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PURSUIT OF REBELLION IN EDITH WHARTON'S "THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY"

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ABSTRACT

Edith Wharton's protagonist Undine Spragg is a hypothetical illustration of a rebellious woman who crushes all good and bad on her way up the social ladder. She changes, suffers, makes mistakes, commits blunders, gets frustrated and sinks into hatred.

She fails through the flaws of the men in her life who obstruct her way but she mechanically kicks away the blocks. She remains unattached to both people and accessories and converts them into her background against which she performs. The past teaches her lessons, helping her constantly change but she does not long for anything that is past.

Key Words: voracious, insatiable, manipulate, ornamental

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INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist and short story writer is markedly unique, insisting on order, form, standards and disciplines which curb the romantic individualism. In addition to her fifteen novels, she has to her credit, seven novellas, and eighty-five short stories, poems, books on design, travel, literary and cultural criticism, and a memoir. Her writing is classical and it reveals the instability of human nature, the impossibility of perfection of human beings and the doctrine of inevitable material progress. In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton has combined her view of America's privileged classes with a brilliant and natural wit in the incisive depiction of a notorious woman, Undine, unraveling her sociological confrontations. Margaret Drabble in her essay *The Beautiful and the Damned* comments that,

Undine can, and she does. She dares, risks, exceeds, rises, falls, and rises again. She is

unstoppable. She is a force of nature. Her energy is dreadful, her beauty is fatal. She is a fortune-seeker from the Midwest, upwardly mobile, ignorant but quick to learn, and ambitious not for riches (her humble and devoted father has made money and spent lavishly upon her) but for admiration and social glory.

DISCUSSION

The Custom of the Country is a preeminent novel where the heroine Undine Spragg undertakes a rebellious journey of series of marriages and divorces so as to take a better place in the society. The novel unfolds an insurrectionary story of Undine Spragg, who clears her way through the old and new society of New York with tenacity that grows with her understanding of her evergreen needs. Undine manipulates her parents right through her life from childhood as she is the only child who has survived in her family out of three due to an epidemic attack in the Apex region. Undine makes use of her guilt

ridden parents physically, financially and psychologically.

The marriage succeeds only to the end of making Undine a mother and her undaunted spirit of wants are never fulfilled. Marriage with Ralph Marvell gives her an advantage of explicating her beauty to the aristocratic crowds where people of money assemble. A man like Ralph Marvell with his poetic sensibility and innate goodness is insufficient to meet her financial and luxurious needs. The only spark that has ever been alive in Undine is to satisfy herself in whichever way she feels and to take her to the next level socially. When Ralph fails to meet the need, she mechanically leaves him and their son, in search of means to fulfill her wants. This leads to her flight with Peter Van Degen who afterwards rejects her .

Undine does not mind when she is abandoned by Peter Van Degen and the absence of any feeling for him is analogous to the absence of feeling towards her husband. Edith Wharton has created a woman like Undine who is not capable of attaching herself with any other human being in order to uplift her own self. Her inner self is restless and it keeps bubbling till she is sure of her next step in advancement. Her next target after Peter Van Degen is her plan to marry a French aristocrat Raymond de Chelles. For some time, Undine is engrossed in her attempt to marry him, which poses a difficult challenge. As a Catholic, Raymond is prevented to marry a divorcee and Undine is crooked enough to know the way of getting Vatican's permission to the marriage. She is audacious to extort enough money from her previous husband to bribe the officials and blackmails Ralph Marvell to take custody of their son, if he does not oblige. Her only aim is to fulfill what she desires and she does not stop to discriminate between the right or the wrong way. Hence Undine does not feel guilty when Ralph commits suicide when he is not able to ransom his son. The chain of marriages culminates in the final reunion with her old rustic counterpart Elmer Moffatt, the billionaire. She remains restless till the end when she learns that she can't become an ambassador's wife as she had been a divorcee once.

Undine is unique, absolutely ruthless, and complex and her main impulse is that she is voracious. She is beautiful but spoiled and she continually searches to find her own self in the mirror. Her search for self is dependent on external objects and people and she never turns internally. Her longing is to see her reflection in the eyes of other people who necessarily have to represent a variety of worlds. Edith Wharton makes Undine Spragg travel through different worlds starting from Apex America, the Washington Square society, the Anglicized traditional New York families, the fashionable Paris crowd and the elite French aristocrats. Edith Wharton projects the different types of worlds with a touch of irony and humour to underscore her view of female sexuality. Whenever Undine is seen in distress, it is because of the absence of an exciting world around her. It is not lack of comfort or luxury but lack of platform to exhibit her beauty which distresses her. Always preoccupied with how people will view her, she reflects herself through the eyes of others to identify herself. She is bored by the absence of the world that reflects her and that leads her to displeasure. "There is always a Narcissus – element in youth, and that what Undine really enjoyed was the image of her own charm mirrored in the general admiration." (725)

Sarah Emsley in her essay "*Nothing against Her, but Her Husband & Her Conscience*": Jane Austen's *Lady Susan* in Edith Wharton's *Old New York* says,

Undine Spragg, beautiful, charming, manipulative, and in search of the best of the power and pleasure that New York can offer, is Wharton's version of the Austen character most obsessed with marriage as a game of using ambition and sexual power to "trade up" for more money and social power. Undine is an incarnation of Austen's *Lady Susan* in the society of Edith Wharton's *Old New York*—in *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton has written a kind of "Austen sequel."

