the dim passages of her mind, and now hailed each other with a cry of mutiny. (316-17)

Such passion is all the more overpowering to Anna because it was completely lacking in her marriage to Fraser Leath, whose

kiss "dropped on her like a cold smooth pebble." Even then Anna had "questioned the completeness of the joys he offered," since she had already experienced some passionate feelings for George (91). She does not want to be cheated of those feelings now that they have been renewed and intensified.[9]

But because Anna had come to believe in her outer reserve as a reflection of her inner self, she views her "sense of incompleteness, of passionate dependence" on George as "somehow at variance with her own conception of her character" (319). Anna is forced to readjust her thinking about herself and come to terms with this passion. She realizes "she knew now" what George and Sophy know about themselves; she "knew weaknesses and strengths she had not dreamed of, and the deep discord and still deeper complicities between what thought in her and what blindly wanted..." (320, Wharton's ellipsis). This passage foretells the difficulty Anna will have as she tries to leave Darrow. Her past behavior is echoed in the attempt; when away from him, "she exhausted herself in appeal and interrogation, she formulated with a fervent lucidity every point in her imaginary argument" to break their engagement. But her passion overcomes these efforts:

> as soon as she was alone with him something deeper than reason and subtler than shyness laid its benumbing touch upon her, and the desire to speak became merely a dim disquietude, through which his looks, his words, his touch, reached her as through a mist of bodily pain. (329)

Anna's dilemma is complicated by her awareness that Sophy

has experienced George's passion in a way that she as yet can only imagine. Anna feels "humiliated" that George does not act upon her passion, "as though his forbearance, his tacit recognition of her pride, were a slight on other qualities she wanted him to feel in her," and she feels "Exasperated by her helplessness" (343). Her long habit of repression has left Anna without any words to express her passion to George, no matter how acutely aware of it she is herself, just as her upbringing in New York society had rendered her unable to express her love for him as a young girl.

The problem is not resolved when George stops her from leaving his room one night, for now Anna fully understands what she has missed, and the experience makes her extremely possessive of George. As they travel to Paris the next day, "She had an intense longing to be with him, an almost morbid terror of losing sight of him for a moment," and when he goes to buy a paper, "she felt as though she should never see him again" (344). Anna's possessiveness and "morbid terror" hardly suggest healthy sexual fulfillment. Her passion has simply taken over. "Her scruples were not overcome; but for the time their voices were drowned in the tumultuous rumour of her happiness." (345)

Her scruples do re-surface, however. Even before they reach Paris, Anna has calmed down sufficiently to recognize that her love for George contains a "new element": "a sort of suspicious tyrannical tenderness that seemed to deprive it of all serenity" (346). This is a key sentence, for it indicates that their relationship must yet end. Anna's physical union

with George cannot alter her knowledge of him, and the next several pages of the novel continue to catalog her destructive suspicions and insecurities. When George becomes impatient with her efforts to discuss Owen, Anna fears he will "grow indifferent to me as he did to her..." (347, Wharton's ellipsis); when Anna suggests a restaurant in Paris, she "fancied she saw a shadow on his face," and concludes that George had been there with Sophy (354); and after they return from a night at the theatre, Anna thinks about George and Sophy doing the same, and pulls away from George's touch (357). It is at this point that George tells her, "'things can't go on like this'" and starts to leave, but Anna stops him. She simply cannot let George go, and the novel ends without a definite break between them.

Sophy's introduction to The Reef parallels Anna's, although it comes much earlier. We initially see Anna through the eyes of a narrator; we first see Sophy through George's eyes. Like Anna, Sophy remains unnamed for several paragraphs, but this is because George cannot remember who she is. The fact that George cannot name Sophy for so long (although she immediately remembers his name) symbolizes his failure to ever get to know her beyond a superficial level. We first see Sophy in distress over her broken umbrella: "Oh, dear, oh, dear! It's in ribbons!" (10) Her preoccupation with this fact suggests Sophy may be a shallow, hysterical girl. George apparently thinks so; he "smiled at the inten-

sity of her distress" and mused how "side by side with such catastrophes as his"--he had just gotten the telegraph delaying his visit to Anna--"human nature was still agitating itself over its microscopic woes!" (11) But they are standing in a "driving rain," a "gale," and Sophy's frustration is not unreasonable. As with Anna's telegram, it does not occur to George that this woman may have something more important on her mind; she is unemployed and enroute to friends on whose charity she must rely. When Sophy hears that the boat is delayed for two hours, she says, "How lucky--then I can find my trunk!" (11) Her response is both positive and practical. George makes no comment, perhaps because Sophy has just contradicted the smug, condescending view he had already begun to form of her.

Sophy is a greater abstraction to Darrow than Anna, and she will continue to be so in many ways. While Anna is initially described as "a lady," Sophy is "a helpless female arm" holding a broken umbrella, then a "young lady," and "the loveliness in distress under his umbrella," and ultimately "his companion" (11-12). The progression of these terms suggests both the progression of their relationship and George's perception of Sophy, which undergoes a series of adjustments. In his mind, Sophy changes from damsel in distress, to a woman associated with something "unpleasant," to a pitiable "creature," and finally to prostitute. The something "unpleasant" that Sophy was part of is the "Murrett mob," a group with which George had associated but towards which he clearly feels superior. In another setting he may

have dismissed her completely at this point, but since George feels angry and hurt by Anna, and because Sophy is both beautiful and "amusing," he does not yet abandon Sophy. (11, 16) George considers himself Sophy's rescuer, much as he imagines himself rescuing Anna from the memories of an unsatisfying first marriage.

George's shifting perception of Sophy makes it difficult for him to categorize her effectively: "She might be any one of a dozen definable types, or she might--more disconcertingly to her companion and more perilously to herself---be a shifting and uncrystallized mixture of them all." (60) But the fact that George persistently fails to mail Sophy's letter telling the Farlows that she is in Paris suggests that the fourth stage of his perception begins forming early in George's mind. In fact, George's "persistent sense connecting her with something uncomfortable and distasteful" (13), which sums up his attitude toward the Lady Ulrica in his past, also foretells the sensations in which his brief affair with Sophy will end.

When Sophy and George do become lovers, George can then, presumably, fit her into the category of those women who are "decidedly not" ladies. It takes only ten days for him to grow tired of Sophy, and he laments to himself that rainy weather has made him think about his "situation" by keeping him inactive. (75) George considers his drab hotel room in terms of its "anonymous part," and as he listens to Sophy's step in the next room, he thinks, "It was strange how much

better he knew it than the person to whom it belonged!" (73, 76) George knows Sophy only as a physical being, a set of movements; to him she is as anonymous as the hotel room in which their affair takes place.[10]

George doesn't accord Sophy the intelligence or adulthood of a woman of his class; he thinks of her as a "child," even though he knows she has been on her own and has worked to support herself for some time. From her enthusiastic acceptance of a night at the theatre, he concludes she is "starving" for amusement, which he can provide. (55) By trivializing her enthusiasm, George discounts Sophy's interest in acting as a profession, something she might do to maintain her independence. Her reaction to the play supports this: even George recognizes her interest in "observing the details" of the play's "interpretation" on stage, and Sophy displays a "sharp apprehension" of "things theatrical" (46-47).

Yet George does distinguish Sophy from Anna on the basis of class, including Sophy's "avowed acquaintance with the real business of living" (26). George discounts Sophy's experiences so that he can treat her condescendingly as a child, yet he then paradoxically remembers Sophy's experiences so that he can treat her condescendingly as a lower-class woman, as he does when he later encounters her as the governess of Givre and the fiance of Owen Leath. Later, reflecting on their affair, George remembers that Sophy's conversation had gradually diminished and remembers that "The mere fact of not having to listen to her any longer added

immensely to her charm." (265)

George's pygmalion impulses are also revived through Sophy, in whom he sees "the effects of a perfectly fresh impression on so responsive a temperament," and for whom "he felt a fleeting desire to make its chords vibrate for his own amusement." (50, my emphasis) George's desire to entertain Sophy is completely self-serving, as this quote reveals. He finds it amusing to exercise control over this young woman, who he considers "intrinsically young" and malleable. (46) George finds Sophy beautiful--"He had dashed past that to reach Lady Ulrica Crispin!"--and "the candid approval of her eye" helps him recover "his usual sense of being a personable young man" (15, 16). Sophy serves a purpose for George by assauging his "wounded vanity" in this way, a purpose that is confirmed by his pleasure at being seen with her around Paris (46, 48). Yet the limits of his pleasure are revealed later, as George muses about Anna: "to be loved by a woman like that made 'all the difference' ... He was a little tired of experimenting on life..." (127, Wharton's middle ellipsis). His affair with Sophy, and with Lady Ulrica before her, is simply an experiment.

One immediate drawback to this experiment, for George, is that Sophy does not stay within the bounds of socially-acceptable discourse. She expresses surprise that George perceives of his time among the "Murrett mob" as "'so awfully long ago,'" when her time at Mrs. Murrett's is so fresh in her mind. Yet George considers Sophy's comment a "thrust" of

"doubtful taste" which "chilled his growing enjoyment of her chatter." (15) George wants the pleasure of talk with a beautiful young girl, but he wants the talk kept on a superficial level. Sophy continues to speak openly of Lady Ulrica, who she says was "false from head to foot" and "took apart clike a puzzle" (17). Sophy embarrasses herself by such talk--she blushes and breaks off--yet her insight toward the woman George had once sought after indicates that Sophy is on a different level than Lady Ulrica. Unlike Undine Spragg, who consciously mimics those she admires, Sophy indicates no desire to have Lady Ulrica as a role model. She does, however, admit to envying her because she had "all the things I've always wanted: clothes and fun and motors, and admiration and yachting and Paris..." Sophy tells George:

> "And how do you suppose a girl can see that sort of thing about her day after day, and never wonder why some women, who don't seem to have any more right to it, have it all tumbled into their laps, while others are writing dinner invitations, and straightening out accounts, and copying visiting lists, and finishing golf-stockings, and matching ribbons, and seeing that the dogs get their sulphur? One looks in one's glass, after all!" (18)

Nor does Sophy want only <u>things</u>; her mention of admiration, which echoes Lily Bart, suggests that she is lonely and not nearly so superficial as George had thought.[11] Sophy speaks more candidly than the young Anna Summers, who had lost George because she could not express herself. But by listing admiration in the middle of a list of objects, Sophy reveals this part of herself while keeping within the boundaries of what young girls were supposed to want. At this moment, even George sees her face as "no

longer a shallow flower cup but a darkening gleaming mirror that might give back strange depths of feeling." He concludes, "the girl had stuff in her--he saw it..." (18) The realization that Sophy has "stuff" in her is the closest George ever comes to recognizing any complexity to her character.

