Frères Ennemis

William Cloonan

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Chapter III

The American Woman
and the Invention of Paris

\textit{The Custom of the Country}

L’Américaine est l’avenir (déjà présent) de l’Américain.

(Charles Crosnier de Varigny, cited in Philippe Roger, \textit{L’ennemi américain})

“Undine Spragg – how \textit{can you}?” are the opening words of \textit{The Custom of the Country}. They reflect Mrs. Spragg's exasperated sense of wonder and confusion concerning her daughter’s comportment. These sentiments are often shared by the reader as well. Who is this undereducated, small-town girl who claws her way to the top of the American expatriate world and becomes a leading figure in Parisian society? Why does she act the way she does? What complicates the response to these questions is that the story initially appears to supply a very straightforward answer, but which, upon examination, proves to be dissatisfying.

This novel, published in 1913, might easily be read as the story of a woman deeply frustrated by her economic marginalization in a man's world. A character in \textit{The Custom of the Country}, Charles Bowen, gives a certain credence to this approach when he describes the infantilization of society women in the Gilded Age. According to Bowen, these women are loved and admired by husbands who nevertheless do not take them seriously:

The fact is the average American looks down on his wife. ... It’s normal for a man to work hard for a woman – what’s abnormal is his not caring to tell her anything about it [his job] ... Why haven’t we
taught our women to take an interest in our work. Simply because we don’t take enough interest in them. (757; emphasis original)

Bowen’s point is that the American socialite is frustrated because she is permitted to play no role other than a decorative one in her husband’s accumulation and enhancement of wealth. She is kept away from his financial affairs and confined, as it were, to a gilded pedestal. This is, Bowen argues, a source of resentment and frustration among women and helps account in part for the burgeoning divorce rate. As a description of the social position of the well-off woman at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, this portrait may well have merit, although it has been contested.¹ Yet it is hardly applicable to Undine, who both embraces and exploits the limits of her social position. She questions neither her role as a female whose beauty is an asset that enhances the reputation of her male companion nor the function in general of women in society. Annoyance at unforeseen obstacles, more than anger, characterizes Undine’s attitude toward her social situation, and her petulance can be easily soothed by an immediate influx of money, a substance she finds indispensable but whose origins are of no interest to her. For Undine, “Money disappeared, but always returned” (948). Mrs. Fairford, Bowen’s interlocutor, succinctly and astutely remarks, concerning Undine’s putative need to be informed of the family’s financial situation by her husband, that “She’d be bored to death if he did” (757).

It is Undine’s insatiable craving for money and what it brings which accounts in part for the intensity of the moral condemnation her character has provoked in readers and critics from the time of the novel’s publication until today. In an article entitled “Landscape with the Fall of Undine,” Margaret Murray provides excerpts from the reviews of Wharton’s novel that appeared shortly after its publication. According to the New York Times of the day, Undine “is merely greed personified – without … heart, conscience, sense of honor or sense of humor … scruples never enter her head” (118). The Saturday Review of the era echoed these sentiments about Undine: “She does not have a single redeeming feature” and, if that were not sufficiently damming, the Saturday Review writer adds, “Mrs. Wharton has assembled as many detestable people as it is possible to pack between the covers of a six hundred page novel” (118). Murray sums up the initial critical reaction to Undine as follows: “Contemporary critics were at pains to point out how thoroughly distasteful Undine was to them” (118).
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Over a hundred years later, the sense of moral opprobrium which Undine generates has remained largely unabated. For Robin Peel, “Undine is one of the terrible engines of destruction that horrified Wharton and, what is worse, she stands as a metaphor for the future” (203). Carol Wershoren finds that Undine “does not seek human contact or emotions from others, because she sees others only in terms of their usefullness” (59), while Blake Nevius considers her “the spirit of materialism incarnate” (152). In a similar vein, Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes that the novel has “no moral center” (232) and that Undine is a “creature without a soul ... the perfect and monstrous emblem of the time” (233).

These condemnations are powerful, but whether they provide an accurate appraisal of the character is another matter. The “real” Undine would certainly be crass, vulgar, and dishonest, but if the fictional Undine continues to fascinate as much as outrage, that is in large measure due to the way the text directs attention less to Undine’s numerous flaws (although they are certainly indicated) than to her unrelenting pursuit of social success and the delight this engenders in her. To appreciate this subtle shift in focus involves first of all separating authorial intent from the finished text. While it cannot be doubted that Wharton was appalled by what her main character represented and sought to condemn her conduct, her portrait of Undine is not primarily moralistic. The novel clearly focuses on Undine’s achievements rather than on the ethical principles she might have ignored on her way to success. From the very first page, Undine is presented essentially as she will be throughout the novel: egocentric, crass, and ambitious. She will rapidly lose her naivety as she develops her guile. This is the only significant change in her character. Her ambition is intense but what spurs it, other than pure self-interest, remains largely unexamined. In the process of writing The Custom of the Country, Wharton seems to have unconsciously shifted the focus from the psychological make-up of the individual character to her actions. There is no effort to delve into Undine’s putative insecurities and only a limited effort to detail the factors which spur her drive for success. While Wharton makes evident the ways in which the young woman’s single-mindedness creates havoc in polite society, wrecks at least two men, and psychologically damages her own child, these activities are not the center of the story; they are collateral damage. The novel’s emphasis is elsewhere.

What characterizes Undine Spragg is not who she is in some profound psychological sense, but what she does; for such a person, failure is
occasionally acceptable, or at least part of a process, provided it proves to be the stepping stone to eventual success. To a greater or lesser degree, all the society women in the novel partake of some of Undine’s characteristics, but none is her equal in the intensity of the drive to succeed.

The value of approaching Undine as someone more developed than an allegorical figure, yet lacking in complexity and depth, is twofold. First of all, it moves the discussion away from self-righteous, moralistic conclusions, while remaining closer to the substance of the text. Henry James points toward a plausible explanation of why traditional moral values are not the main concern in *The Custom of the Country*: “We move in an air purged at a stroke of the old sentimental and romantic values” (cited in Walton, 114). The novel is not focused on the sort of complicated individual description or moral dilemmas one might find in earlier fiction, even including Wharton’s own *The House of Mirth* (1905), where the heroine’s greatest struggle is to know herself and find love. Nor does it dwell at any length on right and wrong. Instead, *The Custom of the Country* centers on what is practical and achievable for a woman; it is not about what a woman should do, but what she can do. The novel is much more descriptive than judgmental. It is certainly a satire of the female American social climber, and while Wharton may well have loathed everything Undine represented, the story she tells nevertheless treats her creation with a grudging respect, tinged with a degree of admiration for her indefatigable spirit.

Secondly, concentrating on Undine in terms of her insatiable ambition, rather than as a totally realistic character, helps account for some of the novel’s and the main character’s peculiarities. In terms of verisimilitude, Carolyn Wolff has rightly remarked that “the novel’s realism is strained almost to the point of collapse” (231), while Blake Nevius has noted that “Psychologically [Undine] ... is the most uncomplicated heroine in Edith Wharton’s gallery” (149). One might also add that she remains the most successful. Undine is not very financially astute, yet this ignorance proves no great problem since she is “the only one of Wharton’s early heroines to deal successfully ... with social and economic reality” (Ammons, 111).

