Szeged Series in American Studies 1

REVISITING THE PAST

American Culture in Contemporary Context

Edited by
Irén Annus and Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

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AMERICANA eBooks # Szeged Series in American Studies is a new book series launched by AMERICANA eBooks based at the University of Szeged, Hungary for the production and dissemination of academic ork in the multidisciplinary field of American Studies.

Revisiting the Past: American Culture in Contemporary Context collects and connects publications by the staff of the Department of American Studies at the University of Szeged across a wide range of subjects: American popular cuture, visual culture, children's literature, modernist literature, autobiography, performance studies, Interamerican Studies.

Series editors: Réka M. Cristian & Zoltán Dragon

ISBN: 978-615-5423-77-2 (.mobi); 978-615-5423-76-5 (.epub);
978-615-5423-75-8 (PoD)

AMERICANA eBooks is a division of *AMERICANA – E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*,
published by the Department of American Studies,
University of Szeged, Hungary.
http://ebooks.americanaejournal.hu

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Contents

The Business of Marriage: Clashing American and French Roles for Turn-of-the-century Married Women in Edith Wharton

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

In Wharton criticism, there is a tendency to look at Wharton the critic of culture rather than Wharton the feminist author because of her ambiguous representation of women's issues. The paper locates this ambiguity as part of Wharton's general preference for dualities. There is a double strategy at work in Wharton's texts that not only criticizes but also accepts the overwhelming social and cultural changes late nineteenth century American modernization has triggered, and for the representation of women this means a critical attitude to modern feminine gender roles. In particular, the paper investigates Wharton's ambiguous representation of cultural change in the life of a married woman in *The Custom of the Country* (1913). Undine Spragg is a ruthless opportunist, who consumes four husbands for social uplift. Wharton's representation of Undine is highly critical: Undine stands for the Modern American *nouveau riche* whose abundance of energy and money threatens the nineteenth-century genteel New York City cultural elite with extinction. However, Undine also learns about New York City social life, European customs, and Parisian manners in the course of her marriages. The paper analyzes Undine's changing social positions as a married woman and investigates what it is that Undine actually learns in the course of her marriages by comparing the extent of her adaptation to norms of behavior in Wharton's chapter on "The New Frenchwoman" in her *French Ways and their Meaning* (1919). The paper claims that Undine becomes a professional businesswoman and her position is represented ambiguously in the novel because it is shown both from the perspective of American and French ideas of married womanhood.[9]

Keywords: marriage, manners, cultural change, *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *French Ways and their Meaning* (1919), the new Frenchwoman

0. Proema

In the conclusion of her *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Edith Wharton differentiates between two kinds of Hell, a Latin and an Anglo-Saxon version. To be more precise, she distinguishes between two different concepts of Hell: one version is symbolized by Paolo and Francesca's story, the other by *The Scarlet Letter* narrative. Wharton argues that the positions the adulterous lovers take in their respective Hells reflect the values Latin and Anglo-Saxon cultures attribute to morals in general. In the Latin version the lovers are placed in the temperate zone of Hell because their sin against the third person is not considered a serious one. In this framework, real sinners are traitors of business, state, religion, and friendship instead. Conversely, in the Anglo-Saxon version the lovers are punished most severely because their sin against the third person is considered most serious, whereas in this framework business or state affiliations matter less.

The basis of the difference lies in how the two cultures think about the relationship between individual and community. Wharton claims the Latin model places values and rules of the community higher than individual ones, while the Anglo-Saxon version reflects a belief that individual values and rights are worth more than those of the community. Wharton claims that Americans could use the French concept more than they think. This scenario is challenging as it also characterizes Wharton's perspective and method. Focusing on the theme of interpersonal and social relationships, she jumps to generalizations about morals and nations as a whole, and even makes comparisons between cultures with an educational intent.