Sophy is not being coy; she knows she is attractive and that there is no inherent difference between her and Lady Ulrica that should keep her from having what she wants. It is not necessarily just Lady Ulrica that Sophy has in mind, either; "some women" could encompass George's other "types" as well, including Anna Leath. Thus the passage foreshadows the two couples at Givre, but with a twist: ultimately, neither Sophy nor Anna will "have it all;" Anna loses her opportunity for a marriage of passion, and Sophy, largely because of her passion, forfeits the financial security of marriage.

Sophy's reaction to the play George takes her to also reveals something about her character. She does not have a formal education through which to view the production, but she "felt" in the play "the ineluctable fatality of the tale, the dread sway in it of the same mysterious 'luck' which pulled the threads of her own small destiny." (59) This echoes Sophy's thoughts about some women having "it all" while others do not; that, too, is a matter of luck. Her interest in and enjoyment of the play further muddies George's perception of Sophy; himself bored with the pro-

duction, he had assumed that she was merely feigning interest in the play and was too polite to express her true opinion of it (57-58). In this case, rather than George making "a perfectly fresh impression" on Sophy, Sophy enables George to see the play differently. Following her response, he "pierced to the heart of its significance" and felt anew the play's "supreme and poignant reality." (59)

There is an additional significance to this passage. George had just layed his hand on Sophy's, and when he asks her opinion, his own preoccupation with what he is doing makes him "only half-aware of his words" (58). And by pouring out her impressions of the play, Sophy avoids acknowledging George's hand on hers. Similarly, Sophy's declarations about marriage a short while later are a defense. She tells George, "'Oh, I never mean to marry,'" and when he questions her, she continues:

> "I'd like you to see the only men who've ever wanted to marry me!....I'm not so sure that I believe in marriage. You see I'm all for self-development and the chance to live one's life. I'm awfully modern, you know." (61)

In response to this George ponders, "It was just when she proclaimed herself most awfully modern that she struck him as most helplessly backward..." (61). "Backward" is George's term to describe attitudes he does not understand because they don't fit neatly into his view that women are made to please men.

But even without George's commentary, Sophy's proclamation does seem defensive. She may be quite truthful in that she does not believe in marriage as it has been pre-

sented (and offered) to her, yet Sophy's rhetoric, and her later engagement to Owen Leath, suggests that she would like to believe in marriage. She simply does not have the faith in it that Anna does. Sophy calls herself "awfully modern," but as Ammons points out, Sophy is "in bondage to the past" like other Wharton heroines, "because the liberation, the 'progress,' that America boasted of for women was, in her [Wharton's] view, a mirage...Marriage and the New Woman are antithetical, Wharton argues..." (49). Since George is of a different social class than Sophy, and therefore no one she would perceive as a possible mate for herself, it is no wonder Sophy makes a disclaimer against marriage as he stands there with his hand on hers. Later, Ammons continues:

> Sophy is...a New Woman: she is modern, self-confident, practical. She is also completely unable to free herself from certain traditional notions and impediments. Her lack of marketable skills, her vulnerability to the double standard, and her own romantic infatuation with George Darrow keep her from gaining authority over her own life. (89)

Paradoxically, while Sophy's feeling of being in love with George shows that she is bound to the past, it also indicates that she is unwilling to accept a tradition which separates love and marriage. Because of her affair with George, and because he did provide an escape for her (however temporary), Sophy has a feeling for him which she, using the rhetoric society gives her, interprets as love. In this sense, tradition does hold Sophy. Yet she, knowing there is no chance of marriage with George for her, rejects the

alternative: marriage with Owen, who she ultimately realizes she does not love.

Sophy is vulnerable not only to the way the double standard condemns women who have affairs, but exonerates men; she is also vulnerable to a woman's need for the security of marriage. Initially, she becomes engaged to Owen even though she is not sure she loves him. She credits George with warning her "'That I'd be miserable if I married a man I didn't love,'" and when George chides her for not telling Owen sooner, Sophy answers, "'I told him as soon as I knew'" (260). Even if she really does not want to believe in marriage, Sophy had understood that it is the role she must accept if she is to stop being a governess and is to get those things she wants in life. This does not mean Sophy is cold or calculating; she is forced to depend on someone, and Owen is a "good match." Sophy is free from Anna's illusions about marriage (if not her illusions about love), but as Schriber says of marriage at Wharton's time, "The investment by heroines of an enormous portion of themselves in marriage or its pursuit grants to that institution an inordinate power either to make or break their lives" (189). While this is true for both heroines of The Reef, Sophy is clearly more financially vulnerable. Her situation makes her decision to face her feelings for George, and her lack of feelings for Owen, quite impressive.[12] Despite a tremendous cost to herself, Sophy cannot maintain the pretext that she knew George only casually. But the cost, in one sense, may not be as high for Sophy as it appears. She recognizes that she does not love Owen and, contrary to the

conventions of her society, Sophy decides she is unwilling to pay that cost for security: a life quite possibly without passion, a life like Anna's with Fraser Leath.

That Anna and Sophy are not such opposites as George had originally believed is demonstrated throughout the novel.[13] One major similarity between the two women is Anna's "visioned" life and Sophy's desire to be an actress. In the background about Anna, we are told that she lived largely in her imagination as a girl; "It was in the visioned region of action and emotion that her fullest hours were spent..." And while she never expected her visions to be "translated into experience" as a girl (85), Anna came to believe in her dream of love and rescue through marriage and to expect it to come true, first through George, then Fraser, and finally through George again. Similarly, Sophy dreams of becoming an actress--a life which, by definition, would involve living partly in her imagination. But just as Anna's sexual repression is largely responsible for keeping her visioned world from coming into existence, so Sophy's economic dependence--the fact that she must take a governessing position far from Paris, rather than taking acting lessons--keeps her dream of acting from coming true. In a sense, Sophy's desire to act is an inversion of Anna's visioned world. Anna had retreated into her imagination to escape from a world where she was known as a "model of ladylike repression;" and for Sophy, acting would take her out of a world where she must be dependent on other people to survive. Ironically, it is Anna who has always

played a role in her life, and Sophy who cannot act the part of innocence in the presence of her former lover.[14]

Another indication of these women's similarity is Anna's natural sympathy for Sophy, despite their difference in age and social status. Before Anna knows of the affair, she encourages Sophy to be open with her and to trust her.

> She had, in truth, so many reasons for wanting Sophy to like her: her love for Owen, her solicitude for Effie, and her own sense of the girl's fine mettle. She had always felt a romantic and almost humble admiration for those members of her sex who, from force of will, or the constraint of circumstances, had plunged into the conflict from which fate had so persistently excluded her. (236, my emphasis)[15]

Ironically, Anna does not yet know that part of this "conflict" is Sophy's sexual involvement with a man on whose kindness she has depended, and to whom Anna happens to be engaged. Rather than denigrating Sophy as a person of inferior social rank, Anna recognizes her as another woman, and as one who is admirable for having faced life in a way that Anna has not had to do. It is because of this understanding that Anna can promote Sophy's marriage to her stepson Owen, despite Madame de Chantelle's disapproval. Anna also trusts Sophy with her little girl; she comments on how Effie "expands" when she's with Sophy and feels at ease about leaving Effie with Sophy, who is "gay and kind and human" (222).

Even after Anna knows Sophy has had an affair with George, she still acknowledges the similarities between herself and Sophy. Meditating on her own passion for George and the passion on which Sophy acted, Anna "thought of the girl

with a mingling of antipathy and confidence. It was humiliating to her pride to recognize kindred impulses in a character which she would have liked to feel completely alien to her." Yet Anna also has an "absolute trust" in Sophy because she had "instantly obeyed the voice of her heart when it bade her part from the one [Owen] and serve the other [George]" (320-21). Anna wants to see Sophy completely as the "other" but cannot, any more than she can condemn Sophy but exonerate George. Both women have experienced intense passion for George, and both have loved him. The major difference is simply that Sophy has acted on her passion, while at this point, Anna has not.

In fact, Anna ultimately sees Sophy as the only one who can "save" her, and plans to regain her serenity by finding Sophy and telling her she is giving up George (361). In effect, Anna is trying to create in herself the firmness she has noted in Sophy by announcing her resolution to Sophy. But when she meets Mrs. Birch, the prostitute, Anna's empathy and admiration for Sophy disintigrate. She sees in Mrs. Birch's face "a suggestion...of what Sophy Viner might, with the years...become" (365). Sophy becomes in Anna's mind, as in George's, the other, the prostitute. Only by viewing Sophy in this way, it appears, can Anna finally separate her own self from this woman. She and Sophy are neither complete opposites nor two halves of a split heroine. They are simply two very complex women characters who differ in some important ways but who, as women, also have much in common.

Chapter Two: The Custom of the Country

While The Reef addresses sexual passion, The Custom of the Country is concerned with its heroine's passion for acquisition. Undine Spragg suffers from none of the upheaval of sexuality that characterizes Anna Leath and Sophy Viner. For Undine, men's sexual feelings are simply factors to consider in her efforts to form ever more socially and financially rewarding partnerships with them. Charles Bowen, the male character who watches Undine from a distance, says she is a "perfectly monstrous result of the system" in which "money and motors and clothes are simply the big bribe" a woman is paid "for keeping out of some man's way!" (208) Criticism that relies on this view and that draws parallels between Undine's manipulations and those of the male business world shows more appreciation for the complexity of this character than previous criticism which dismissed her as completely evil. But to focus exclusively on the business aspects of Undine and her world is still to oversimplify her personality. Just as George Darrow attempts to categorize Anna and Sophy, the men in The Custom of the Country operate according to serious misconceptions of Undine, whether they perceive her as a "result of the system" or assume that she wishes to adopt their values. In fact, Ralph Marvell's

misconceptions are ultimately fatal.

