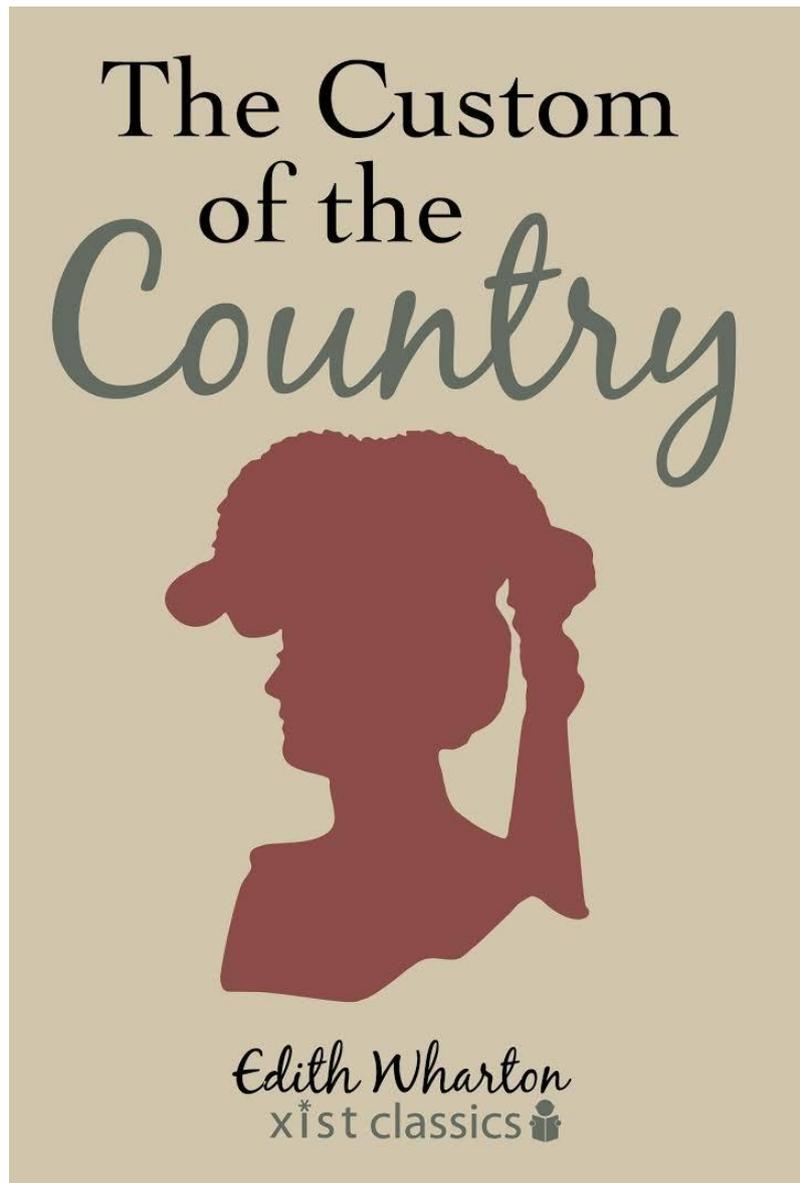


**The Art of the Leisure Class and Their Way of Life in
Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country***

P. Nehru, Ph.D. Research Scholar



Courtesy:

https://books.google.mu/books/about/The_Custom_of_the_Country.html?id=08QmCwAAQBAJ&source=kp_cover&redir_esc=y

Edith Wharton's ninth novel *The Custom of the Country* was published in 1913. The novel follows the social development of New York socialite Undine Spragg who is a member of the leisure class. She is a woman who appears "to live on change and excitement" (515). She is a materially

spoiled young woman, who defines herself in terms of property, and she is herself a product a commodity that comes at a price to her parents and her various husbands. Undine has one ambition and that is to move up the social ladder. Women are seen as ornaments; they are predictable to display their beauty. Undine Spragg manages to display her beauty by enlightening it with beautiful dresses and she negotiates her social progression by using her beauty.