Wharton draws special attention to the roles of Latin and Anglo-Saxon women in the adulterous scenarios and in married life. In Latin cultures, it would seem, adultery is tolerated as long as the women remain close knit business partners of their husbands and reliable members of their community as wives. In contrast, an Anglo-Saxon context expects them to be more virtuous than social and place the value individual faithfulness above any other value. It is natural to ask the question which cultural context dominates the married life of a repatriate American woman like Ellen Olenska in NYC in *The Age of Innocence*, or conversely, how an American woman manages to function as wife in a Latin country, like Undine Spragg of Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* in Paris.

Wharton's direct engagement with issues of the marriage market has been pursued by critics for long. Most recently, Pamela Knights explained the intricacies of the institution of marriage in the US before the turn of the

century (Knights 2012, 230-4) and Linda Wagner-Martin surveyed the conscious decision on Wharton's side not to represent herself as a sentimental woman novelist when she wrote about marriage and marriageable female characters (Wagner-Martin 2012, 243). Emily Orlando succinctly connects "the seeing eye" Wharton attributes to be the result of French cultural tradition in *French Ways* to Ellen Olenska's creative relation to art and marriage (Orlando 2007, 171 and 224). Yet, it is Virginia Ricard who argues that France provided Wharton with a standard from which to criticize the US and to compare French women to women in the US, clearly preferring French ways also in marriage (Ricard 2019, 86).

In general, Wharton's relation to France is not necessarily linked to her concern with women's roles. William Blazek tells about Wharton's relation to France by prioritizing the topic of cultural continuity; and *French Ways* as a historical account of national characteristics not gendered ones (Blazek, 2012, 280). Similarly, Laura Rattray's positions *French Ways* as part of a war related cultural debate rather than an exposé on gender related concerns when she considers it as Wharton's defense of her decision to live in France (Joslin and Price 1993, 10, 12 qted. in Rattray 2020, 107) and when, as a contrast, she also points out Wharton's enhanced *identification* with America in the text (Rattray 2020, 107). In the same vein, discussions of the frightening destruction of French cultural continuity the Great War represents for Wharton prefer to focus on Wharton's architectural language of loss undifferentiated by gender (see Carney 2016, 198 and Kovács 2017, 559).

Drawing upon both the interest in marriage and comparative cultural studies, the essay below maps out the story of Undine Spragg's ambiguous marital behavior in *The Custom of the Country* in relation to clashing national expectations of gender performance at the intersection of national, gender and class issues.

1. Introduction

In Wharton criticism, there is a tendency to look at Wharton the critic of culture rather than Wharton the feminist author. In 1988, Amy Kaplan discussed Wharton's problems with traditional gender roles for upper class American women in terms of professionalization. In 1995, Nancy Bentley showed Wharton's interest in American and European ways as an ethnographically oriented project that both criticizes and accepts the changing of manners. In 2004, Jeannie Kassanoff pointed out Wharton's conservatism in her cultural politics. Bentley, Kaplan, and Kassanoff all approach Wharton's fiction as social practice that produces a discourse of culture (Bentley 1995a, 3;

Kaplan 1988, 7; Kassanoff 2004, 4). Moreover, they all find a double strategy at work in Wharton's texts. Amy Kaplan locates a double strategy in Wharton's early short stories about women artists that represent her attempt "to write herself out of the private domestic sphere and to inscribe a public identity in the marketplace" (Kaplan 1988, 67), neither being active against a male tradition of writing nor being a representative of a separate sphere of women's writing. Instead, she wrote realistically as part of her struggle to define the nature of professional female authorship by relying on traditional male genres and rhetoric. This vision of the link between domestic space and public space -- which also appeared in other art forms in contemporary American culture, such as painting (Annus 2010, 128-130) -- represents the core of Kaplan's current analyses of the dynamic of imperial expansion both in domestic and foreign policies of the US in the 19th century (Kaplan 1993, 11 and 2005, 25), with a focus on how deeply the rhetoric of domesticity permeated debates about national expansion (Kaplan 2002, 115).