The Custom of the Country, unlike The Reef, begins with the heroine; "'Undine Spragg'" are the first words of the novel. Undine's immediate introduction is appropriate not only because she is the central character in the novel, but because she is herself completely egocentric. Other characters exist solely in relationship to her, at least in Undine's perspective. Wharton explores this egocentrism partly through Undine's love of mirrors. Undine's "delight" in dressing up and playing "'lady'" in front of a mirror "had outlasted childhood" and as an adult, "she still practised the same secret pantomime" (22). Preparing for a dinner at the fashionable Mrs. Fairford's, Undine yields to the "joy of dramatizing her beauty" and practices her "incessant movements" because "she thought it the correct thing to be animated in society" (22). The passage reveals Undine's vanity, but more importantly, it anticipates her way of dealing with the world. As the narrator says,

> Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met... (19).

She is imitative in both senses of the word; copying and artificial. Undine mirrors people externally but fails to improve her inner self. Her concern with the external, established so early in the novel, anticipates Undine's constant search for new and better mirrors as she moves from one segment of society to another.[16]

Much later, when Undine has a dealer come to appraise

the Chelles tapestries, she looks at them "as complacently as though they had been mirrors reflecting her own image" (529). The tapestries are symbolic of mirrors for Undine because their sale could buy her several seasons in Paris, where her beauty would be reflected in, and appreciated by, the society she craves. Undine needs this type of reflection because she relies on the "mirror" of others' views as much as she relies on literal mirrors; the "image of herself in other minds" is "her only notion of self-seeing" (401). Even as a girl Undine had craved the approval of others; she thrived on "the public triumph which was so necessary to her personal enjoyment" (549).

At the same time, just as a mirror can reflect only what is within its range, so Undine can "see" only those who are reflected in her mirror, those who are with her and who complement the image she sees of herself. At the Opera, Undine perceives herself as reflecting all of society; she is the "core" of the auditorium, "the sentient throbbing surface which gathered all the shafts of light into a centre" (60). Later, Undine is surprised to learn how much has happened to Elmer Moffatt while she has been living at Saint Desert, because "It never occurred to her that other people's lives went on when they were out of her range of vision..." (412). In this sense she is like an infant, unaware of anything it cannot see.

Undine's egocentrism is also suggested by her tendency to blame others whenever something goes wrong. Although

Undine believes "she was ready enough to acknowledge her own mistakes," she rarely seems to think she has made any (58). Wharton establishes this characteristic with the relatively trivial episode of the opera box. Undine "exulted" when her father bought her a box for every other Friday, after he had initially refused to buy her one at all. But on her first night in this hard-won opera box, Undine laments, "now she saw that it might but emphasize one's exclusion. And she was burdened with the box for the rest of the season! It was really stupid of her father to have exceeded his instructions" (68).

Later, married to Ralph but enjoying Popple's flattery, Undine reflects: "Popple's homage seemed the subtlest proof of what Ralph could have made of her if only he had 'really understood' her. It was but another step to ascribe all her past mistakes to the lack of such understanding..." (190). And, "Since it was never her habit to accuse herself of such mistakes" as her decision to marry Ralph, "it was inevitable that she should gradually come to lay the blame on Ralph" (193). Undine pities herself for marrying Ralph. "She found a poignant pleasure...in the question: 'What does a young girl know of life?'" (193-94). The question is ironic for Undine, who had been married once before and engaged three times.

Undine attributes all her problems to external sources because she believes the world owes her happiness. She considers herself "essentially peace-loving" and believes she "would have preferred to live on terms of unbroken harmony

with her parents."

> But she could not help it if they were unreasonable. Ever since she could remember there had been "fusses" about money; yet she and her mother had always got what they wanted, and apparently without lasting detriment to the family fortunes. It was therefore natural to conclude that there were ample funds to draw upon, and that Mr. Spragg's occasional resistances were merely due to an imperfect understanding of what constituted the necessities of life. (45)

In Undine's eyes, anything that interferes with her will is "unreasonable." She refuses to acknowledge any need for moderation; such things as opera boxes have become "rights" to Undine simply because she has never been denied them (44).

Wharton explains her parents' oversolicitousness by refering to the death of the Spragg's only other two children by typhoid fever (80). Undine is the ultimate stereotypical only child; she is twice as spoiled because she is all her parents have left of their three offspring. Yet early in life, Undine underwent the "terrible initiation" of discovering that others were not content with the things she had thought worth having. She came to believe that "There was something better beyond" and that "it was always her fate to find out just too late about the `something beyond'" (54).

Much later, when Undine regrets accepting money from Van Degen, she reflects: "What she wanted was not a hand-to-mouth existence of precarious intrigue: to one with her gifts the privileges of life should come openly." (234) This is the message Undine has gotten from a mother who "seemed to have transferred her whole personality to her child" (11), and a father who allows her to cajole him into the most

impractical expenditures. The feeling that she is always missing out on something, plus her attitude that life should treat her in a privileged way, keeps Undine from ever being fully satisfied with what she has.

Because she had learned early that money was always available, Undine continues to assume that whenever someone fails to meet her "needs," that person does not care about her. When her third husband, Raymond, refuses to sell his ancestral tapestries, Undine pouts to Elmer Moffatt: "he'd rather see me starve than part with one of his grand-father's snuff-boxes" (559). This single complaint indicates the way Undine glorifies her problems and trivializes others' positions. Undine's idea of starving is going without one more expensive dress, or not taking over the top floor of the Chelles' home in Paris. In contrast, she equates the Chelles tapestries, extremely valuable heirlooms whose "'history has been published,'" with "snuff-boxes." (530)

As the above discussion suggests, Undine's egocentrism results in a great deal of selfish thinking and behavior. For example, "Partly as a result" of her financial "excursions" with money she has borrowed from Van Degen,

> she had a 'nervous breakdown'...and her physician having ordered massage and a daily drive it became necessary to secure Mrs. Heeny's attendance and to engage a motor by the month. Other unforseen expenses...were added to by a severe illness of little Paul's....During these days Ralph's anxiety drove him to what seemed to Undine foolish excesses of expenditure... (229)

Undine happily pampers her own illness (which the passage suggests may be feigned), but resents money spent on her

son's illness as "foolish." In contrast, Undine attempts to use a later illness of Paul's to her benefit. Before she and Raymond leave Paris one season, "a doctor had been found to say that Paul...was in urgent need of sea air" because Undine does not want to return to Saint Désert (491, my emphasis).

Also, as the Marquise de Chelles, Undine "felt no compunction in continuing to accept an undiminished allowance," although her allowance breaks her parents financially. She does feel "a sentimental pity for her parents," however. "Aside from all interested motives, she wished for their own sakes that they were better off." Ironically, among Undine's supposedly disinterested motives is the idea that "renewed prosperity would at least have procured them the happiness of giving her what she wanted" (562). Undine can't imagine that her parents might have interests outside herself.

The harshest indicator of Undine's selfishness, however, is that she views Ralph's death as a financial advantage. His suicide

> brought about a sudden change in her situation. She was now no longer a divorced woman struggling to obtain ecclesiastical sanction for her remarriage, but a widow whose conspicuous beauty and independent situation made her the object of lawful aspirations. (483)

A subsequent line suggests that Undine does take some responsibility for Ralph's death; "she continued to wish that she could have got what she wanted without having had to pay that particular price for it" (487). But the appearance is deceptive. Undine is actually feeling sorry for herself, as her

reaction to Paul's inheritance confirms:

> she wished she could have got [the money] some other way--she hated the thought of it as one more instance of the perverseness with which things she was entitled to always came to her as if they had been stolen. (488)

Undine turns Ralph's tragedy, and the windfall which comes to her through Paul as a result, into an occasion to pity herself.

Undine's attitude toward the male business world also reflects her self-absorbed perspective. Undine does not want to be a part of the male business world, as Wharton indicates:

> Her eyes grew absent-minded, as they always did when [her father] alluded to business. <u>That</u> was man's province; and what did men go "downtown" for but to bring back the spoils to their women? (44)

This passage is a clue to much of Undine's subsequent behavior. She expects to be lavishly supported, without being bothered with the details of the way money is earned.[17] Wharton confirms Undine's view later in the novel when, preparing for her wedding to Ralph, Undine and her mother feel "secure in their invariable experience that, once 'father' had been convinced of the impossibility of evading their demands, he might be trusted to satisfy them by means with which his womenkind need not concern themselves" (127).

Undine's persistent ignorance of the business world cannot be wholly attributed to men's attempts to shelter her. Ralph does initially try to take over Mr. Spragg's role of providing everything Undine wants, but he soon realizes that

her "disregard for money may imply not the willingness to get on without it but merely a blind confidence that it will somehow be provided" (149). When he tries to explain their financial situation, however, Undine objects; "it was always hard to make her see why circumstances could not be bent to her wishes" (171). Although Bowen editorializes that women are "bribed" by material goods to stay out of men's way (208), this assessment does not apply to Undine. She instead refuses to understand so that she can avoid taking responsibility for her expenses. And Wharton shows that Undine is perfectly capable of understanding finances when she sees a direct connection to herself. From Moffatt's scheme to buy some real estate from Ralph's firm, Undine "finally extracted, and clung to, the central fact that if the 'deal went through' it would mean a commission of forty thousand dollars to Marvell's firm, of which something over a fourth would come to Ralph" (251). Undine's face is "alive with interest" when Ralph later discusses the deal with her, and she wants to know if he intends to make the sale (255).