This paper will examine how Undine Spragg fulfills her position as a woman in her society, and how she constructs her femininity. Thorstein Veblen's book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) to theoretically frame the concepts consumerism, obvious consumption and the leisure class. This paper discusses women's dress styles and the purpose of clothing as an index of wealth and social standing.

Undine is a survivor in spite of her playful character and heartless actions to maintain her leisure class membership. She tries to sell herself dearly in her patriarchal world where women are seen as ornaments. Moreover, Undine tries to do everything in her power to stay beautiful, attractive and loveable for everyone in her society. Though Undine does not educate herself, she is a career woman, ever displeased with her achievements. She does not give up on her social thoughts and does not have any desire whatsoever to settle for less than a perfect social success.

The Custom of the Country was the ornamental purpose of women still remains similar. The *Vogue* magazine that pays tribute to Wharton and her work is the evidence of this significance. There is still an implied cultural assumption that women have to be beautiful and display their wealth in order to maintain their class membership, particularly in upper class circles. Women play a important role in this consumer culture. Their identity is influenced by the commodity culture; women become the main consumers of material goods and through the purchase of material goods they create their self-image and social status. Women's beauty is necessary for their self-image and social status, and is treated as a selling point or as a key factor in the negotiation for an attractive marriage, wealth, leisure, and status. In a way, women, particularly female members of the upper class in New York, are treated as beautiful jewels whose task is to display their beauty in order to obtain a attractive marriage and a comfortable life.

Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* describes the story of a ruthless, materially spoiled, young woman named Undine Spragg who is a member of the early twentieth century leisure class nouveau riche New York. Undine, the character of this novel is never content with the things she owns, the more she has or achieves the more she desires. She gives no thought whatsoever to how her actions affect those around her. Undine does everything to accomplish the most important goal she cares for in her life which is her dream to climb up the social ladder, marrying into high society to an eligible and rich man who can provide her with a luxurious life.

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

Undine is a very good product of her class which Thorstein Veblen referred to as the leisure class. By 'leisure' Veblen means withdrawal from everyday or conventional activities such as work (Veblen 2). Leisure is amazing which is not beneficial for one's society. In addition, leisure, unlike work, does not involve social responsibilities for the individual. Being a member of the leisure class means you do not need to work because you have more than enough money already. In contrast to such a compulsion as work, leisure indicates the notion of spending time by engaging in pleasurable activities which are highly admired and valued by the members of the early twentieth century's leisure class. Engaging in leisure activities can be understood as pleasurable or a way of life, exclusively to the leisure class. Moreover, Veblen shows how its members consider leisure as one of their significant obligations, because it shows they can afford not to work (Veblen 43-44).

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

The phrase 'leisure class' was coined by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). In his introductory chapter Veblen explains the development of cultural class systems along broad historical lines. In what he calls "early barbarian culture", "the distinction between classes is very rigorously observed" (Veblen 1). By barbarian culture Veblen means the "feudal and tribal societies" (Veblen 1), societies that succeeded the pre-historical savage society, the primitive society which is the "lower stage of barbarism". The leisure class was not fully developed within the lower stage of barbarism. In the later stage of barbarism, however, something like a leisure class evolved in a different form. Veblen describes this forerunner of the leisure class as "comprising the noble and the priestly classes, together with much of their retinue"(Veblen 2). Thus, for Veblen, members of the leisure class belong to the upper class, the wealthiest members of society who occupy higher positions. Veblen points out that, in barbarian culture "the occupations of the class are correspondingly diversified", and suggests that, as a result, employment within the leisure class differs as well: one can hold a position of a priest or one can occupy a position of an officer in warfare. But these occupations have "a common characteristic of being non-industrial" (Veblen 2). Industrial jobs, such as manual labor, are done by the lower class.