Bentley asserts that Wharton's fiction performs an ambiguous strategy of representation, as her texts both "critique and preserve the authority of the late 19th century elite class, a double strategy that finally serves to accommodate the very social changes the class appeared to oppose" (Bentley 1995b, 49 and Bentley 2003, 151), in other words they do not only criticize but also accept the overwhelming social and cultural changes late 19th century American modernization has triggered. More recently, Kassanoff identifies Wharton's conservative theory of race and also attests to her texts' hybrid force that fails to authenticate Wharton's conservative notion of American (racial) identity (Kassanoff 2004, 7). So the ambiguous representation of historical change Bentley explicated seems relevant not only to modernization but to racial and gender representations as well.

In *The Custom of the Country* issues of gender performance, cultural change, and national culture intersect and are represented ambiguously. Undine Spragg from Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913) is a ruthless opportunist: she goes through four husbands in quick succession who help her reach her social and economic aims. On the one hand, Wharton's representation of Undine is highly critical: Undine stands for the Modern American *nouveau riche* whose abundance of energy and money threatens the nineteenth-century genteel New York City cultural elite with extinction. On the other hand, Undine does learn a lot about New York City social life, European customs, and Parisian manners. In this paper I wish to investigate what it is that Undine actually learns in the course of her marriages, and whether her new knowledge modifies the initial *nouveau riche* cultural position assigned to her in the text.

I frame the problem of Undine's professionalization as a problem at the intersection of gender, class, and sexuality that is articulated in a dual rhetoric of criticism and acceptance following Nancy Bentley's example. I suggest that we look at Undine' position in the context of Wharton's ethnographically oriented writing on French and American women. I claim that Wharton's criticism of American women in her *French Ways and their Meaning* (1919) fits Undine's position to perfection. However, looking at Undine as a middle class uncultivated social upstart disregards the alterations she undergoes and the skills she does acquire through the story. To me, during her social ascent she becomes a businesswoman, and one should account for the skills of her profession as part of the story of her ascent.

To substantiate the idea above, the paper is divided into three parts. The first section delineates Undine's various positions as a wife in *A Custom* as that of a socially ascending American married woman. In the second section, I go on to Wharton's view of the differences between French and American ways of marriage on the basis of her *French Ways*. Eventually, I reassess Undine's class, gender, and sexual positions in terms of her professionalization, pointing out her new qualities as a those of businesswoman that can be seen from both the French and the American perspectives. I argue that Wharton's double rhetoric of criticism and praise of change can be identified in her representation of Undine's professionalization: a businesswoman whose trade is marriage.

2. The critique of Undine Spragg

Undine Spragg's four marriages and her notions about manners, entertainment, motherhood, sexuality, and, last but not least, money, represent an attitude to American marriage that is thoroughly criticized in the book. I wish to show the link between this criticism and Wharton's ideas of the New Frenchwoman in her *French Ways*, so first let us lay out conflicting female role models in the novel.

Changing American customs

Early on in the novel one character, Charles Bowen points out the main problem behind Undine's behavior. The omniscient observer character of the novel discusses the custom of the country, the US, regarding the relationship between an American man and his wife. Bowen the quasi scientist ethnographer claims that '*Homo sapiens Americanus'* does not take enough interest in his wife. He has his real life, the real business of life he considers

serious. Also, he has his life of the home, but his domestic context remains unaware of his hard work at the office. The wife knows nothing about her husband's public business life, because although the husband slaves away at the office, sacrifices himself at work, — he has nothing to communicate about this to his wife. Bowen thinks this attitude reflects the man's indifference to his wife. For the man, the primacy of business has brought his inability of knowing how to spend his money, therefore it is the wife who spends the money without a single idea of its origins. Yet, the man makes only material sacrifice for the women, no ideal or romantic ones. He is too preoccupied to share his real life, and instead he tosses money, motors, clothes to his woman to make up for the absence of the real. This, for Bowen, is humbug, a big bribe paid for women for keeping out of man's way. It is the custom of the country not to bore the women with business matters, but this custom practically boils down to American men's indifference to wives and eventually results in the wives' sham pretentious notion of life.