Undine's carefully maintained ignorance of the male business world is just one aspect of the business Undine does understand: marriage. Ammons, in discussing the way Undine makes marriage her business, says Undine's "avaricious approach to marriage" is "simply realistic" in her world (101). Ammons goes on to explain how Undine's business world parallels her father's:

> Wall Street is the field of battle for the modern robber baron, and although his female counterpart...is denied that battleground, she is given

> her own stock exchange: the institution of marriage in which she herself is the stock exchanged. To create her empire, she invests herself in the right marriage--an enterprise Undine understands and embraces. (Ammons 107)

This enterprise requires certain adjustments in Undine's thinking. For instance, she initially perceives Ralph as "a little fellow" whose primary distinction was being in the same room with the more overtly-stylish Claud Popple (5). After learning of Ralph's social status, however, Undine decides he is "so much less negligible than his brilliant friend" (23), an assessment which is followed by a new appreciation for Ralph's physical appearance (69). Undine ultimately convinces herself that she is in love with Ralph: "It was pleasant...to meet Ralph's grey eyes, with that new look in them, and to feel that she had kindled it" (92).

Yet this feeling "was only part of her larger pleasure in the general homage to her beauty" at her engagement dinner, and "in the sensations of interest and curiosity excited by everything about her, from the family portraits overhead to the old Dagonet silver on the table--which were to be hers too, after all!" (92) Love, for Undine, means both power over another, a type of "possessorship" (97), and possessorship of <u>things</u>. At this dinner Undine plays one of her major roles. She tells herself that the "part" of a young woman "very much in love, and a little confused and subdued by the newness and intensity of the sentiment" was "not hard to play, for she <u>was</u> in love, of course" (91). But Wharton makes it clear that she <u>is</u> playing a role; she feels none of this intensity of emotion toward Ralph, as a later reference

to "her first impersonal affection" for Ralph confirms (226, my emphasis). Undine is--and remains--completely detached from such intense feelings, as Ralph will come to realize after they have been married a while.

Undine's talent for rationalizing helps her evade her true motive for marrying Ralph. Dismayed that he will be expected to support the newlyweds, Mr. Spragg suggests that Undine break her engagement. Undine wonders, "Did he suppose she was marrying for money? Didn't he see it was all a question...of the kind of people she wanted to 'go with'?" (123) Even if Undine's lack of concern for money is accepted, she clearly expects Ralph to serve a purpose: getting her into society. She is not marrying him for love. The following passages confirm that Undine is marrying for money, as well. When Mr. Spragg says that if she's in love with Ralph, "'you and he won't mind beginning in a small way,'" Undine reacts by theatrically tearing off her engagement ring and threatening to tell Ralph, "'I thought he was a rich man, and now I see I'm mistaken----" (124-25).

Ralph initially fails to understand the extent of Undine's egocentrism because he, too, is egocentric.[18] Just as George Darrow perceives of women as "designed" to please men, Ralph perceives of Undine in relation to himself, rather than as a separate person who may have very little in common with him. Based on a conversation with Undine's mother, Ralph concludes that the Spraggs "had been 'plain people'" and that this "drew them much closer to the Dagonet

ideals than any sham elegance in the past tense" (82). From here, Ralph makes the leap to speculating, "To save her [Undine] from Van Degen and Van Degenism: was that really to be his mission--the 'call' for which his life had obscurely waited?" (82)

At first, Ralph thinks he judges Undine clearly; he recognizes "her crudity and her limitations," but views them as "a part of her grace and her persuasion" (83). He assumes that Undine shares her mother's "virgin innocence" and "unaffected frankness" and can yet be spared from "swell[ing] the ranks of the cheaply fashionable" (81-82). But Undine is frank because "some intuition had already told her that frankness was the tone to take with him" (69). Wharton makes it clear that Ralph falls in love simply because he is ready to; "his faith in the great adventure" of romance to come in his life is what "made him so easy a victim when love had at last appeared clad in the attributes of romance..." (83). Having lost his first love, Clare, because he waited too long, Ralph is quick to assume Undine is suitable for him.[19]

Ralph's egocentric view is also apparent in his attempt to change Undine.[20] While he recognizes Undine's "sensitiveness to new impressions" and "obvious lack of any sense of relative values," he dwells on these characteristics as enhancing Undine's vulnerability, rather than as negative qualities to consider before deciding to marry her. He envisions her as a "lovely rock-bound Andromeda" and imagines himself "whirling down on his winged horse...to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue" away

from the "devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her..." (84). As Collins notes, Ralph's motive for rescuing Undine is largely an attempt to "restore his own self-esteem" (201). Ralph takes on the project of rescuing and protecting, he assumes, an as yet unspoiled daughter of the Invaders.

In discussing The Custom of the Country, Ammons comments on Ralph's Pygmalion attitudes: "A would-be artist who has never been able to finish a single work, he sees Undine as raw material for his creative impulse." (112) Ralph, however, has always been a passive artist (he lies under trees and waits for poetic words to drop on him like leaves), and the project of molding a living being into his desired shape is far more than he can handle. As Ammons concludes,

> Ralph assumes that Undine wants to be lifted and will adopt his unostentatious way of life, his taste for reserved people, and his educated aestheticism. He assumes, in other words, that she wants to become a supportive, emotionally and intellectually dependent wife--both the object and the nurture of his creativity....His wife simply will not adopt his values, especially his belief in the innate passivity of female human nature. (Ammons 113)

Undine initially has no idea of Ralph's view and is puzzled, during their engagement, by his "reluctance to introduce her to the Van Degen set" (93).

Ralph's attitudes cause frustration for Undine, who expects certain rights as a partner in the marriage-business. Afraid Ralph will thwart her growing friendship with Van Degen, Undine muses, "It was hard to be criticized for every grasp at opportunity by a man so avowedly unable to do the

reaching for her!" Undine "felt herself trapped, deceived" because, she realizes, Ralph will "not achieve the quick rise to affluence which was man's natural tribute to woman's merits" (227). In her view, Ralph fails the partnership because he does not support Undine adequately, although he stops trying to control her activities. Collins suggests that Undine's relationship with her father influences her view of Ralph:

> From her father, Undine derives her energy and her pleasure in complicated manoeuvers designed to advance her own social position. She weedles him into giving her money....In contrast, Ralph's refusal to bring home enough money to satisfy her desire for luxury, and his inability to understand her desire to barter for what she wants...prove disappointing. (205)

But Ralph does not refuse to provide enough money; he simply does not have the business training which would enable him to do so. Besides, Ralph perceives that "his business" is to defend Undine from her "weakness" for Van Degenism and "lift her above it" (177), not to provide her with unlimited funds.

As Undine then asserts her independence, Ralph notes that she "had so amply shown him her ability to protect herself. The pang lay in the completeness of the proof--in the perfect functioning of her instinct of self-preservation" (163). Ralph takes no pleasure in his wife's ability to function as an adult, since it means she will not be easily molded. For the same reason, Ralph dislikes Undine's practicality. He is upset by her suggestion that they ask the Marvells for money, ostensibly because "it was always she who made the practical suggestion, hit the nail of expediency on

the head. No sentimental scruple made the blow waver or deflected her resolute aim" (165). Yet as Carol Wershoven notes in The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton, "since the Spraggs have made a life-long commitment to 'helping out' Ralph," Undine's suggestion "hardly seems an audacious request" (63). Ralph cannot accept his wife's ability to take charge where he has, in her opinion, failed.

Ralph treats Undine as he does because he perceives her as a child. As Undine begins to resist him, Ralph holds firm to his purpose of protecting and molding her. He realizes that she can be inconsistent, as when she complains that he hastened their marriage. But he is "still enchanted" by her and, when Undine complains about being hidden away in Italy, he says, "'We'll go wherever you please--you make every place the one place,'" "as if he were humouring an irresistible child" (145, my emphasis). Ralph's tendency to view Undine as a child is consistent with his desire to protect her; if he thought of Undine as an adult, he would realize that she can function without his constant guidance. Later, as Ralph takes Undine into his arms, "he felt her resign herself like a tired child" (152). But again, this is his perception; the context ironically reveals that Undine is only "resigned" in allowing him to hold her. "She had never shown any repugnance to his tenderness, but such response as it evoked was remote and Ariel-like..." (152).

Finding her response not up to the level of his passion, Ralph briefly emphasizes Undine as goddess. He daydreams about the "pot-boiler" novel he plans to write and thinks,

"Did not the worshipper always heap the rarest essences on the altar of his divinity?" (155) A goddess does not need protection from a mortal, however, and Ralph soon returns to his view of Undine as a child.[21] He "told himself that there is always a Narcissus-element in youth, and that what Undine really enjoyed was the image of her own charm mirrored in the general admiration" (157). Because he considers this a characteristic of youth, rather than an intricate part of Undine's personality, Ralph expects Undine to outgrow her need for general admiration. "With her quick perceptions and adaptabilities she would soon learn to care more about the quality of the reflecting surface..." (157).

As Ralph becomes disillusioned about Undine and recognizes her "instinct of adapting herself to whatever company she was in," he becomes concerned about "what her ignorance might expose her to" (160). When Undine doesn't accept his view of her friends, Ralph is "exasperated by what seemed a wilful pretense of ignorance" (161). When Undine says she can choose her own friends, Ralph patronizingly responds, "'No, you can't, you foolish child. You know nothing of this society you're in..." (161). Ralph is surprised later when Undine refuses to give up her journey on Van Degen's Sorceress.

> He was used to women who, in such cases, yielded as a matter of course to masculine judgments: if one pronounced a man "not decent" the question was closed. But it was Undine's habit to ascribe all interference with her plans to personal motives... (179)

Still, Ralph believes he is "learning to influence her

through her social instincts" and expects Undine to drop Van Degen once back in New York (180). But Undine does not do so, and subsequent events show just how little influence Ralph has had over her.

By the time of Undine's pregnancy, Ralph has given up enough of his illusions to notice her true reaction. He is struck by the "chill of her tone" as she bewails the year she will lose to her pregnancy, and he perceives her thoughts about "the approach of illness, anxiety, and expense, and of the general unnecessary disorganization of their lives" (185). He responds "bitterly" to Undine, but Ralph wants to "disguise from himself the hateful fact that he felt it [the same way] too" (185).