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

The particular society Veblen refers to as the leisure class is the upper class in the United States. Like in the upper classes in barbarian cultures, it was common in the American leisure class for men to occupy a non-industrial occupation, such as for instance in the governmental or in warfare, where a member of the leisure class would fulfill the function of officer. So, the leisure class refers to the upper class, elite, which dominates society and has a high-status and position in society. Veblen goes on to examine the lifestyle of the leisure class, how they live and dress; he also comments on their everyday activities. The men are in business or government, and by occupying such positions, members of the leisure class wield power over the lower classes, and express their high-standing within their society.

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

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

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

To appreciate the society of the early twentieth century, in particular the leisure class and their way of life one must also take into consideration the historical context of the early twentieth century. The American consumer culture originates in the late nineteenth-century. The Civil War between the Union of Northern states and the Southern Confederate states took place from 1861 until 1865. The Civil War was the most destructive and the bloodiest war in the American history. After, the country experienced many changes during the Reconstruction Era (1867-1877), first and foremost in the wake of the emancipation of former slaves, but also in terms of economic expansion, which resulted in industrialization, urbanization and new influence of immigration. Moreover, cultural changes occurred during the Reconstruction Era which resulted in mass production, and this led to consumer culture.

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

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

As Meyer says that: “the American economy had completed a transformation from rural to urban and from agriculture to manufacturing” (Meyer 731). As a result, the country experienced a decline in agriculture, whereas the manufacturing industry grew during the Reconstruction Era. After the discovery of coal, gold, iron, also the building of railroads took place. A resonance of this novel can be seen in Elmer Moffatt, Undine’s first and fourth husband from Apex, who becomes wealthy by investing and engaging in railroad business. As a result of the economic expansion society experiences dramatic changes. One new addition to the American society is the emergence of a class of ‘nouveau riche’ or ‘new money’. In contrast to ‘old money’, the wealth of the ‘new rich’ is acquired within the same generation or by their parents who belong to a lower class; ‘old money’ refers to the upper class gentry or elite who have inherited their wealth. However, both social classes have several things in common. One of the most important general aspects is that both classes are referred to as the ‘leisure class’.

Not only did the economic development of the country cover the way for the development of this new class in American society, it also affected women and changed their social and cultural role. Veblen argues women’s prescribed role is that of a conspicuous consumer: she is the one who consumes the material goods and men are the providers and breadwinners. In the leisure class, women are expected to display their husband’s wealth by attractive in social behavior and also by dressing in most fashionable and expensive clothes. In the following I will discuss Undine Spragg in the context of Veblen’s approach to gender and conspicuous consumption, focusing on how young women in the patriarchic society of the US in the early twentieth century are the chattel of men, who are grateful to make themselves as beautiful as probable to retain their social status.

Works Cited

- Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped the Nation*. Oxford University, 2010.
- Henderson, George, and Thompson Olasiji. "No Place Like Home." *Slaves: Racial and Ethnic Groups in America*. Lanham: U of America, 2003.
- Meyer, David R. "The Rise of the Industrial Metropolis: The Myth and the Reality." *Journal of American Studies* No. 3, 1990, 731-752.
- Miller, Michael. *The Bon Marche: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store 1869-1920*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Montgomery, Maureen E. "Optical Excursions". *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Orlando, Emily J. *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts*. Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2007.
- McFarland, Pennell, Melissa. "The Other Two." *Student Companion to Edith Wharton*. Westport: Greenwood Group, 2003.
- Shannon, Brent. "The Cut of his Coat". *Men, Dress, and Consumer Culture in Britain, 1860-1914*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006.
- Singley, C.J. "Wharton's Women: In Fashion, In History, Out of Time." *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1899.
- Veblen, Thorstein. "The Economic Theory of Woman's Dress": *The Popular Science Monthly* vol. 46, New York 1894, 198-205.

P. Nehru, Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Annamalai University
nehrukpn1@gmail.com