For Bowen, this division of gender roles has come to being recently with the emergence of men of business in the social scene. Before, the emotional center of a man's life was 'love'. Today, the emotional center of man's life is 'business' (chapter XV). Because of this shift, there is a breach between the hemisphere of men and women, with their different emotional centers, business and love, respectively.

Undine's case

Ironically, in the case of Undine Spragg and her marriage to the effete Washington Square gentile, Ralph Marvel, it is the woman who has switched to a new understanding of public and domestic spheres, while her husband, Ralph is still burdened by the old notion of love. This setup has disastrous results when Ralph has to go to business. He cannot adopt business and money-making as the emotional center of his life, while his wife expects him to excel in this new sphere and provide for her domestic existence plentifully. His allusions to love in the old sense carry no meaning for her, while his inability to make money makes her impatient for her chance of life in terms of money, motors, and clothes. The same clash of roles is valid for the relation of Clare van Degen and Peter van Degen. Here it is the wife who has the old notion of love as the emotional center for the lives of the partners, while Peter has already switched to a businessman's attitude to his most precious asset, his wife. Peter, then, floods his wife with money, motors, and clothes and does not care to know why she still seems discontent.

Undine's divorce from Ralph is the inevitable result of this incommensurable distribution of roles. However, her next divorce from her French aristocrat of a husband, Raymond de Chelles, is also connected to their different ideas about roles in matrimony. Undine breaks the laws of French social life by getting married to de Chelles in the first place. As an American *divorcée*, she would be welcome to be the 'friend' of the man provided she keeps up appearances. But she is determined to play the game according to her own rules and coaxes the Frenchman into marrying her. Then she is appalled to learn the roles she has to perform as the wife of a French nobleman. Her main grudge is her husband's relation to money. He is happy to invest and spend money on his estate, but he is more than unwilling to pay Undine's bills. Also, they have an *hôtel* in Paris, but they only live in its back quarter for two months of the year. The main apartment is let, and anyway, ten months of the year are spent in an ancient castle in Burgundy, without proper social life, and also without proper piping, electricity, and heating. Also, there is an expectation for family loyalty, which primarily means an active participation in social activities connected to family relations. Moreover, it does not help that Undine is unable to join conversations on literature, arts, politics that are going on in the French salons associated with her new family. From her perspective, she is prevented from the pursuit of other, for her more enjoyable, social activities during the short two months in Paris: dining out in restaurants, motoring about, wearing splendid clothes in the company of her compatriots.

The different ideas of social propriety the spouses cling to result in a swift estrangement between husband and wife, culminating in the argument about the family tapestries. The de Chelles family possesses ancient tapestries from the age of Louis XIV hung in the draughty halls of the castle in Burgundy. Raymond would be happy to miss one Paris season to save some money, but Undine rejects this proposition wholeheartedly. Instead, she invites a salesperson to estimate the value of the tapestries. When Raymond learns of this, he tries to explain the symbolic importance of the tapestries, the family tradition they stand for, but Undine does not understand. This incompatibility of opinion also represents the breach between the two. He goes off on errands to his 'friend,' leaving Undine without the chance to conceive the heir expected of her. She meditates on her unhappiness and the chances of divorce.

Undine is content to join her last husband (who was also her first husband to divorce), Moffatt, the successful American businessman who finally shares her social code. She does not seem to understand where the money comes

from but is an expert in spending it on social entertainment. They have a house in NYC on Fifth Avenue, a mansion in Paris, and they travel around a lot, in the company of their compatriots. The husband remains indifferent to his wife's sphere and her way of spending money — the way Bowen had described the relation. At the same time, Moffatt is involved in spending money on art objects he has an unsuspected but excellent taste for. His aesthetic sense is not paralleled by that of his wife, but this has no effect on their matrimonial bliss.

3. Marriage and the new Frenchwoman in *French Ways and Their Meaning*

This story of changing and incompatible gender roles is a familiar theme from Wharton's novels and short stories. However, in her study of French customs, *French Ways and Their Meaning*, she lays out the exact difference between current American gender roles and French ones, also indicating her preferences.