Certainly Undine has little or no interest in intellectual matters or the arts, except for how they might be used for decorative or manipulative purposes. Her story unfolds at a moment of great financial upheaval in her native country, radical changes precipitated to a great extent by the arrival of robber barons on the scene. Yet Undine displays little interest in any history other than her own. The character Charles Bowen claims
that Undine Spragg represents the success of American capitalism (759), a sentiment Hermione Lee appears to echo when she writes that “Undine may be ignorant of business matters, but she embodies the forces of capitalism” (*Edith Wharton*, 436). Yet nothing in the novel suggests that social forces, as opposed to societal fashions, have molded or are molding her. Certainly she displays no struggle to come to terms with her own identity amid the changes affecting American society as a whole. Her emergence on the scene might well accompany the latest triumph of capitalism, but while she must certainly be to some degree the result of the social agitation around her, the novel forgoes a detailing of the process of her formation and presents Undine as the finished product of that system, a person who never doubts her social values or ambitions, primarily because she never even questions them.

Very few of the socially significant issues of the Gilded Age are presented in the novel, and those which are receive only a tangential development; they serve primarily to make clear the obstacles which Undine confronts and the ways she overcomes them. The historical setting’s primary role is simply to provide the backdrop; while Undine is most definitely a figure of the Gilded Age, the nature of this society, outside of the narrow world in which she functions, is not the focal point. The reader knows the approximate historical period wherein the story unfolds, but the precise timeframe remains somewhat unclear.³

It is tempting, but somewhat misleading, to compare Undine to the robber barons, exemplified by her first (and fourth) husband, Elmer Moffatt. She has his drive and the additional asset of being able to bend otherwise powerful men to her will. She has his lack of scruples, along with his relaxed attitude toward ethical issues, and, even more than Elmer, an obsessive focus on her goals. Yet she has an inherent weakness which distinguishes her from the robber barons. Her major handicap is that she is a woman. Although Undine is quite capable of succeeding in a man’s world, she cannot do so without a man; because of gender inequality she will always be in an inferior position, socially speaking. Typically, Undine chooses to work with this situation, rather than rail against its injustice. Nonetheless, she can never have a totally independent triumph. *The Custom of the Country* manages the impressive feat of describing in very concrete terms the force of female ambition, as well as its inherent social weakness, which can be largely overcome, or at least minimized, by the strength of a woman’s character and cunning.
From her earliest appearance in the text, Undine instinctively understands that her goal is not to challenge the social system but to exploit and enjoy it. If it were indeed true that “the American man lavishes his fortune on his wife because he doesn't know what to do with it” (758), that would be just fine with Undine. She would know what to do with the money. Indeed, she would have more ideas for spending it than her husbands had the means of earning it. In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine usually finds herself surrounded by socially powerful American women with access to great wealth. While none so thoroughly embodies the single-minded pursuit of the social success which money makes possible, the fundamental difference between Undine and the more established socialites is that only she realizes that the pursuit of success never ceases. The achievement of one goal just opens a vista onto the next. Undine Spragg is the quintessence of the female American social climber of boundless ambition who finds in Europe the perfect background to display her one great creation: herself.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about the main character in *The Custom of the Country* is that throughout the novel she displays a staggering amount of unpleasant, parvenu attributes that she manages to turn into assets which facilitate her relentless ascendancy to the top of the social ladder. Undine comes from a little town in rural America, but to reach the heights of the social hierarchy in Apex City is well below her ambitions. Even as a child when she displayed the most lukewarm interest in children’s games (635), Undine had higher aspirations, and they were all focused on social advancement, something she would eventually succeed at brilliantly, though not by virtue of a superior intelligence, which in the traditional understanding of the term she does not possess. She is not thoughtful, has little time for self-reflection or doubt, and is totally self-absorbed: “It never occurred to her that other people’s lives went on when they were out of her range of vision” (894). Her single foray into culture, in an effort to impress Raymond de Chelles’s French friends, involves several trips to the Louvre, which only ends in disaster: “She was disconcerted ... by finding that everybody appeared to know about the things she thought she had discovered, and her comments clearly produced more bewilderment than interest” (980).

If Undine is a woman of little intellectual substance, she is also not particularly imaginative, but this too quickly becomes an advantage as it helps define her goals, which are quite simple. She desires: “what others want” (687). Undine does not have to waste her time figuring out what she
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would like to possess or become since those knotty issues have already been resolved by contemporary fashion. Her approach to social success is therefore uncomplicated: to succeed in society one has to share the same aspirations as the social leaders and, ideally, achieve more of these goals than others in her milieu: “Undine always liked to know that what belonged to her was coveted by others” (771). An important tool in this endeavor is most obviously her great beauty, but a striking physical appearance and her delight in “the general homage to her beauty” (683) are not sufficient to achieve her ends, as she learns when she attempts to break into French aristocratic society: “Her entrances were always triumphs; but they had no sequel. As soon as people began to talk they ceased to see her” (979). This setback annoys her and leads her to a quick and unsuccessful attempt at cultivating herself through several disastrous visits to the Louvre. Yet even in this failure what becomes starkly apparent is that “any sense of insufficiency exasperated her” (979). Undine’s beauty is ultimately less significant than her other assets, which are her resiliency and determination to succeed. As her father puts it: “I presume you realize it ain’t easy to change Undine, once she’s set on a thing” (839). She will either learn the rules of success in a particular social context or, failing that, she will aspire to a milieu whose social or financial standing trumps that of the group which denied or limited her access. This is what she does when, partially in response to perceived snubs by French aristocrats, she marries Elmer for the second time. Rather than simply being a striking beauty favored by chance, she “is a hard-headed pragmatist who quickly sizes up the realities of a situation” (Showalter, 91). Whatever Undine Spragg might lack in intellectual curiosity or aesthetic sensibility, she more than counterbalances through guile.6

Undine’s determination is also enhanced by factors that in most other contexts would be considered faults: her very narrow view of the world and her total freedom from self-doubt. She is fundamentally oblivious to most of the world, including her son, and only takes seriously people who share her aspirations and values: “Undine’s estimate of people had always been based on their apparent power of getting what they wanted – provided it came under the categories of things she understood wanting” (988). Largely indifferent to values other than her own, she does not tolerate viewpoints opposed to hers; she finds them to be extremely suspect: “it was impossible for Undine to understand a social organization which did not regard the indulging of women as its first purpose, or to believe that
any one taking another view was not moved by avarice or malice” (980).

To provide a concrete example of this attitude, she assumed that the
annoying news that her husband Ralph had fallen ill, and thus she must
return from Europe immediately, had been cooked up by his mother and
sister “to spoil her pleasure” (818). At the end of a discussion with Elmer
Moffatt, where Undine tries to convince him of the putative faults of her
then husband, Raymond de Chelles, the narrator notes: “It was essential
to her at that moment to be told that she was right and that everyone
opposed to her was wrong” (996). Remove the “at that moment,” and
one has a succinct expression of Undine’s sense of herself and what she
expects from other people.