Years later, when Undine misses a birthday party for their son Paul, Ralph reflects, "For a long time now feminine nearness had come to mean to him...the ever-renewed dread of small daily deceptions, evasions, subterfuges." The discovery that Undine had reset her jewelry, after telling him she would not, had marked "the point beyond which there was no returning" from disillusionment (213). Ralph now realizes,

> it was admiration, not love, that she wanted....and her conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity--the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses, and the sense of walking among them in cool security. (223-24)

This, Ralph's most accurate perception of Undine, does not help him address their problems. He simply resigns himself to the idea that "They were fellow-victims in the

noyade of marriage" and concludes that "if they ceased to struggle perhaps the drowning would be easier for both..." (225, Wharton's ellipsis). His progressive disillusionment with Undine includes an escapist attempt to return to his first love, who he had lost to the "Invaders" long before he met Undine. As his marriage disintegrates, Ralph begins to compare Clare and Undine, just as George Darrow compares Sophy Viner and Anna Leath. Ralph begins to see Clare more favorably; she is "light and frivolous" like Undine, but Clare "would never have lied to him or traded on his tenderness" (215). Yet Ralph views Clare in much the same condescending way he had previously viewed Undine. He is content in Clare's presence because she makes him feel important; "With her eyes on him he felt the exquisite relief of talking about himself as he had not dared to talk to anyone since his marriage." (321) He also takes solace in her quiet company and believes she "wanted him to know that she had never wholly been any one else's" (320). She is the one he would have been able to mold and protect.

Ralph cannot stop struggling over the "drowning" of his marriage, however. During Undine's long visit to Europe without him--which ultimately ends in their divorce--Ralph becomes obsessed with her letters and tries to envision her through them. Sometimes "he saw her, closely, palpably before him, as she sat at the writing-table, frowning and a little flushed, her bent nape showing the light on her hair, her short lip pulled up by the effort of composition..."

(308). But this vision of Undine completely and earnestly involved in communicating with him, as if she is away from Ralph against her will, is destroyed by the letter in which she says: "'Everybody's talking to me at once, and I don't know what I'm writing.'" (308) As Ralph realizes, "Though his feeling for her had changed, it still ruled his life." (309) He begins to blame himself for their failed marriage, not because he made no effort to understand Undine, but because perhaps he had not "done all he could to draw her half-formed spirit from its sleep" (309). To the end, Ralph refuses to understand that Undine could not be transformed into the woman he wanted her to be.

Yet despite all he has learned about Undine since their marriage, so sure is Ralph that she had been innocent as his bride, that he is thrown into complete shock by the revelation of Undine's previous marriage. This news closely follows the revelation that a business venture with Moffatt has gone bad, leaving Ralph both without the money he needs to buy his son's custody and unable to repay Clare's loan, the money she had been saving in order to someday escape "Van Degenism." Ralph cannot accept the fact that not only had Undine been married before, she had been married to "<u>This</u> man...<u>this</u> man...," Moffatt, "this coarse-grained man with whom," he had just been thinking, "he hadn't a sentiment in common" (466, 464). The impact of all this on Ralph causes him to feel that he is "stumbling about in his inherited prejudices"--the ones which had made him believe he could rescue Undine from the Invaders--"like a modern man in

mediaeval armour," so that "the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions tumbled down about him" (469).

Even with his perception of society destroyed, however, Ralph's view of his role toward Undine somehow fails to change. He sees Undine <u>herself</u> quite differently; the "overwhelming sense of her physical nearness which had once so haunted and tortured him" now "filled the room with a mocking glory" (471-72). Realizing that his life's project had been a sham because it had already been too late to influence Undine in the way he had envisioned, Ralph commits suicide. But even in the act of suicide, Ralph perceives himself as rescuing Undine. "He said to himself: `My wife...this will make it all right for her...'" (474, Wharton's ellipses). In his confusion, Ralph apparently understands that his death will enable Undine to remarry and so, unable to bear the strain of knowing she had been married before him, he tells himself that he is really doing this for her.[22] In the midst of unbearable disillusionment, Ralph cannot relinquish his vision of himself as his wife's savior.

While still married to Ralph, Undine begins her attempt to negotiate a marriage to Van Degen, who could both support and display her lavishly. Undine had long since rationalized her friendship with Van Degen; "it ennobled her in her own eyes to influence such a man for good," since he "was noted for not caring for `nice women'" (201-02). Undine does not admit to herself how much he may be influencing <u>her</u>. As subsequent events show, in fact, Van Degen does not view

Undine any differently from the other women she places herself above.

When they do become involved with each other, Van Degen refuses to enter a partnership with Undine, partly because he does not trust her to uphold her side of it. After Undine divorces Ralph, Van Degen won't see her. As her friend Indiana Rolliver reveals, "'He says that the very day you went off with him last year you got a cable from New York telling you to come back at once to Mr. Marvell, who was desperately ill.'" (358) Yet Wharton makes it clear that Undine did not return to Ralph because she did not believe he really was ill. Just as she later perceives Raymond as acting when he confronts her about the Chelles tapestries, Undine quickly assumes Laura's cable saying that Ralph is ill is an act, an attempt to force her to return to New York and "spoil her pleasure" (297). "Ralph was always perfectly well--she could not picture him as being suddenly at death's door and in need of her....what if the cable were a device of the Marvell women to bring her back?" (297) Herself aware of playing roles throughout the novel, whether young girl in love, noble mother, or incorruptible American woman, Undine readily assumes that others do the same. Of course, it is also a matter of convenience for Undine to rationalize away Laura's cable in this way; she is about to begin her affair with Van Degen when the cable arrives.

When Undine rightfully points out that Van Degen went with her anyway, Indiana explains, "'One day when he wasn't feeling very well he thought to himself: "Would she act like

that to me if I was dying?" And after that he never felt the same to you.'" (360) Yet Undine still feels certain she can win him back "'if I could only see him.'" (357) What she really means is if he would only see her; she expects Van Degen to be hers again simply because of her beauty.

Undine clearly saw her affair with Van Degen as a business move; "It had been a bold move, but it had been as carefully calculated as the happiest Wall Street 'stroke.'" (364) During their affair, Undine "had preserved her self-respect by telling herself that she was really [Van Degen's] wife, and in no way to blame if the law delayed to ratify the bond" (364, my emphasis). She takes credit for her affair as a business move but denies any moral responsibility. Her "business" during their affair was to "make each of their days so agreeable that when the last came he should be conscious of a void to be bridged over as rapidly as possible; and when she thought this point had been reached she packed her trunks and started for Dakota," for the divorce court (366-67). Consequently, she has trouble understanding why the "move" didn't work. Undine had failed to take into account any emotional needs, other than passion, in her attempt to form a marriage partnership with Van Degen.

Undine also fails to realize the extent to which she, like Anna Leath and Sophy Viner, is an outsider to the male world. She is an outsider to the world of business by choice, as I have discussed. But Undine discovers with Van Degen that even in her business, men play by different rules.

Just as in The Reef George Darrow brands Sophy unfit as Effie's governess because of their affair, yet considers himself a fit step-father for the same child, so Van Degen can have both a wife and a mistress, with no apparent loss of social status.

Van Degen perceives Undine's initial refusal to "'be a little fond'" of him as an act (233-34), not realizing how repulsive she finds him. Undine had noted his "grotesque saurian head, with eye-lids as thick as lips and lips as thick as ear lobes" the first time she saw him (49). She never does overcome her physical repugnance for Van Degen; when he first kisses her, "she felt a moment's recoil" (294). But as Undine learns more about the extent of Van Degen's wealth, and has been married long enough to realize the dearth of Ralph's, she decides she likes his type of "'exclusiveness,'" which is a "contempt for everything he did not understand or could not buy" (192). He is "nice" to listen to her financial problems (and give her two thousand dollars), so Undine decides she wants to marry him despite being repulsed by him.

During their affair, Van Degen seems perfectly aware that Undine wants the social and financial security of marriage with him. While he never explicitly agrees to marry her, he does nothing to correct her expectation that he will. He "seemed in no way disturbed" by her references to divorcing Ralph, and "though Undine could not remember his ever voluntarily bringing up the subject of their marriage he did not shrink from her recurring mention of it" (366). Thus

Peter, by seeing clearly aspects of Undine's character to which Ralph was initially blind, is able to control his relationship with her and end the relationship when it no longer suits him.

Undine realizes too late that:

> her companion's view of their relation was not the same as hers. She saw that he had always meant it to be an unavowed tie, screened by Mrs. Shallum's companionship and Clare's careless tolerance... (365).

This is partially a rationalization for Peter's never coming to Dakota; Undine doesn't want to believe that anything she did had such a negative effect on him. But Undine's perception is also supported by what we have already seen of Van Degen. This is not his first extra-marital affair, and he had said much earlier--in Undine's presence--"'Marry somebody who likes all the things you don't, and make love to somebody who likes all the things you do.'" (174) This is precisely what Van Degen has done.[23] While Van Degen retains his place in society after his affair with Undine, she, now divorced, experiences the "lost advantage" of no longer being Mrs. Ralph Marvell. "Her new visiting-card, bearing her Christian name in place of her husband's, was like the coin of a debased currency testifying to her diminished trading capacity." (361)

Because Van Degen entered into an affair with her, Undine had thought he was in love with her. She believed that the "cool spirit within her" which "seemed to watch over and regulate her sensations" made her "capable of measuring the

intensity of those she provoked" (294). Undine reflects,

> It was wonderful how cool she felt--how easily she could slip out of his grasp! Any man could be managed like a child if he were really in love with one... (294, Wharton's ellipsis).

What had been true with Ralph does not apply to Peter, however, and Undine miscalculates her control over Van Degen. Her failure to understand Van Degen's rules led Undine to bargain away the prestige of the Dagonet-Marvell line without receiving the superior display she expected in return.