Undine is indifferent to normal, emotional expectations. She seeks for a partner who need not mandatorily meet her sexual impulses if she has any.

She will meet his needs provided he is capable of playing a dominant role in the society. Need for conspicuousness devours the need for any sexual instincts. Hence Edith Wharton creates Undine Spragg with precarious impulses. She is subservient to carnal desires of any kind. Any quest has to end up with some discovery or finding and Undine's insatiable quest also culminates in a finding, though it is a partial fulfillment of her quest. Her experiences with different sorts of men representing different social and geographical backgrounds is worth mentioning. She somewhat comes to end her quest in the rediscovery of her former counterpart Elmer Moffatt. Elmer Moffatt who also reaches his final position going through a similar journey like Undine is complementary and therefore Undine's quest culminates in partial success.

Undine can be viewed as a fully realized woman in the last episode where she goes to Moffatt's apartment. She feels that she has achieved her goal when "she knew now what she had come for to keep him from everyone else, to keep him for herself alone." (996) Undine takes her place among the old world and tries to reign over it with her modern materialistic success. "The bid vulgar writing-table wreathed in bronze was heaped with letters and papers. Among them stood a lapis bowl in a Renaissance mounting of enamel and a vase of Phoenician glass that was like a bit of rainbow caught in cobwebs." (997)

All the men in Undine's life disappoint her and fall short of her expectations and in the final episode Undine tells Moffatt that he is strong which means the strongest of all. Moffatt is the only person who is of the same wave length whereas others are not compatible. Thus Moffatt succeeds in helping her gain her identity. Undine, for the first time in her life, expresses herself genuinely to him. She does not employ any other means to cajole him to be his mistress. She acknowledges that she has always felt that she belonged only to him even when she was under the custody of other men. As a reciprocation of her sincerity, Moffatt decides to marry her rather than keeping her as his mistress.

Through the caricature of Undine Spragg, Edith Wharton attacks the American greed and hypocrisy. Undine undoubtedly is greedy and uses

any means to attain her goal which is unanimously agreed in general. Though she is confident of her powers she has to encounter certain things that neither beauty, nor influence nor could money ever buy for her. The quick and smooth divorce that Moffatt gets her is a sharp attack on the judicial system. The height of sarcasm is understood at this juncture, when, soon after a few minutes of divorce, they are married in the presence of the judge who issued her divorce.

The blatant flaw in Undine is that she is empty inside. She does not have any inner resources which can lead her attain satisfaction. All that she is trying to satisfy in all her attempts in life are the wants springing not from her inner self but the ones which she has perceived in the outer world. She is easily influenced by other people and is always attracted by variety which she can imitate. "Her conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity—the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses, and a sense of walking among them in cool security." (769) Her ideals are ornamental and imitative and so they keep changing as the trend changes.

She tries all the forms of men she comes across to manifest her and ultimately gets convinced when she sees her reflection through Moffatt. Whatever words and thoughts she has been uttering and rehearsing in her imaginations are heard in reality through Moffatt's words when he speaks. Here is a man who is real and who voices out her own words and thoughts. In this man, Undine finds an image of her concrete self which has been wandering to find an expression. Undine turns rebellious whenever she is not recognized for her beauty and intelligence. Invariably her rebelliousness is the outcome of her insecurity.

The novel depicts the love of publicity which is highly prevalent among the upper class society of New York. Undine is not spared from the ideology that success in life is synonymous to public social triumph. She does not care anymore about the secret of her first marriage with Elmer Moffatt getting publicized once she comes away from the group which represents the old aristocrats of the society, establishing a space for herself.

CONCLUSION

Undine keeps adapting herself to all new situations but she does not undergo any change in as she has no attachment to any past. She is a success in the materialistic world because of her detachment to people and things of the past. She lives only in the present movement with an aspiration for the better future and thereby appears to be cruel and vicious. With her realistic vision, she understands that her society revolves around money and looks at women as ornaments. This avaricious society dehumanizes its members and Undine is a natural product of exploitation who uses them to her advantage. She fits herself perfectly well in this system and also knows to play successfully within the framework. Her demeanour is “that of the incorruptible but fearless American woman who cannot even conceive of love outside of marriage.” (888)

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