Lacking superior intelligence or great imagination, what feeds Undine’s
determination is her suppleness. Initially, it has merely a physical manifes-
tation: “she was always doubling and twisting on herself” (625), but
eventually the physical morphs into the social. Dreaming of a circle of
doting admirers, she imagines herself “twisting this way and that, fanning,
fidgeting, twitching at her draperies,” as she did in real life when people
were noticing her. Her incessant movements were not the result of shyness:
“she thought it the correct thing to be animated in society, and noise
and restlessness were her only notion of vitality” (635–636). The social
utility of movement even extended to props. Noticing a woman with a
lorgnette, Undine “was instantly struck by the opportunities which this
toy presented for graceful wrist movements and supercilious turns of the
head” (653). Ultimately the twisting and turning acquire an important
internal dimension and become a metaphor for what Robin Peel describes
as Undine’s infinite adaptability (203), an advantage which allows her to
overcome all obstacles standing in the way of her social advancement.7

Undine is an actress rather than an ordinary individual, a beautiful façade
rather than a person. As Mrs. Heeny observes, “I never met a lovelier form”
(623). A talented social actress, Undine instinctively appreciates the value
of close observation, which leads to astute conclusions: “It is better to
watch than ask questions” (664; emphasis original), and the need to know
her audience, “she caught and stored up every personal reference” (644),
in an effort to either emulate or impress the right people. If, at the time
of her marriage to Ralph, Undine’s “pliancy and variety were imitative
rather than spontaneous” (718), as she adjusted to her role-playing over
time, she would no longer be “consciously acting a part,” since any “new
phase was as natural to her” as any other (798). After a period of trials and
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occasional errors, by the end of the novel Undine had fashioned herself into a perfectly functioning social machine, a consummate social presence whose triumphs only whet her appetite for more challenges. Her gains and occasional losses clearly parallel the career of the alpha male in the novel, Elmer Moffatt, whose activities and shifting fortunes loosely associate him with the robber barons of the Gilded Age.

Elmer Moffatt is the Christopher Newman of a later, more cynical, and less ethically restricted age. Like his predecessor, he has made and lost considerable amounts of money, and does not seem particularly affected by either his successes or his failures. Elmer learns from both and moves on. Yet if Elmer appears to represent some form of a robber baron in The Custom of the Country, this is of secondary importance. Wharton concentrates less on his actual financial machinations or their place in turn-of-the-century American history. She is more concerned with establishing the image which his background and achievements create for him in society, an image which for someone like Mr. Spragg, is largely negative: “He’d go and ring the devil’s front door if he thought he could get anything out of him” (784). Many of Moffatt’s activities confirm this ominous picture. He is not a reliable business partner, he constantly shifts alliances and investment areas and frequently has trouble with the governmental authorities attempting to verify the legality of his complicated financial transactions. Yet Wharton provides Elmer with a complexity and a degree of sensitivity which will demarcate him from Undine, a person to whom he is so similar in other respects that descriptions of the financier might readily be applied to the socialite.

The similarities begin with their goals. Both aspire not simply to succeed but to be the very best at what they do. Undine wants to be at the very top of the social ladder. Possessions will serve as an indication of her superiority, whereas Elmer aspires “to have the best ...; not just to get ahead of the other fellows, but because I know it when I see it” (976–977). With regard to Elmer’s suppleness, Undine notes that “something in his look seemed to promise the capacity to develop into any character he might care to assume” (693). She is referring to any role in the world of high finance. Were the area of exploitation shifted to the realm of high society, these words might readily be applied to herself. Over the course of the novel both Elmer and Undine learn to evaluate the shifting parameters of their respective worlds and then behave in the appropriate manner to insure the highest level of achievement.
Ralph Marvell’s description of Elmer seems equally germane to Undine: “He strikes me as the kind of man who develops slowly, needs a big field, and perhaps makes some mistakes, but gets where he wants to in the end” (790). From the outset, Undine and Elmer knew what they wanted to do and where they wanted to be; each had setbacks, but their goal never changed and their confidence that they would succeed never wavered. Undine recognizes this determination in Elmer, because it is also her own. Her admiration for Elmer Moffatt is at once genuine and an expression of her own narcissism.

A final point of similarity between these two strong-willed people involves “collection.” Toward the end of the novel, the reader learns that Elmer Moffatt might be the greatest collector in America (1007). The word “collector” is significant. Elmer, like Christopher Newman, is not a connoisseur; he needs others to choose for him the objects which will serve as a vindication of his success and will serve as markers of his social standing. His *objets d’art*, like the books that fill his library but which are inaccessible to a potential reader (1004), are part of an elaborate setting which serves, much as theatrical props, to establish and enhance the achievements of their owner. They tell the world not only that Elmer Moffatt has arrived, but that he has every right to be where he is.

Possessions serve a similar purpose for Undine. In a moment of frustration with Raymond de Chelles, her third husband, she can nonetheless take comfort in her surroundings: “She liked to see such things around her – without any real sense of their meaning she felt them to be the appropriate setting of a pretty woman, to embody something of the rareness and distinction she had always considered she possessed” (984). Confident in herself as a beautiful adornment, she knows she will shine more brightly surrounded by comparable *objets d’art*.

While the similarities between Elmer and Undine are most striking, what is more instructive are their differences, since they establish the woman, rather than the man, as the more driven, potentially dominant figure. Elmer’s weakness is his humanity. For all his ambition and ruthless pursuit of wealth, he is not lacking in certain decent human qualities, attributes which Undine does not share.

Although Elmer Moffatt was wronged by the Spraggs, who broke up his marriage with Undine, he does not appear to hold any grudges. Perhaps his business instincts simply dominate his emotions, but there is a consist pattern of Elmer behaving in a rather decent way. He is no altruist, but
neither is he always a cold-blooded manipulator of others. When Undine's second husband's career is floundering, Elmer provides some advice that makes Ralph, however briefly, a good amount of money. Moffatt profits as well, but so does Undine's rather financially inept spouse. When Ralph is desperate to raise money to prevent Undine reclaiming their son Paul, Moffatt tries to help out. He invests Ralph's money in a financial scheme which, if successful, would provide the requisite cash. The investment does eventually pay off, but too late to help Ralph. Toward the end of the novel, when Undine is railing against her third husband, Raymond de Chelles, whose lack of wealth, coupled with his adherence to family traditions, she finds unbearable, Elmer simply remarks, “His ancestors are *his* business. Wall Street’s mine” (1001; emphasis original). However uncouth Elmer appears, he displays intermittently a sensitivity to others that Undine completely lacks. Finally, unlike the boy’s mother, Elmer Moffatt evinces a genuine interest in the poor lost soul that is Undine’s son from her marriage to Ralph.

In the final sections of *The Custom of the Country*, Elmer displays a very clear-headed, disabused understanding of who Undine is, yet, despite knowing her as he does, the condition he sets for helping Undine is that she marry him, again. This implies a degree of at least residual affection, even love for her, whereas her reasons for reuniting with him are entirely self-interested: “Here was someone who spoke her language, who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms; and as she talked she once more seemed to herself intelligent, eloquent and interesting” (975). Elmer Moffatt has made a brilliant career in financial speculation, but his career is not the sum total of his life, whereas “her career” (861) is Undine’s life.