Feeling devalued, Undine becomes defensive. "She feared to be associated with 'the wrong people,' and scented a shade of disrespect in every amicable advance. The more pressing attentions of one or two men she had formerly known filled her with a glow of outraged pride..." (361). When Indiana chides her for leaving Van Degen in the middle of their affair in order to get her divorce from Ralph, Undine responds: "'But what could I do? I'm not an immoral woman.'" (346) Undine can still view herself this way because

> The pleasures for which her sex took such risks had never attracted her, and she did not even crave the excitement of having it thought that they did. She wanted, passionately and persistently, two things which she believed should subsist together in any well-ordered life: amusement and respectability... (353-54)

Being thought sexually immoral damages the respectibility Undine wants, so she protects her self-image by believing that, because she has no intrinsic interest in sexual "pleasures," she is immune to criticism on that basis. As Ammons points out, even women such as Undine "still live through men" because "In Wharton's view the woman who wants to

make it to the very top of the American pyramid still has only one route: confederate with a man already up there, or one on the way." (Ammons 112) Undine's period of social ostracism confirms this in her mind, and she procedes next to allign herself with Count Raymond de Chelles.

If Ralph fails his partnership with Undine primarily because he cannot provide enough money, Raymond fails because he refuses both to fund Undine's extravagances and to display her.[24] Undine had believed she was truly flattered by Raymond's courtship; "Nor was there anything calculated in her attitude" (401). But Undine's persistent "want of money" is soon mentioned again, and it is not surprising when she explores the possibility of buying her way into a marriage with Chelles. She assumes both that he would end her financial problems and that her "scarcely-gained footing" in French society would be secured (402-05). When Indiana (now Madame de Trézac) suggests that she become Chelles' mistress, Undine self-righteously invokes the moral standards of Apex; when her friend responds, "'Personally, of course, I've never quite got used to the French view--,'" Undine says, "'I hope no American woman ever does.'" (404)

There is more to Undine's refusal to have an affair with Raymond than moral scruples, however. She had already been "cut" by society after her affair with Van Degen and her divorce from Ralph, and Undine does not intend to make the same mistake with Chelles. Thus, "her demeanour to Chelles was that of the incorruptible but fearless American woman, who cannot even conceive of love outside of marriage," and she

determines to "give up Chelles unless he was willing to marry her" (404-05). She is learning to adjust her strategies to the rules by which men play.

But once they are married, Raymond requires Undine to "report of every hour she spent away from him" because he considers her "too young and good looking" to be "mixed up" with Princess Estradina's "crew" (481-82). After a season in Paris, he takes her to Saint Désert, where "At first she was sure she could laugh Raymond out of his prudence" and convince him to spend more freely on her. But Raymond, like Ralph, initially expects Undine to understand the limitations on their finances; "he appealed to her good sense....But his economic plea was as unintelligible to her as the silly problems about pen-knives and apples in the 'Mental Arithmetic' of her infancy..." (495-96). Then, Undine notices,

> He had apparently decided that his arguments were unintelligible to her, and under all his ardour she felt the difference made by the discovery. It did not make him less kind, but it evidently made her less important; and she had the half-frightened sense that the day she ceased to please him she would cease to exist for him. (496)

From this point on, the story of Undine's marriage to Raymond is the story of a woman who is increasingly an outsider to her husband's world. Raymond leaves Undine at Saint Desert, where only her in-laws visit, while he takes care of family affairs--usually getting his brother out of debt. Whenever he returns from a trip Undine, very much aware of her isolation from his life, "had a curious sense of his coming back from unknown distances and not belonging to her or to any

state of things she understood." Undine "learned to hide her feelings," and tries not to challenge her situation (497). Discussing Undine as outsider to Raymond's world, Wershoven notes, "This is a terrible punishment for Undine, who can define herself only through other people's eyes." (68) The only eyes watching her at Saint Desert are those of her disapproving in-laws.

After their argument about leasing the premier to Raymond's brother and his bride, Raymond shuts Undine out even more. When his efforts to discuss literature and world events with her fail, they stop talking. And, while the Chelles family judges Undine inadequate for her failure to have a baby, the fact is that Raymond will not sleep with her (506, 509-10). Yet Raymond, like his wife, lacks an understanding of business; he thinks Harry's American father-in-law is in the military because he's "General Arlington," a "'General Manager, whatever that may be'" (499). By displaying Chelles' ignorance of the business world, Wharton underscores that, despite Bowen's assessment, it is not only in American society that women are outsiders. The situation is the same in French aristocracy as in American business.

Undine responds to this isolation in her usual way; by focusing on her appearance at the expense of any intellectual development: "her dresses were more than ever her chief preoccupation" and, because Undine perceives that "her complexion was less animated, her hair less shining," "she scanned the fashion-papers for new scents and powders, and experimented in facial bandaging, electric massage and other processes of

renovation" (520-21). This process fails to regain her husband's affection and does not, as Undine discovers, secure her place in French society. Madame de Trézac tells Undine that the members of Raymond's "set" "'think you beautiful....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.'" (541)

Undine appears to take this criticism very seriously, believing "she had never lacked insight into the cause of her own failures," and having noticed herself that "Her entrances were always triumphs; but they had no sequel." (541) But she is unwilling to work at improving her mind and is unable, finally, to take seriously the idea that beauty alone does not always suffice (although her failure with Van Degen should have convinced her of this truth). Rather than balancing the time spent on her appearance with intellectual pursuits, Undine gives up what attempts she was making to learn, "prolonged her hours at the dress-maker's and gave up the rest of the day to the scientific cultivation of her beauty" (542). As a result, Undine remains an outsider not only to the male world but to all of French aristocracy. "As soon as people began to talk they ceased to see her" will continue to be the response to this beautiful but uninformed woman (541-42).

As Ammons says, "The almost literal imprisonment she suffers at Saint-Desert erodes her confidence in her own power and rectitude," and so Undine becomes petty and vicious (118).[25] The next phase is that "Her constitutional

restlessness lapsed into an apathy like Mrs. Spragg's..." (522). Like her mother, Undine is becoming subdued by her environment. But while her mother had channelled all her energy into her, Undine, who is daughterless--and effectively childless, at this point--channels all her resources into the one project that has always concerned her: her physical appearance.

Raymond's condescending treatment of Undine is similar to Ralph's. When Undine complains that Raymond leased the premier to his brother without consulting her, Raymond replies, "But, my dear child, you've always professed the most complete indifference to business matters..." (502). What we know of Undine suggests this is probably true. Yet by calling her a "child," Raymond indicates that like Ralph, he does not consider his wife an adult whose opinions matter.

Finding herself treated like a child, Undine reverts to the child-like behavior that had worked with her father in the past. Frustrated at Raymond's keeping her from Paris, Undine "wanted to burst into sobs like a child." And she rebels, telling Raymond, "'You can do as you please; but I mean to go to Paris.'" (525) Undine's subsequent attempt to fund a season in Paris with the Chelles tapestries completely disillusions Raymond. Like Ralph, he is genuinely appalled at Undine's lack of concern for his heritage and traditions. During their confrontation about Undine's having the tapestries appraised, Raymond "stood looking at her coldly and curiously, as though she were some alien apparition his eyes had never before beheld" (545). He lumps her into the class

of Invaders, declaring "you're all alike," and:

> "You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about...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 life decent and honourable for us!" (545)

Raymond now fully understands Undine's superficiality. Judith Fryer notes that, unlike Ralph, Raymond "asserts himself in the face of her power" through speech. Raymond "asserts his own ability to see clearly, and to speak clearly, over her inability to see anything at all beyond herself..." (Fryer 114).

Raymond's impassioned speech, however, is lost on Undine, who perceives him as acting:

> He stopped again, his white face and drawn nostrils giving him so much the look of an extremely distinguished actor in a fine part that, in spite of the vehemence of his emotions, his silence might have been the deliberate pause for a <u>replique</u>... (546)

Because Undine understands emotions only as an act, she can discount Raymond's feelings. She protects herself from the force of his anger by assuming he is playing a part.[26] Thus she can answer, "waiting long enough to give the effect of having lost her cue," "'Do you mean to say you're going to refuse such an offer?'" (546) But Raymond's protests are valid, and Undine can respond only by leaving him and returning, through marriage to Elmer Moffatt, to the world Raymond now recognizes she has come from.

The story of Moffatt's social and financial rise covers

the length of The Custom of the Country. Undine's feelings for him come closest to romantic love. After meeting Elmer in New York, following years of separation, Undine returns home crying and shaken (116-17). "She had been drawn to him from the first" (548) and, years later, Undine is still attracted by Elmer's strength and power (537, 563). Her father had successfully gotten their first marriage annulled because, as Undine says, "'I was so young...I didn't know anything...'" (110, Wharton's ellipses). After learning that Elmer has enough wealth to be "'The greatest American collector'" (530), Undine develops a desire to "cry out her wrath and wretchedness" to him. At first, "She did not think of Moffatt as a power she could use, but simply as some one who knew her and understood her grievance." She soon realizes she wants to "keep him from everyone else, to keep him for herself alone" (566-67). Yet as Undine sees pieces of Elmer's collection scattered about his room, "her heart beat at the signs of his altered state" (567). Undine wants to be with Elmer both because she is still attracted to him and because he now has the means to support her in the way Raymond has not.

Unlike Ralph and Raymond, Elmer understands Undine clearly and is able to use his understanding of her to further his own success. When they met in New York early in the novel, he blackmailed her with hints of revealing their past marriage, because he knew how desperately Undine wanted it kept secret. She had told him, "If any of [Ralph's] folks found out, they'd never let him marry me....And it would kill me, Elmer--it would just kill me!" (114)

If she realizes Elmer understands her, Undine also recognizes that she is an outsider to his world;

> he gave her, more than any one she had ever known, the sense of being detached from his life, in control of it, and able...to choose which of its calls he should obey. If the call were that of business...she knew she would drop from his life like a loosened leaf. (563)

This is no condemnation of Elmer, however. Undine perceives that "He used life exactly as she would have used it in his place." (563) Elmer's "place" is that of a man. While Anna Leath faults herself for not living life as fully as her stepson Owen, Undine sees in Elmer someone whose dealings with the world are not limited by gender, as hers are.[27]

Wharton uses this relationship as another gauge of Undine's ignorance, which is related to her inability to feel anything deeply. Undine simply does not <u>care</u> about the things other people do. This flaw is most fully explored in the contrast between Moffatt's genuine love of art and Undine's complete indifference to it, except as an indication of wealth. The contrast is especially important because they are so alike in other ways. When she takes Moffatt around to look at various art objects, Undine finds that "the things he looked at moved him in a way she could not understand," whereas she "had lived in almost total ignorance" of such objects, and now simply "acquired as much of the jargon as a pretty woman needs to produce the <u>impression</u> of being well-informed..." (563, 561; my emphasis). The contrast between Elmer's and Undine's reactions to art confirms Ralph's earlier perception of Undine as "a creature of skin-deep reactions"

who "remained insensible to the touch of the heart" (224).