In *French Ways*, Wharton distinguishes the Latin and the Anglo-Saxon conceptions of marriage. In the Anglo-Saxon world, marriage is supposed to be determined solely by reciprocal inclination, and to bind the parties not only to a social but also to a physical lifelong loyalty. In this system, love which never has accepted and never will accept such bonds (as Wharton claims), immediately becomes a pariah and sinner when experienced outside marriage. Conversely, in the Latin world, a marriage is founded for the family and not for the husband and wife. Marriage secures husband and wife as associates in the foundation of a home and the creation of a family. It is a kind of superior business association based on community of class, of political and religious opinion, and an exchange of advantages. Love is not expected in the association neither as an emotion nor in the form of physical loyalty. In other words, Wharton defies the old stereotype of the immoral and sensuous Frenchman and woman by placing the phenomenon of illicit sex into a social context quite incomprehensible for the average American. She names this role model the "new Frenchwoman" (not to be mixed up with the notion of the "New Woman" from the first part of the twentieth-century, see Tóth 2005, 257). Such an attitude to the French and American conceptions of marriage expressing the superiority of the former over the latter was in sharp contrast to the one represented by Thomas Jefferson, who promoted the American way of intramarital relations, finding it ideal both in terms of men's affection for women and productivity in family business are concerned (Vajda 2012).

For Wharton the French businesslike association of man and woman, interestingly, is a sign of more superior interpersonal relations between them than the relation between married man and woman in the Anglo-Saxon world. In France the idea of equality extends to the relation of man and woman, she claims. Here the married woman becomes a full social partner of the man, she is not only socially free to take part in the intellectual life of the salons. Rather, in many cases she rules French life through the important relations she can establish with men in her circle. Wharton calls these relations "frank social relations" (Wharton 1919, 112) and contrasts them to the relations an American woman has both to her husband and to men in general. In the US, a girl is free to romp around in society until she becomes married: then she is cut off from men's society in all but the most formal ways. An American woman is listened to by women, because women are restricted to the domestic sphere where they are engaged by questions of art and the home. In America, the result of the clear division of roles between domestic and public spheres is an odd Anglo-Saxon view that a love of beauty and an interest in ideas imply effeminacy.

4. The critique of Undine Spragg

In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine Spragg seems to represent upper class American women, who are criticized in *French Ways*. Undine romped around freely with young men as a girl, and as a married woman she is expected to learn stricter rules of associating with men. She does not understand the business sphere of her husbands' life, and lives her own pretentious one centered on flimsy social activity and a display of money. Also, she remains ignorant of French expectations of behavior as well, she has not been able to interiorize the value attached to family loyalty, tradition, culture, and economy that are the chief characteristics of the French system of values. Elaine Showalter points out that Undine in fact lives a freer life than a French woman, and learns not only a new social language characteristic of her new set but also a skill to bargain and negotiate, the art of the deal (Showalter 1995, 91). These new skills are acquired as part of her story of adaptation. I wish to link this idea to Wharton's criticism of Undine's ways so far.

Apart from her beauty, it is Undine's flexibility to learn and adopt to her surroundings that singles her out for social success.[10] Her first appearance shows her as a flexible, doubling and twitching person (Wharton 1989, 7)[11] who likes to dress up and play lady for her mirror (16) and also for an audience like the one at the Opera (37). Her only problem is that once she has acquired a certain behavior, she always realizes there is something even better beyond that: "it was her fate to find out just too late about the something beyond," (34) and accepted values are reversed again and again (164, like for Mae West in Tóth 2015). What are the ways of behavior she learns? Out in Apex she wants something else already: she goes for holidays to lakes, to the East, to the sea to see social life unattainable to her. The family's departure for NYC in search of a husband is part of this scheme. After her marriage to Ralph, she is quick to adopt to the Marvel's codes but sees she has chosen the wrong set, as she joined "the exclusive and the dowdy of the past instead of the showy and the promiscuous," who possess the future (111). Then she learns the possibilities open for a *divorcée* in America and in France. She goes on to join an aristocratic French social system but its actual code of behavior does not fit her, so she quits again, this time for the glittering promiscuous fast world of the rich American businessman.