Given Undine Spragg’s strength and clear focus on her goals, why then does she fall victim to what in the *fin-de-siècle* United States was increasingly becoming the custom of the country: the widespread practice of women divorcing men?8 The answer has to do in a variety of ways with her youth, inexperience, and an initially limited understanding of the social world in which she determined to excel. Parental pressure led to Undine’s first divorce from Elmer Moffatt but, whatever her state of immaturity, her instincts, even then, were sound. Elmer, young, unproven, without any support outside himself, was indeed the right choice. Somehow she knew that but was unable to act in defense of her instincts.
With Ralph Marvell it was another matter. When she encountered him, Undine did not yet understand the social geography of New York City. Ralph's family had long been pillars of the city's social scene; they were part of a veritable elite, but their influence was already waning. The southern part of Manhattan, where the Dagonets lived (Washington Square) was no longer fashionable, and the family fortune was diminishing. The new money, that of the parvenus busy building flashy new residences, was invested in the Upper East Side, a shift Undine only grasped after her marriage to Ralph: “she had given herself to the exclusive and dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous” (748). Although this marriage was a disaster with tragic consequences for Ralph, Undine did come to appreciate an essential part of herself. If Ralph loved being in isolated places in Italy with his new wife, Undine “was sick to death of being alone with him” (718). In this marriage Undine confirms her true identity as a public figure. She needs to be surrounded by an enraptured audience who view her as an icon of beauty rather than an individual human being. She shuns the intimate and is indifferent to the power of sexual attraction: “she always vaguely wondered why people made 'such a fuss'. ... A cool spirit within her seemed to watch over and regulate her sensations, and leave her capable of measuring the intensity of those she provoked” (816). A creature seemingly immune to the attractions of love, Undine knew that success was all the romance she needed.

Her marriage to Raymond de Chelles takes place at a low point in Undine’s life/career. Her failure to persuade Peter Van Degen to marry her after she had broken with Ralph was a serious setback, which by her own estimation had exiled her to the “wilderness” (864). She is, at least for the moment, a fallen woman, and thus anathema to the leaders of New York society. Undine cannot return there nor reasonably expect to find a new husband among the American social elite. However, at approximately the same time, she learns about “other American women, the women who had married into the French aristocracy, and who led, in the high-walled houses beyond the Seine which she had once thought so dull and dingy, a life that made her own seem as undistinguished as the social existence of the Mealey House” (811). With America temporarily off-limits, and French society suddenly the latest ideal, Raymond de Chelles's fate is sealed.

It is at Raymond de Chelles's entrance into the novel that the question of the French and the French way of life begins to become important.
Undine’s initial exposure to Europe during her honeymoon with Ralph had proven a serious disappointment:

I don’t like Europe ... it’s not what I expected, and I think it’s all too dreadfully dreary. ... It's dirty and ugly – all the towns we've been to are disgustingly dirty. I loathe the smells and the beggars. I’m sick and tired of the stuffy rooms in the hotels. I thought it would all be so splendid. (722)

Yet shortly thereafter she will be happy and totally at ease in a European context. Undine has not somehow become acclimatized to this different world; she has invented her own France, and particularly her own Paris, an alternative universe consisting of luxury hotels, broad modern boulevards replete with expensive shops, exclusive restaurants, and, for the most part, the company of rich Americans.

Undine “seemed to have mastered her Paris by divination, and between the bounds of the Boulevards and the Place Vendôme she moved at once with supernatural ease” (731). Her Paris has nothing to do with unpleasant places, smells, or people, or with France's political or social reality for that matter. In fact, it has little to do with the real Paris. Her “city of lights” is a fantasy world that revolves around the “central sun of gold” (749), whose focal point is the not very subtly named hotel the Nouveau Luxe. Charles Bowen, whose comments on American high society manage to be moderately insightful while usually a bit off the mark, views the place with unguarded fascination. He finds there the “incorrigible habit of imitating the imitation” (802). For him the Nouveau Luxe represents:

what unbounded material power had devised for the delusion of its leisure; a phantom “society” with all the rules, smirks, gestures of its model, but evoked out of promiscuity and incoherence while the other had been the product of continuity and choice ... the instinct which had driven a class of world-compellers to bind themselves to slavish imitation of the superseded. (802–803)

Bowen is certainly correct that American riches have thrust traditional French society from center stage, but he is more than slightly misleading when he talks of the American parvenus’ “slavish imitation” of a once-famous French lifestyle which no longer has currency. Undine and her friends are
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not imitating an obsolescent social elite, they are using the French and their
country, primarily Paris, as an elaborate stage on which to create something
new, a fantasy based only in part on the earlier model.10 They are not
functioning out of cultural insecurity but out of a sense of superiority, a total
confidence in their achievements and their right to dictate new standards of
behavior. At the basis of this “right” is, of course, money. The culture these
people are acquiring has little to do with ideas and everything to do with
objects. At the beginning of the novel, Undine and her parents have taken up
residence in New York’s Stentorian Hotel which features the “Looey rooms,”
complete with portraits of Marie-Antoinette and Madame Lamballe. While
it is unclear whether the guests know who Marie-Antoinette was or anything
about Madame Lamballe and her relationship to the queen, the question is
unimportant. The pictures represent culture and the hotel has them. Hence,
those who have paid for the right to spend time in these rooms partake of
the “sophisticated” ambiance created by what hangs on the walls.

The manifestation of luxury which Undine and her friends are displaying
is not a continuation of what had predominated in the past, since the past
has become, in the eyes of rich Americans, merely a vast antique market, a
sort of adult EuroDisney avant la lettre for the wealthy and blasé: “[Undine]
had assumed that Paris existed for the stranger, that its native life was
merely an obscure foundation for the dazzling superstructure of hotels
and restaurants in which her compatriots comported themselves” (811).11
This is why access to the American expatriate world is largely limited
to their own kind, a notion clearly expressed by Undine’s acquaintance,
Mrs. Rollivier: “I don’t care much about meeting foreigners” (852). In the
sanctuary of the Nouveau Luxe, the French and the assorted Eurotrash
who are occasionally granted entrance are the exceptions rather than the
rule; those who are permitted access must appear in the Americans’ eyes
to be truly exceptional or extremely useful and have the titles to prove it.
In The Custom of the Country, the Paris that counts is the American one; to
the extent the French have a habitation which represents their country and
culture, it is Raymond de Chelles’s château, the rather transparently named
Le Saint Désert, located in an isolated corner of France where wealthy
Americans would not normally go.

What creates this new and affluent influx into Paris is the burgeoning
American economy. Although France in the latter part of the nineteenth
century was still recovering from the psychological wounds of the defeat
of 1870, it was nonetheless confident about its achievements and future as
the Expositions Universelles of 1878 and 1889 indicate. The United States, on the other hand, was experiencing an economic and industrial boom without precedent:

Between 1865 and 1901 the American Industrial Revolution transformed the United States from a country of small and isolated communities scattered across 3 million square miles of continental territory into a compact economic and industrial unit. ... It was fabulously rich in minerals, possessing about two-thirds of the world’s coal; immense deposits of high-quality iron ore; great resources of petroleum; and in the West, a natural treasury of gold, silver and copper. ... Although in 1860 the United States was still a second-rate industrial power, by 1890 it led Britain, France and Germany. (Cashman, 12)\textsuperscript{12}

The American expansion in its own West, and the increase in wealth and resources which accompanied it, had a very perceptible downside. In the West, the Indians who were not killed were pushed to the margins of society and their territories confiscated. The best of their lands were taken over by whites. The Indians who were tolerated were those who could offer some service to their conquerors. The parts of Indian culture that were not destroyed were Americanized.

Without the overt brutality and attenuated ethnic cleansing experienced in the American West, the mass arrival of American money in Europe, along with the dominance it provided within the narrowly constricted Paris of the great hotels and broad boulevards, can be read as a sort of urban colonization. The Americans usurp property by essentially taking over a place such as the Nouveaux Luxe, which in any case appears to be named in their honor. They impose their language within the borders of the hotel. They are indifferent to the parts of Paris outside the narrow parameters they have established, and they are only interested in the French who can be useful to them, either as an aristocratic presence at their sides to legitimize the American ubiquity in fashionable Paris, or because these people possess things the wealthy socialites wish to obtain, such as paintings, sculptures, and tapestries. The French could also be useful as servants, provided they possessed a reasonable amount of English.