As she reminisces with Elmer about their first romance, Undine tells him that her life so far has "'all been an awful mistake. But I shouldn't care if you were here and I could see you sometimes. You're so strong...'" (568). And, we are told, "She had never spoken more sincerely. For the moment all thought of self-interest was in abeyance, and she felt again...the instinctive yearning of her nature to be one with his." (568) She tells Elmer that their relationship "'was the only time I ever really cared--all through!'" Undine cries out, "'Oh, Elmer--if I'd known--if I'd only known!'" What she really means is that if she'd known how well Elmer would do, she could have stayed with him in the first place and foregone her other marriages. This is symbolically confirmed by the way she "turned away, touching with an unconscious hand the edge of the lapis bowl among his papers" (570).

By now, Undine has gained respectibility as a French Marquise and sees a way to gain amusement without losing this respectibility. She proposes to Elmer that she become his mistress. This is Undine's attempt to have what men in French society have (and in American, given Peter Van Degen): both respectibility and sexual freedom. The plan appeals to Undine because it would not entail the vulnerability that she had faced as divorced mistress to Van Degen; "she had no wish to affront again the social reprobation that had so nearly wrecked her" (564).

Elmer Moffatt, however, does not want a mistress; he wants a wife. He tells Undine, "'if you want to come back

you've got to come that way...walk in by the front door, with your head up, and your Main Street look'" (572). He will not accept the bargain Undine offers, and presses her for an official contract. That Undine expects to overcome this scruple is clear in her belief that "the great moment of her life had come at last--the moment all her minor failures and successes had been building up with blind indefatigable hands" (572). But Moffatt stands firm, and her "great moment" ends in finally deciding to divorce Raymond and remarry Elmer.

Just before her marriage to Raymond, Undine had asked Elmer if he intended to marry. He answered, "'Why, I shouldn't wonder--one of these days. Millionaires always collect something; but I've got to collect my millions first.'" (419) Once he does, Moffatt is ready to "collect" Undine and give her, along with the Chelles tapestries, the display for which she has longed. Blake Nevius has said that Undine "is bound to fall short of her goals because her ideals are incompatible" (152).[28] But Undine's situation shows that, in her world, respectability and amusement are incompatible only for women.

Ultimately the most sympathetic male character in this novel is the least developed--Undine's son, Paul. As <u>The Custom of the Country</u> nears its end, Wharton strips away whatever sympathy there was for Undine by showing her through Paul's point of view.[29] Paul has no memory of Ralph, so he thinks of Raymond as his father (582). He is sickened to learn how his mother got her divorce from Raymond:

> She said things that weren't true...That was what he had always feared to find out...She had got up and said before a lot of people things that were awfully false about his dear French father... (586, Wharton's ellipses).

Paul's thoughts echo those of Ralph, just before he committed suicide. Like his father and the other men in his mother's life, Paul experiences tremendous disillusionment about Undine.

Wharton leads to Paul's disillusionment with several pages describing his wanderings through Undine's new house, contrasting these ostentatious surroundings with Paul's loneliness. A brief reference to "pictures he would have liked to know about" suggests a greater depth to this child than we have seen in his mother. Paul especially likes Vandyck's Grey Boy because the boy looks "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" (578).

Paul's perspective is credible because Undine had previously shown so little interest in him. Before she wanted to marry Chelles, Undine had "consoled" herself "by thinking of him [Paul] as 'better off' with Ralph's family, and of herself as rather touchingly disinterested in putting his welfare before her own" (370). But Undine actually wanted to keep herself free of "the additional burden" of caring for Paul (370). The extent of her feelings for Paul is revealed in the following lines: "She could forget him when...things were 'going her way,' but in moments of discouragement the thought of him was an added bitterness, subtly different from her other bitter thoughts, and harder to quiet." (370)

Wharton allows Undine some maternal feelings only to use them to emphasize her shallowness. Having been raised to put herself first, Undine cannot understand her vague feelings for her son. Her superficial view of Paul is also revealed in the thought, "It was dreadful that her little boy should be growing up far away from her, perhaps dressed in clothes she would have hated." (406, my emphasis).

Undine's feelings for Paul suddenly become important when Moffatt suggests she press her claim for custody, in order to get the money from the Marvells that she needs to buy her way into marriage with Chelles. Undine says to Moffatt, "'I can't tell you how I miss him,'" with "a ring of truth that carried conviction to her own ears if not to Moffatt's" (417). Undine has completely convinced herself that she would rather have her son with her but has given him up for his own good. Undine "seemed to see her little boy as though he were in the room with her; she did not understand how she could have lived so long without him..." (418, Wharton's ellipsis). Only now does Undine find the separation from her son unbearable.

With all her manipulations, from her affected frankness toward Ralph to her belatedly demanding custody of her son, Undine appears to be successful in her social climb. With the exception of her affair with Van Degen, she enters into increasingly more prestigious, if not increasingly satisfying, marriages. Undine ultimately seems to have everything she wants. She has respectibility as the wife of a famous art collector, the amusement provided by Moffatt's tremendous

wealth and his interest in the same social group she enjoys, and the bonus of finally being with a man for whom she feels some physical attraction. But as Judith Saunders argues, Undine ultimately fails in that there is always something she cannot have.[30] When Undine learns that Moffatt cannot be an ambassador because she is divorced, she "burst into an angry laugh" and is insulted, "as if the rule had been invented to humiliate her" (594). The novel ends with Undine saying to herself, "it was the one part she was really made for" (594).

Undine is not nearly so sympathetic as the women in The Reef, but like them, she is believable. Undine leaves behind a trail of divorces and other heartaches (Ralph's suicide, Paul's isolation, Moffatt's purchase of the Chelles heirloom tapestries) because she is constantly driven to reach whatever is currently out of reach, and because, with her egocentric view of the world, she can behave cruelly toward others while still perceiving herself as a good person. Because they are seen in comparison to Undine, the male characters in The Custom of the Country are more sympathetic than George Darrow. But except for Moffatt, who understands Undine but considers her another acquisition, they nevertheless misunderstand Undine's character and treat her as a child. The difference is that in The Custom of the Country, unlike in The Reef, the men generally suffer as a result of their failure to perceive Undine as a complex adult.

CONCLUSION

Although the scope of these two novels is quite different, Wharton's careful efforts to create complex women characters are apparent in both The Reef and The Custom of the Country. In some ways, Undine Spragg is similar to Sophy Viner; both women see marriage as their only route to security in their society. But while Sophy ultimately refuses to accept marriage to a man she does not love, Undine moves from one marriage to the next with little concern for such emotional concepts as love. Because of this difference, Sophy is a more sympathetic character. While Undine's story ends in bitterness despite her apparent social success, Sophy makes a graceful exit from The Reef (Anna's final judgment of her notwithstanding). Sophy acknowledges her feelings and acts upon them, a fact which even Anna admires. Undine represses what little emotion she has, such as her feelings for her son, or channels her feelings into projects of acquisition, as when she tries to convince Elmer to make her his mistress.

Anna Leath is also a more sympathetic character than Undine, because of her strong feelings and her attempt to achieve genuine communication with the man she loves. Anna's romantic expectations and her desire for complete communication with George are in contrast to Undine's view of marriage as a business arrangement, and her expectation that she need

contribute only her beauty and her showiness to a marriage. But like Sophy and Undine, Anna mistakenly looks to marriage as an escape from an unsatisfying life.

These women share a desire to have something more in life. Sophy wants financial independence as an actress; when this does not work out for her, she becomes engaged to a wealthy man. Anna, who had become used to her unhappiness, revives her hopes for romantic fulfillment through George; and Undine spends her life constantly seeking more--more money, more amusement, more respectibility. All of these women are dissatisfied with their lives and try to find ways to fulfill their wants. Undine is simply the most extreme case of grasping for more.

All three women also misunderstand the male double standard, and suffer as a result. Sophy, having decided she is in love with George, can neither hide nor disregard her feelings for him. Anna naively expects George to marry Sophy because he has had an affair with her, and cannot resolve her feelings of disgust and insecurity toward George, both for the affair and for his subsequent indifference toward Sophy. And Undine discovers that, while an extra-marital affair may have little lasting effect on the life of a man like Peter Van Degen, it can cost her her place in society. The women differ, however, in that while Anna is emotionally destroyed by George's affair with Sophy, Undine uses the lesson of her social ostracism, after Van Degen fails to marry her, in her careful dealings with Chelles; and Sophy decides not to marry Owen because she realizes she will be unhappy.

Much of our sympathy for Anna and Sophy results from the fact that they are more clearly victims than Undine. Wharton detracts sympathy from Undine partly by increasing our empathy with the people she hurts, as in the chapter devoted to Ralph's emotional deterioration, and in the brief switch to Paul's point of view. Most of George's point of view in The Reef, in contrast, indicates his superficiality and his view of women as different "types" created to serve men.

In fact, in The Custom of the Country Wharton appears to invert the gender roles of The Reef by depicting a superficial woman and an emotional man. Ralph's obsession with his estranged wife's letters is strongly reminiscent of Anna's passionate sensitivity to George's presence. Yet the appearance is deceptive, for as I have discussed, Ralph--and the other male characters in The Custom of the Country--seriously misunderstands Undine and, like George in The Reef, expects her to behave according to his expectations of women. Both Ralph and Raymond de Chelles react to Undine's refusal to be molded in much the same way that George responds to Sophy for loving him: they are completely surprised and unable to accept that a woman could step out of the categories in which they, as men, have placed her.