Undine changes from an invader in the making to an invader at its most active. At the outset, when she has not learnt the language of her new class yet, Ralph wants to teach her something about an inner life that does not exist in the glittering world of surfaces. Yet Undine is made out for adapting to her

actual context in minute detail and has no eye for the interior. She notices new tones and is quick to pick them up to attain her own end: entertainment. For instance, at her first dinner with the Marvels, she is silent and takes in "the world of half-lights half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations, gradations of tone" (ch III) but it is all alien to her – later when she has to evade her husband's queries as to her use of time, she applies these methods for not giving straight answers. It is always her who hits the nail on the head when a problematic situation is to be solved. She picks up ways of thinking from her male friends. Her male friends like Peter van Degen and Elmer Moffatt tell her about business dealings and even give her advice she can make good use of. Peter gives her money with the intent to make her his mistress eventually, to buy her body, as it were – a deal she is careful to keep with the code of the honest married woman, only desiring a new marriage, not an extramarital affair (not as a *mujer mala,* see Cristian 2017, 173 but rather the way Julia Childs adopts French recipes to American ingredients as in Cristian 2018). She is effective in her dealings with tradesmen. She pleads for money from the right people, she drains the Marvels from their last dollar blackmailing them by threatening to take her son away from them. She wins Peter van Degen's offer for marriage as the result of a tricky business negotiation where she pulls threads and plays with emotional pressure consciously as if winning a bargain (168). She follows a similar method when she makes de Chelles ask to marry her: she explains the stakes and creates a business negotiation where she wins the deal. So she makes use of the social knowledge she acquired in the exclusive Washington Square context to realize her 5th Avenue aims.

She seems to be a counterpart of Elmer Moffatt, the successful American businessman. Yet, Undine lacks several characteristics that make Elmer different from the rest. Elmer is detached, ironic, sees through his partners' motivations. He has an irreverent sense of humor and no respect for sham social life. Ralph likens him to a director of a play and even to a novelist, who sees the psychology of his business partner as a novelist sees his characters and makes them act and speak with a view of the larger design of -the novelistic plot (132, 150-1). Apart from his intelligence, Moffatt also possesses an involuntary aesthetic sense triggered by art objects. Undine learns Elmer's methods but she does not possess his intelligence and aesthetic sense. Undine has no social charm to accompany her actions.

5. Conclusion

What does Undine's professionalization mean from the perspective of the Whartonian conflict between Invaders and Aborigines? Is Moffatt's kind of

doing business and making money acceptable, while Undine's way of social bargaining without charm is not? From the perspective of the usual Whartonian double rhetoric of criticizing and negotiating the shock of the American modernization, Undine's representation in *The Custom of the Country* fits in perfectly. Her social manner is criticized both from an elite New York City perspective and a traditional European perspective, but even from that of the new American hero, the successful businessman. It seems that the new American businesswoman needs to learn even more from her male counterparts. In turn, the manners of new American businessmen represented by Moffatt can be synchronized with the requirements of the old elite (Ralph) and European tradition (Raymond).

Another way to think about Undine's social uplift is in terms of architectural metaphors Wharton is so fond of. Undine's social ascent can be characterized by the spaces she occupies. Her years in New York spent waiting for a husband and presenting an attractive surface is contextualized by the Sentorian Hotel. Her next stage, the marriage to Ralph, can be characterized through her relations to the ancient Marvell house at Washington Square, her friends' houses on 5th Avenue, and to her own house way off West. Her aim to become free is worded in her Paris hotel room. Her French phase and difficulties are expressed by her understanding of the Paris mansion and the Dordogne castle. Eventually, the new Paris mansion and the New York City house on 5th Avenue represent her social ideals most perfectly. Yet, she cannot sit still and stick to any of these symbolic spaces, as being on the move and staying at a hotel (in the American sense) is her most natural environment that reflects her superficial interest in interiors.

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