At the time of the novel the United States is beginning to emerge as the world’s leading economy, and its wealthy citizens have an arrogance based
on their bank accounts. From France they want only what they can exploit to their own ends; secure in the fortress-like Nouveau Luxe, they take over the better sections of the city, remain totally indifferent to Paris’s social issues, and carefully vet the locals who will be permitted in their presence. They do not replicate a France either new or old; they create a new world on French soil, an artificial, but extremely appealing and agreeable society for the right people. The first person to acknowledge how the Americans have transformed their Parisian environment is a Frenchman, Raymond de Chelles: “it’s charming and sympathetic and original – we owe America a debt of gratitude” (803) is his initial reaction. Raymond will, of course, have reasons to rue these words, but at this point in the novel, he senses that something new is happening, yet remains open to the bizarre transformation of the surroundings which the Americans are affecting in the middle of his nation’s capital. Much more than his stuffy American friend, Charles Bowen, Raymond appreciates that the Americans are creating around the Nouveau Luxe an alternate universe where it is possible to indulge in pleasure without the danger of losing social status: “This, in the social order, is the diversion, the permitted diversion, that your original race has devised: a kind of superior Bohemia, where one may be respectable without being bored” (803). In his closing comments Raymond adds rather presciently: “If I married I shouldn’t care to have my wife come here too often” (803). One of the sadder ironies of The Custom of the Country is that the first person to recognize the unique nature of the American presence in Paris is also among its first victims.

The concept of urban colonization reflects a significant variation on the Franco-American paradigm. The roles of French and Americans are largely reversed. While the Americans can make no real claim to cultural sophistication, they still possess the money and are not in the least naïve in their use of it. The requisite culture can be bought. Most significantly, they have taken on the role of the unscrupulous and exploitative, the part assigned to the French in The American. Raymond de Chelles is neither exploitative nor unscrupulous, but he is extremely naïve. He totally misjudges Undine, mistaking surface for reality, and believing her intentions to be honorable. He speaks the truth to her and imagines she responds in kind. Much like Christopher Newman and Claire de Cintré, but with more disastrous results, his Undine Spragg is a figment of his imagination. As Raymond learns more about her, his sense of her identity as an individual and an American vacillates wildly, while Undine’s understanding of him, once she
realizes he cannot support them in Paris, never really changes. From that moment on, he ceases to exist for her except as an annoying obstacle that will have to be discarded.

Raymond de Chelles represents much more than another of Undine’s former husbands. Géraldine Chouard, somewhat too enthusiastically, describes him as an “Homme de patrimoine ... il incarne à lui seul l’histoire de France, une civilisation triomphante d’élégance et de distinction, aux antipodes de la lointaine Amérique” (“Undine ou la fluctuation,” 112). Although Raymond does represent French traditions in the novel, they are not without their gray areas. Moreover, if he incarnates certain sorts of French values, they are not the ones that predominate in the Third Republic.

The Third Republic was founded in the chaotic aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War (1870), a period in which a defeated and humiliated France was undergoing a profound reassessment. Initially it was possible that the country would revert to a monarchy. Its first president, Patrice de Mac-Mahon, was a royalist who attempted unsuccessfully to move the new government to the right and to establish the Bourbon Comte de Chambord as King of France. This effort proved unsuccessful as French voters opted for a more liberal agenda. By 1875, the “République parlementaire ... était définitivement fondée” (Azéma and Winock, 116), and by 1879, “Le Sénat est désormais républicain” (Baquiast, 30). While the possibility of a second restoration was now definitively averted, and postwar France was beginning to work toward re-establishing itself as a major European force, in terms of economic growth among industrialized nations, the country remained relatively weak. Compared to the United States, France was mired in “une période de stagnation relative” (Azéma and Winock, 127). Even by the time the fledgling Republic had finally triumphed over its internal enemies, the royalist faction, the nation had not yet achieved “pleinement entrée dans l’ère industrielle” (Azéma and Winock, 129).

The political and social importance of the French aristocracy had been declining since the Revolution, although it did enjoy a renaissance of sorts under Napoleon III. With the establishment of the Third Republic, its influence only continued to wane as the power of the more liberal middle class increased: “En majorité, ces classes moyennes sont politiquement à gauche et s’affirment égalitaires” (Azéma and Winock, 137). An aspect of the middle class’s political agenda was to rid “l’État des ... strates d’Ancien Régime” (Azéma and Winock, 156), an aspiration which involved an open
hostility to the aristocracy’s oldest ally, the Catholic Church, which was perceived as “le bouclier de l’Ancien Régime” (Azéma and Winock, 172). This opposition was so pronounced, virulent, and persistent that Jacqueline Lalouette chose to call her 2002 history of the Third Republic La République anticléricale.

Raymond de Chelles, whose values are by no means as regressive as those of the Bellegardes in The American, is nevertheless, like them, a figure whose world is ineluctably fading from history. Even more than tradition, what de Chelles represents is an avatar of an irretrievable past, something that Charles Bowen inadvertently suggests when he refers to his French friend as a “precious foot-note to the page” (804), but nonetheless a “charming specimen of the Frenchman of his class” (804). In The Custom of the Country, a historically enfeebled segment of French society, embodied in Raymond de Chelles, will be overrun and buried by an American bulldozer in the person of Undine Spragg.

To the extent that Raymond and Undine can be made to represent their respective countries, Wharton chose to emphasize their differences, the changes wrought by the passage of time and the ascension and decline of national prestige. As framed in the novel, the American woman will accept these changes, and the Frenchman will not. At Raymond’s very first appearance in The Custom of the Country, Charles Bowen makes a comment concerning his friend’s ultimate loyalties which proves prophetic: “That [his] inherited notions would in the end prevail” (804). Much like Valentin de Bellegarde, Raymond wishes to be open to the present and the future, and initially he makes an effort to be so, but eventually he will revert to family and French traditions, partly due to a genuine belief in them and partly in frustrated reaction to Undine’s refusal to accept them.

Principal among these values is respect for the family, something Undine appears not to really understand. Yet this is not entirely true. She knows what it means, because she has experienced its pressures during her first marriage and rapidly chose to reject it. As Claude Grimal notes in “The Right Set: Histoire, Objets, Éthique,” with regard to the ring Ralph gave Undine: “Son acceptation suppose une allégeance à la famille et à l’histoire de la famille ... elle refuse l’histoire de la famille Marvell, elle l’efface” (“The Right Set,” 31). Ralph Marvell brings her into a family circle that prizes, as do the de Chelles, loyalty to each other and upstanding social behavior. Like the de Chelles, the Dagonet-Marvells live in a home removed from the center of society. Their Washington Square residence is in a section of New
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York that is no longer the center of fashion. The de Chelles’ Saint Désert is the French equivalent. Both homes contain cultural icons: heirlooms for the Americans, Boucher tapestries for the French. Even though no family member appears to have spent much time examining these artifacts, they represent each clan’s involvement in their national cultures. If Raymond and Ralph opt to remain faithful to family and tradition, Undine represents a new American orientation, which respects neither the French nor the American sense of the past (except for its decorative value). She is in the process of forging a very different identity which proved to be as disquieting to the Dagonet-Marvells as it would to the de Chelles.