As Wharton makes clear in the ending of The Custom of the Country, Undine is saved by marriage no more than Anna or Sophy. All three women's attempts to fill their needs through marriage utimately fail. Anna, disillusioned first by her passionless marriage to Fraser and then by George's

infidelity, decides she cannot marry George, but never breaks completely from him. Sophy rejects a loveless marriage which would free her from the world of Mrs. Murrett, and apparently returns to the role from which she had been trying to escape.[31] Although Undine appears to benefit from men's misconceptions about her, she, like the women in The Reef, has also suffered. Undine's success is superficial and leaves her only with bitterness, coupled with a man who, because he is a man, has been able to live his life as she would like to have done. In the end, we find none of these women "having it all."

NOTES

1

See "The Business of Marriage," Ammons 97-124, for instance. Ammons says that the "buried affinity" between Wharton and Undine probably explains why Wharton had trouble writing this novel, and that "her long stagnation on the book broke...at about the same time that her marriage collapsed completely" (98-99). Regarding the timing of these novels, Ammons says, "It is almost as if Ethan Frome freed her to create The Reef, which freed her to complete The Custom of the Country" (78). Wolff also discusses Wharton's difficulties with The Custom of the Country. See Wolff 205 and 223-30.

2

Wolff calls Sophy Viner "a significant step beyond Justine Brent; a link, as it were, between Justine and Undine" (229).

3

R.W.B. Lewis, in Edith Wharton, notes the similarities between young Anna Summers and Edith Jones (326).

4

Ammons discusses George's "Pygmalion" attitudes toward Anna (94).

5

The blatant hypocrisy of George's position was noted as long ago as 1950 by Josephine Lurie Jessup. She comments: "The idea of confiding the child Effie to Miss Viner he finds 'peculiarly repugnant,' although he does not question his own suitability for the role of stepfather, any more than he questions his right to marry the child's mother, at the termination of his former liaison" (25). More recently, Richard Lawson succinctly states the three reasons why George opposes Sophy's marriage to Owen; George "is acting out of an exquisite blend of self-interest, class consciousness, and an unquestioning assumption of a double standard of sexual morality" (57).

6

Lady Ulrica--about whom he now has such unpleasant feelings--is a third type: "the woman who uses the privileges of one class to shelter the customs of another" (25).

7

George's attitude reflects his profession as a diplomatist. Part of the Oxford English Dictionary's 1933 definition of diplomacy is "artful management in dealing with others." A diplomatist is "a shrewd and crafty person" (OED 385-86). These definitions apply to George as he attempts to manage both Anna and Sophy, and as he attempts first to make Sophy

leave Givre without revealing their affair, and later to overcome Anna's scruples.

8 The phrase "professional expertness" echoes two earlier uses of "expert" in the novel. George had initially considered Sophy "expert enough to understand his intention and spare him the boredom of hesitations and misinterpretations" (264). Later, Anna wants "to feel herself less ignorant and inexpert" about such things as George's affair with Sophy (294). The concept of expertness underscores both the relevance of George's profession as diplomatist to his perception of women, and his miscalculations about these two particular women. Sophy, as he discovers too late, is not an "expert" at having affairs; and Anna understands far more than either George or she herself give her credit for.

9 Ammons similarly discusses Anna's "dilemma" of being unable to renounce George, although "she loathes her behavior." Anna is both overwhelmed by her passion for George, since she "has been repressed for so long," and caught in her romantic dream, "the hope for deliverance through love, with marriage following as a matter of course" (Ammons 85-86).

10 Wolff, commenting on George's perception of Sophy and his compartmentalization of women into two major "types," says:

> Clearly Sophy will fit into neither of these comfortable compartments, principally because they are ways of construing the feminine nature that make it entirely ancillary to masculine needs. (211)

11 See The House of Mirth, 71-79. Annette Zilversmit notes that while critics tend to pity Lily for desiring admiration, this is a perfectly normal thing for a person to want ("New Directions"). The same applies to Sophy, who buries her desire for admiration by mentioning it in a string of "things."

12 Both Lawson and Ammons point out that the effect of the novel's final scene is to show how much Sophy has overcome. Ammons says this scene "implicitly admires rather than punishes Sophy Viner: against all odds, she has managed so far to avoid her sister's fate" (91). Lawson, while not agreeing that Wharton intended this effect, says "The overkill [of the final scene] may well induce the modern reader to sympathize with Sophy all the more because she has the integrity to emerge from such an environment as an honest, attractive person....[who] instinctively tells the truth, however painful for herself." (59-60)

13 Ammons also notes similarities between Anna and Sophy but focuses on their relationships with other characters and their similarities to fairy tale heroines. She sees Sophy and

Anna as a "split heroine," "the would-be fairy-tale heroine who is rescued from a miserable life by some sort of Prince Charming hero." Anna resembles Sleeping Beauty, and Sophy resembles Cinderella. Although on one level Sophy is a foil for Anna, Ammons says, they are connected by their love for George, Sophy's engagement to Anna's step-son, and Sophy's role as care-giver to Anna's child (Ammons 80, 91-92).

14

Eugenia DeLamotte says that acting is "the center of nineteenth-century woman's relation to her world" (217). Although the Wharton character with whom she is concerned is Lily Bart, the observation also applies to Anna.

15

Similarly, Anna views Owen's "humours" as "the voice of her secret rebellions," and, we are told, "her tenderness to her step-son was partly based on her severity toward herself. As he had the courage she had lacked, so she meant him to have the chances she had missed; and every effort she made for him helped to keep her own hopes alive" (96). Although Anna attributes the difference between them to her lack of courage, it is apparent that Owen can rebel because he is a man. By attempting to support his choice of a bride, Ann is in a sense trying to live vicariously through him.

16

Ironically, Undine's "originality" is mostly comprised of switching between models. McDowell comments, "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" (80).

17

Ammons discusses the way Undine's idea of marriage fits Thorstein Veblen's description of "the function of the rich man's wife, who should be 'supported in idleness by her owner. She is useless and expensive, and she is consequently valuable as evidence of pecuniary strength'" (Ammons 113). But of Undine's husbands only Elmer, who sees her as another item to collect, adheres to this view.

18

Since I am primarily concerned with Undine, I will consider Ralph's character only in relation to how he perceives her. Several critics have responded to Ralph in greater depth. See, for instance, Collins, Ammons (112-14), and Stein (244-46). McDowell discusses how Wharton uses Ralph's perspective to deliniate Undine as "more than a stereotype" (81).

19

As Collins notes, these two mistakes indicate that Ralph "lacks the practical know-how to use marriage as a way to success in the business world" (201).

20

Gary Lindberg notes, "what he is really trying to do is not to rescue her from social submersion but to protect her from a particular class that he abhors" and "what most disturbs him is not her general moral deficiencies but her specific obtuseness to the delicacies that inform his own

class" (73).

21

James Bailey has discussed the resonances of Undine's name and Wharton's use of the undine, or water sprite, myth in The Custom of the Country. Bailey notes that while in the myth the undine must relinquish her power in order to become mortal, Undine Spragg wants the "best bargain: love that empowers" ("Wharton's Water Sprite").

22

Auchincloss questions the credibility of Ralph committing suicide because "his ex-wife had been secretly married and divorced before she had married him" (104). But Ralph never really perceives Undine as no longer his wife, and the shock of learning about her previous marriage is the culmination of a series of shocks to Ralph.

23

Nancy Morrow makes a similar point. Morrow, however, does not believe there is anything more than Van Degen's use of the double standard involved in his failure to marry Undine. Morrow says, "that Van Degen suddenly reproaches Undine for leaving Ralph practically on his death bed must be seen as simply the most graceful retreat he can manage, and not as some kind of moral awakening, as his story implies" (35). Van Degen clearly is rationalizing his actions, but that does not mean he wouldn't be disturbed by the way Undine treated Ralph.

24

Ammons notes that "His lovely jealousy...is not a sign of affection but of power" and that "the 'charming' Raymond is simply a nightmarish exaggeration" of Ralph (115-16), and Allen Stein says Undine's third marriage "is essentially a repetition of her marriage to Ralph, only now rendered satirically" (247).

25

Wershoven similarly notes that this part of the novel is sympathetic to Undine "because of the particularly cold and imprisoning nature of the trap Undine has married into" (68).

26

In contrast, the reference to Chelles as a "fine actor" has been cited to suggest that his outbreak should not be taken too seriously. See for example Wershoven, who says Raymond's expression when he delivers his "long and angry speech" contributes to "a sense of an innate phoniness" which was already established when he "took the part of ardent suiter" during their courtship and "Undine seemed to sense that he was acting" (69). But again, this is Undine's perception; having acted, but never felt ardent herself, she does not think others actually have such feelings either.

27

Stein notes how Undine is affected by her lack of power:

> Barred because of her sex from the sources of power available to men and incapable of understanding the underlying causes of her resultant sense of

> frustration in the role of consumer forced on her by her training in modern America, she is chronically restive, dissatisfied, grasping--seeking feverishly in possession, social position, and men the power for which, largely unbeknown to herself, she really longs. (244-45)

[28] Nevius suggests that the real reason Undine cannot ultimately succeed is because "Undine's notion of amusement and Edith Wharton's notion of respectability can never be joined" and that Wharton had slowly withdrawn her sympathy for Undine, "which, even at first, seemed tentative and forced" (151-52).

[29] Beth Kowaleski-Wallace has discussed how Wharton's use of Paul's perspective manipulates the reader to feel outraged for Paul, thereby keeping us distanced from Undine. Wallace also convincingly argues that we are harsher toward Undine as a failed parent than we would be toward a man ("The Reader as Misogynist").

[30] Judith Saunders has discussed how, in Wharton's fiction, characters tend to repeat struggles that do not succeed. Thus, as Saunders notes, Undine's story appears to be one of upward movement, but there is actually a theme of failure because she is never satisfied ("Repetitive Action").

[31] That Sophy and Owen actually elope at the end is a possibility which, as far as I know, criticism has not addressed. Both leave on a long trip, and Owen's inability to face Anna when they last meet may suggest more than his discomfort about everything that has happened so far. Even if we entertain the possibility that Sophy and Owen elope, however, that ending still leaves Sophy unrescued, since she does not love Owen.

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