The most striking difference between the French and the Americans concerns the question of divorce and the alternative preferred in French society. As a Catholic, Raymond cannot accept divorce and must remain married to one woman for the rest of his life, no matter how unhappy he might be in the relationship. Yet his situation is not entirely bleak. Part of the aristocratic tradition to which he adheres implicitly allows a man to have one or several mistresses, a practice deemed “acceptable” if it remains discreet and the wife continues to be shown respect and affection in public. This is a practice based on discretion; to call it male-oriented, hypocritical, and sexist may well be true, but it seems more germane to the novel to note that this practice is part of the fabric of Raymond’s society; the novel makes it hard to imagine any French woman marrying into that stratum of French society having any illusions about fidelity. Should a married French woman take a lover, presumably she would be bound by the same unwritten rules. This is what is suggested through the character of the Princess Estradina, who uses the presence of Undine during her travels to cloak her relations with a married man.

Divorce is arguably a more honest procedure and certainly a source of empowerment for women. Yet, more to the point, it is American, modern, and totally without ambiguity or pretense. In Undine’s hands it is a tool for advancement. She was briefly the mistress of Peter Van Degen, but that proved to have been a disastrous decision. It made her, if not a social pariah, then a social “item” in a way she did not wish to be, and when Peter decided not to marry her, she was for a time a social outcast. Marriage proved a better solution because, as Charles Bowen astutely observes, “One could not be divorced without it” (806). Divorce legitimizes, or at least attenuates, the stigma of a marital break-up by providing an aura of social acceptability. After all, divorce is legal. Given her lack of romantic inclinations,
her little interest in sex, and indifference to children, the option of divorce is what makes marriage efficient and appealing to Undine. It provides for a clean break and, with it, the possibility of total freedom, things that Raymond could never allow himself.

The tension between Raymond and Undine proves particularly destructive to Raymond because he never understands the extent of Undine’s difference from other women he has known. Like her second husband, he makes the crucial mistake of assuming Undine is a child, a sweet innocent creature he can mold into the woman he wishes her to be (Wershoren, 67). What he fails to grasp at first is that there is nothing innocent about her; nor can she, usually, be manipulated by men. Undine is the new woman, unfettered by the past and only concerned with the possibilities offered by the present and future. Traditions, be they French or American, are in themselves of little importance to her. She can become a Catholic and seek an annulment from the Catholic Church because both are part of the road toward success through marriage; the idea of a genuine religious conversion is hardly thinkable for her. Undine cannot change religions when she never really practiced one. She makes no serious effort to adhere to Raymond’s values once he moves her out of Paris into the country, where she begins to realize that he is not as rich as she had supposed.

If toward the end of their marriage Undine is annoyed with Raymond, but otherwise indifferent to him, Raymond’s frustration and anger with her suggests a lingering passion, which erupts in a tirade. This marks his last appearance in the novel. The tirade, for all its intensity, indicates how little Raymond has grasped the phenomenon that is Undine. He begins by exclaiming, “You are all alike … you come among us from a country we don’t know, and can’t imagine, a country you care for so little that … you’ve forgotten the house you were born in” (982). Certainly the Americans whom Raymond has met are variations on the same motif of money and attendant arrogance. It is also true that the French are less familiar with Americans than they realize, something which becomes apparent in Raymond’s contention that Americans have forgotten their origins. As the final pages of this chapter will indicate, this will certainly not be the case with Undine and Elmer.

“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" (982). The question of the language spoken in this novel is once again of some importance. Obviously Undine must have learned some French – to speak to servants and to participate even passively in the conversation of her French acquaintances. Yet in *The Custom of the Country*, Ralph Marvell is the only American who really speaks foreign languages with interest in the cultures they reflect (724). Other Americans, such as Mrs. Shallum, “though in command of but a few verbs, all of which, on her lips, became irregular, managed to express a polyglot personality” (725), while her husband, in possession of “a colorless fluency in the principal European tongues ... seldom exercised his gift except in intercourse with hotel managers and head-waiters” (725), whom he considered a “gifted but unscrupulous class” (725). In this novel, French is most often a tool needed for conversing with one’s social inferiors; it is not considered a language comparable in value to English. Learning a foreign language is one of the minor annoyances of being in France but a necessity if one is to deal with the help. As in *The American*, the predominance of English reflects an American sense of superiority, and for the French to profit on any level from the American presence in their country, they must speak to these visitors in a foreign language. If Americans speak French without really knowing what the French are saying in terms of culture and values, it is because ultimately they don’t care. Paris, the French, and their traditions constitute an elaborate theatrical setting for what these social climbers want; these places and people are the props from which the denizens of the Nouveau Luxe will create their version, not of what Europe was or is, but of what it should be to conform to American tastes. For this reason, Raymond seems to exaggerate when he claims that Americans ridicule French values, since the Americans pay them little heed. However, he is on much firmer ground when he claims that Undine and her friends simply ignore everything that the French care about. The Paris which concerns these visitors is not the French one; it is the American one.

In *The Custom of the Country*, several events prefigure the inevitable triumph of the Americans at the expense of the French. Raymond is anxious to have a son to carry on the family name. When Undine fails to conceive, his family assumes that the fault is hers. Yet she has already borne a child; she is the one capable of reproducing herself and moving forward. The absence of offspring is due to Raymond, and his sterility represents the enfeeblement of a once-distinguished lineage, just as Undine’s fecundity foreshadows a world peopled and dominated by Americans.
In Elizabeth Boulot's *Edith Wharton: The Custom of the Country*, the author mentions that “Raymond de Chelles s’intéresse ... à la vie politique locale” (86). This might seem innocuous enough, but in fact it further highlights the disparity between French and American ambitions. Raymond is a member of the French aristocracy; he is well-educated and has grown up in a world of privilege, yet he has a circumscribed vision and narrow aspirations; holding office in a rural village is the height of his ambitions. What education Undine has consists of what she provided for herself through observation and imitation, yet her desires for advancement have no limit, and with each victory they only become greater. More than anything else, what will seal her triumph over Raymond – and, figuratively, the victory of the Americans over the French – is Elmer’s purchase of the Boucher tapestries at Le Désert. Raymond is forced to relinquish them by financial necessity. The Americans might have prevailed in this struggle, but the novel makes clear that this American supremacy is hardly laudable.

When Raymond accuses Americans of always changing (982), he certainly has Undine in mind, and what he says is essentially true. From an inexperienced girl with an undulating body, she has become a woman of astonishing and unprincipled social adaptability. Yet, as the novel draws to a close, there is a suggestion that her ambition and freedom from ethical constraints may have, figuratively speaking, a geographical source. Strikingly enough, the place where she first absorbed the values that will guide her decisions throughout the novel is not sophisticated New York City, but rather boring little Apex, a town Undine could not wait to escape (629), a burg of such seeming inconsequence that the novel never really makes clear where it is.

The lack of a fixed location makes Apex something of a mystery, a mythical site rather akin to what the French today refer to as *la France profonde*. This is an idyll inhabited by allegedly pure, pristine French men and women who embody the nation’s finest values, untouched by the sundry corruptions of modern civilization. To the extent that in *The Custom of the Country* there is a semblance of an *Amérique profonde*, the place of origin of the nation’s core values, it is Apex City, whose American values are far from positive, however.

Toward the end of the novel, Elmer somewhat heatedly says: “We’re differently made out in Apex. When I want that sort of thing I go down to North Fifth Street for it” (1001). Elmer is reacting to Undine’s not very subtle hint that she could become his mistress were he to help her cope
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with her difficult marriage to Raymond. A similar scene occurs earlier in the novel when Undine, between husbands and burned by an extra-marital affair, reacts to Mme Trézac’s (the former Miss Wincher) suggestion that becoming Raymond de Chelles's mistress would not be such a bad idea, were it discreetly handled. “We don't look at things that way out at Apex” (888) is Undine’s prim rejoinder.

Both conversations involve an “illicit” sexual relationship, which is rejected through a reference to Apex. One can, of course, view these scenes as a reaffirmation of traditional, hometown American values. Yet in Elmer’s case, and certainly in Undine’s, these sudden turns toward middle-class conventionality seem somewhat surprising. One can perhaps accept Elmer’s interest in marrying Undine out of a combination of love (he has, after all, already married her once before) and some residual respect for a bourgeois moral code. Yet at the same time, given that he makes his living at the limits of legality, he might wish to be as respectable as possible in other aspects of his life. Having a beautiful mistress could win him admiration in boardrooms, which were exclusively male, but it would also limit his access to the posh society he wished to join.

Undine’s case is more extreme. As she learns to her chagrin, a mistress is always something of a social inferior, no matter how politely her situation is handled. While any woman in Undine’s world will always be a secondary figure to a man in public, an extension of his greatness for the world to admire, to be a mistress is even less than a secondary position. It can complicate significantly the woman’s social situation. Discretion precludes her receiving full recognition for who she is; her access to social functions is limited, and the shadow of social opprobrium always lingers. Undine had tried that route with Peter Van Degen, in the hope of eventually marrying him. This proved to be a miscalculation that for a time hurt her social standing. If she appears prepared to take that risk a second time, it is because she is out of options. She is trapped in a failed marriage, in need of money, and forced to spend most of her time away from Paris in a country estate she cannot abide. Being kept by Elmer would provide immediate financial relief and access to some parts of Parisian society. It would not be a perfect solution, but the best one currently available to her.

When Elmer rejects her arguments, she is at first “discouraged” but then quickly “fascinated” (1002) when she senses that he is proposing marriage. She rapidly realizes that, unlike Van Degen, she can count on Elmer coming through for her since he, like herself, “knew what he
wanted, saw his road before him, and acknowledged no obstacle” (1003). If this scene with Elmer initially reflects yet another of Undine’s miscalculations due to her aiming simply for the second best option, she quickly appreciates the utility of seizing the opportunity of Elmer’s offer, which would solve all her problems with only marginal and temporary costs to her reputation. She is an American woman who has divorced; in this respect she is one among many. Undine is married to Elmer by the opening of the next chapter.

In Apex City the most important rule is to do what one wishes as long as social decorum is respected. Undine has understood from a very young age that there are unwritten codes governing social intercourse which must be maintained, not for moral considerations, but because flaunting societal norms could become an obstacle to advancement. What Elmer seems to have garnered from his time in Apex is that business has no ethical restrictions that can withstand success. If one’s ventures become profitable, all other considerations assume a minimal importance. That much said, the successful businessman must try as best he can to nod in the direction of social decorum without, however, losing his primary perspective, which is to make money.

Apex’s role as the incubator of a new set of values is even more apparent concerning divorce. New Yorkers, despite their façade of sophistication, view divorce with disapproval and disgust as this novel and Wharton’s later *The Age of Innocence* (1920) make clear. Apex is a different matter. As Collomb-Boureau suggests, the attitude of the citizens of this small American town toward divorce is “plutôt laxiste” (40), and there is “aucune parole donnée qui ne puisse se reprendre” (“Costumes, fortunes, énergies,” 40). What has been done can be undone, if handled properly. This would seem to be one of the principal lessons which Elmer and Undine learned from their experience in Apex.

Apex, unlike the heavily European-influenced New York, is a pure American product; its customs are indeed “of the country.” What characterizes Apex’s beliefs is strict observance of the letter of society’s laws without any particular concern for the spirit of these rules. Mr. Spragg took care of his daughter’s marriage to Elmer without any great difficulty or public scenes. He also established his wealth through some dubious machinations which left him in control of water rights in the town. In both instances scandal was averted, and social protocols maintained, so no harm was done. Elmer was initially less successful. His financial dealings
led to him having to leave Apex, but later, after his brilliant achievements in business, his earlier peccadillos cease to be an issue. From the Apex perspective, success forgives all sins.

In this novel, Apex and not New York establishes the principles that will govern the American future. New York’s international orientation is something of a handicap since the new set of national values emerging at this time, as reflected in the novel, are quintessentially American, emerging from somewhere in “the heart of the heart of the country.”18 The Old World does not corrupt the denizens of the New World, because these Americans never went abroad in search of European values. What these predatory tourists want in France are aspects of its culture that can be molded to fit into the American model of Europe. The gilding of the Gilded Age is superficial and serves to coat a visceral coarseness whose concrete manifestations take the form of greed, arrogance, unfettered ambition, a sense of entitlement, and a bemused approach to other cultures and peoples who did not have the good fortune to be American and rich. Undine’s ethical weaknesses are at once exacerbated and perfected in Europe, but their origins are unabashedly American, an America symbolized by Apex City.

Apex’s purest product is Undine. At one point she rather smugly remarks that she is not “an immoral woman” (849), and she is correct. As the prototype of the new American woman she is not immoral, she is amoral; ethical consequences of actions are really of no significance to her, even though they must be accorded the appropriate lip service. Moral standards are like the other obstacles she confronts: matters which will either be dealt with or ignored, depending upon the circumstances. As a woman, she will always have need of a man in order to succeed, and that most often involves marriage, but as Elizabeth Ammons observes, “she does not fear marriage as a threat to her autonomy ... she has no illusions about the marriage union as a bond of love which will perfect her personal happiness or complete her personality” (97–98). Everything that is important for her is practical, achievable, and exploitable. Remarkably lacking in affect or conscience, Undine views social customs, whether they involve getting married, changing a dress, or throwing a party, as tools to help her achieve her goals.

Undine exudes success at the end of the novel. She is rich, socially prominent, and well established in “one of the new quarters of Paris” (1003). Her hôtel features the conspicuous display of the de Chelles’ Boucher
tapestries, rather like spoils of war, illustrating the American woman's triumph in France. The young girl who started out in the Stentorian Hotel surrounded by copies of French culture has become an accomplished socialite who possesses the originals. And when she stands in front of them, they highlight her beauty. But despite all her achievements, Undine remains restless: "Even now ... she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there might be other things she might want if she knew about them" (1012). In addition to her annoyance at the possibility of missing something, there is a growing impatience with what she does have: "there had been moments lately when she had to confess to herself that Moffatt did not fit into the picture" (1012). Also, there is frustration that her new goal, to be the wife of an ambassador, appears beyond her reach because she is a divorcée. She is then discontent in her present situation, bored in her marriage, and stymied in her latest ambition. For this reason, many critics would agree with Julie Wolkenstein, that for the first time in the novel Undine experiences a veritable "échec" (148) and finally she must confront her own unhappiness along with the sense of frustration, if not failure, it entails.

Despite the tone of the novel's last chapter, there is really no reason to assume that Undine's ambitions will finally be thwarted. Her triumphs throughout the novel, despite the odds stacked against her, have often had on readers and critics the effect of "a deliberate unsettling of every comfortable conviction" (Wolff, 235). Her new ambition to marry an ambassador is not an impossible dream for an Undine Spragg. This is a woman who used and discarded two husbands and could easily let one go again. She is a person who survived, and indeed triumphed over, two public divorces and a brief career as a kept woman. She became a Catholic when a religious affiliation was required and was in the process of raising money for an annulment of her marriage to Ralph when he conveniently committed suicide. An annulment in the Church is a costly and complicated process, often involving a decision that the former marriage had never been consummated, an argument weakened somewhat by the presence of Undine's son. That Undine was raising funds to begin the annulment process is a testimony to her belief that money can smooth away all sorts of problems, be they secular or religious.

Nor is there any particular danger that her current situation might engender a degree of self-reflection. Nowhere in the novel has she displayed the slightest interest in self-knowledge, and it is hardly imaginable she
would begin now. Of course, the obstacle to becoming an ambassador's wife is significant, but barriers have tended to inspire rather than limit her: “for Undine it is precisely obstacles that generate desire ... The previous forty-five chapters have taught us that nothing makes Undine more powerful than desire” (Bentley, 210). Certainly Undine approaches her latest challenge with the attitude she has maintained whenever an individual or an institution has stood in the way of her desires. Preventing her from becoming an ambassador's wife simply occasions the response she has had to all annoyances throughout the novel: “I never heard of anything so insulting,’ ... as if the rule had been invented to humiliate her” (1014). Undine sees no serious reason why she cannot be an ambassador's wife aside from the small-mindedness of her enemies.

Her ambition is, of course, gender limited. She thinks she can become an ambassadress since she can manipulate social codes, but she cannot alter nature. Her entry into the diplomatic corps requires a husband, but that has never been an issue for Undine. If Elmer proves not to be “man” enough for her goal, then she will surely find someone else, and when she eventually takes possession of an American embassy, she will hunt about once again for something new to want.

Undine is in several ways similar to Camus's Sisyphus, a legendary figure forever attempting to bring an impossible task to a successful conclusion. The difference, of course, is that Sisyphus's labor was a punishment and Undine’s a choice. Also, Undine, unlike Sisyphus, proves successful. Yet both are hardheaded, relentless strivers. This American woman will be forever dissatisfied as she struggles for more, while the mythical figure will remain disgruntled but stoically committed to striving. Neither Undine nor Sisyphus will ever achieve stasis, that still point where they can finally rest on their laurels, not because of the obvious obstacles both encounter, but because neither really wants closure. For each, it is the striving, not the goal, that provides satisfaction. At the end of his essay, Camus proclaimed the eternally malcontented Sisyphus happy. As we close the pages of The Custom of the Country, we would be well advised to follow Camus's lead and consider that Undine Spragg, reigning over a newly Americanized Paris, contemplating the latest slight to her ambitions, and considering how she will react, is in her own way happy.
Notes

1 Elaine Showalter takes direct issue with Bowen's assessment: “despite Charles Bowen's speech and the many restrictions placed on women in the business world, in many respects Undine’s American society is far more egalitarian with regard to gender than English or French society of the same period” (91).

2 These factors consist of the possible influence of her small-town upbringing in Apex, a town that stands for the sorts of “American values” prevalent in the novel. Apex's significance will be discussed in the concluding pages of this chapter.

3 Claude Julien places the novel in the period between 1903 and 1913 (“La folie des grandeurs,” 8), while in the same volume Claude Grimal proposes 1899 to 1907–1908 (23). Nelly Valtat-Comet claims the novel ends in 1913 (65). Laura Rattray is content to say that the novel is set in the 1900s (12).

4 In this respect she is closer to Christopher Newman in The American than to any woman, or even man, in The Custom of the Country, with the exception of Elmer.

5 Another instance of the distance this novel takes from more “realistic” narratives is that the location of Apex is never clear. Is it in upstate New York or the Midwest? The question of Apex, where it is, and what it represents, will become significant toward the end of this chapter.

6 Undine has occasionally been compared to Emma Bovary, whose capacity for cunning is considerably more limited than Undine’s. A more intriguing, albeit imperfect, comparison would be Mme de Mertueil in Les Liaisons dangereuses. Both women are master schemers with few scruples. Both are talented manipulators of men. Both struggle mightily and largely successfully to overcome the limits of their gender. The differences, however, are that Mme de Mertueil is a self-educated intellectual who provides reasons in Lettre 81 for her anger at male-dominated society and her desire for revenge. Undine, on the other hand, is more the pragmatic American, with no particular concern about gender inequality. Her only need is to know the rules of the game so that she can play and win.

7 According to Nancy Bentley, Undine is a “self-made woman” whose “success is due to her lack of a consistent self” (175).

8 Bentley records that “Government studies in the 1880s and 1890s reported that the number of divorces was climbing at a dizzying pace, about five times the rate of the population increase by the end of the century. Between 1867 and 1929 – close to the span of Wharton’s lifetime – the divorce rate rose 2,000 percent. ... Two-thirds of all suits ... were filed by women, just one token of the way that American divorce was formalized as a feminine institution” (161).
9 Ralph's maternal grandfather figures in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), a novel published after *The Custom of the Country* but set in a period prior to it (1875): “the Dagonets of Washington Square ... came of an old English country family allied with the Pitts and Foxes” (*The Age of Innocence*, 1054).

10 Julie Wolkenstein recognizes that the *nouveau riche* American presence in Paris involves more than “slavish imitation”: “La perception américaine est tout d’abord porteuse de renouveau, et valorisée ici aux dépens d’un objet européen taxé de désuétude” (“La représentation de la France dans *Custom of the Country*,” 148).

11 Undine will briefly revise this judgment when she marries Raymond de Chelles, but then she will quickly come to understand that while Europe makes a nice backdrop, the social elite that counts is American.

12 As vast as were the possibilities for wealth in the United States, investments were not without risks, as even Elmer’s career indicates. Thus, the American frenzy to acquire in Paris, as well as the compulsive need to travel from one luxury waterhole to another, may in part be due to the sense that financial resources might suddenly disappear.

13 Later Undine will complain that Raymond has “never attempted to discriminate between Americans” (952). Yet how can he, since he has only seen myriad variations on the same prototype.

14 Although Charles Bowen is often treated with great respect by commentators such as Cynthia Wolff, for whom the “most reliable voice” in the novel “is that of ... Mr. Bowen” (232), I tend to agree with Nelly Valtat-Comet’s harsher assessment: “Sous une fine couche de vernis progressiste, on discerne toutefois très vite chez Bowen une préférence pour une société très patriarcale et réactionnaire” (40). As Valtat-Comet also points out, Bowen’s tirade about the American socialite as decorative object whose function is to underscore her husband’s success appears largely taken from the works of Thornstein Veblen (40). Bowen is a member of the social in-group whose function is to provide a degree of social titillation to his peers with occasional acerbic comments, yet without ever really challenging the status quo and rarely offering a completely original insight.

15 In her Introduction to Wharton’s essay *French Ways*, Diane de Margerie remarks that this book “enlightens us more on what Edith Wharton came to find in France than it does about the French” (vii). This is undoubtedly true. Sweeping generalizations about foreign nations are inevitably more illuminating of the author than the country discussed, yet in this instance the novel makes more of national differences than the essay: “the differences between ourselves and the French are mostly on the surface” (*French Ways*, 15).

16 Collomb-Boureau writes “Apex, c’est l’ennui mortel” (40).

17 *La France profonde* is a highly charged political concept often used by
the extreme right in France to demarcate the true France which has never been corrupted by cultural diversity, immigration from the Third World, or American popular culture.