Undine Spragg's Affective Resistance

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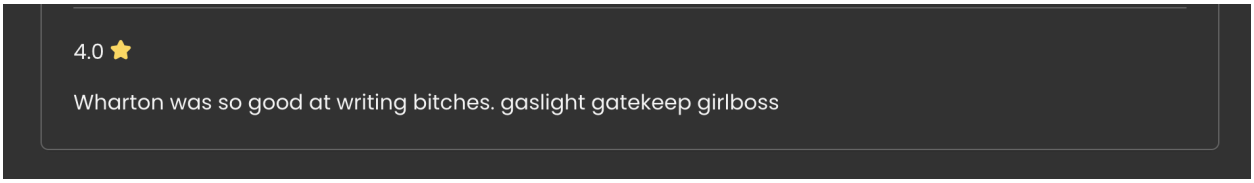

In Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), the character of Undine Spragg is a provocative symbol of modernity's complex social, emotional, and gender dynamics. Faced with widespread criticism by readers for her relentless pursuit of social status, Undine is portrayed as a morally ambiguous figure who manipulates familial and marital relationships for personal gain. She is defined by emotional detachment and transactional relationships through her pursuit of material success. Over a century later, readers are still simultaneously fascinated and disgusted by her self-centered ambition and her desire for control as contemporary society continues to grapple with the moral complexities that the novel explores. As Dr. Madison Priest explained in her dissertation on modernist anti-heroines, Undine was "American modernity's tailor-made *bête noire*" (p. 5, 2019). She was designed to be intensely disliked and detested. The irritation and disgust that Undine evokes in others are not mere personal reactions but reflections of the larger societal contradictions that underpin her actions.

Wharton's portrayal of Undine exposes the deep-seated anxieties of early 20th-century America, particularly concerning the dissolution of traditional social structures like marriage and family. Exploring these anxieties and other negatively charged, "ugly feelings" is key to understanding Undine's actions and the broader critique of a rapidly modernizing American society that this novel offers. Through the lens of modernist feminist scholarship and affect theory, this analysis explores how Undine's character highlights the emotional alienation and social decay inherent in a capitalist society, where human relationships are increasingly commodified. The irritation and resentment that Undine evokes are deeply tied to social conflict, particularly the tension between personal ambition and societal expectations.

From the outset, Undine's actions are marked by an unflinching determination to climb the social ladder, a pursuit that leads her to manipulate the men in her life and disregard

emotional connections with family members. Her behavior stands in stark contrast to the virtuous heroines typically found in early American literature, prompting critics like those in the *Ohio Record Herald* to label her a product of a society that coddles women, turning them into "exasperating parasites" who exploit relationships for personal gain. The entire scathing review continued as follows:

> It is a rare thing, a vigorous criticism of American life expressed wholly in the terms of literary art …. The sting lies in the title. Is it *the custom of this country* to indulge its women too much, so that out of certain vulgar and masterful temperaments we create exasperating parasites such as Undine Spragg? Mrs. Wharton implies that it is—that American parents let their children rule them—that American husbands keep their wives ignorant of the business problems they should share—and that the result is such a reckless, wealth-devouring woman as Undine and the vulgar 'society' she represents.

Similarly, Charles Bowen, a minor character in the novel, describes Undine as "a monstrously perfect result of the system," referring to the social, emotional, and economic dynamics that underlie American marriage, where women like Undine are expected to trade beauty and adaptability for wealth, status, and luxury (Wharton 166). Bowen's critique provides commentary on the moral and social conventions of his time, or as he puts it, "*the custom of the country*" and underscores how such a system provides women with material rewards while simultaneously diminishing their emotional fulfillment, reducing them to hollow, transactional figures. He argues that American women are often relegated to accepting material rewards—money, cars, and clothes—as compensation for their role in maintaining a man's world, while simultaneously deceiving themselves into believing these things constitute a

fulfilling life. As Bowen puts it, these are merely "the big bribe she's paid for keeping out of some man's way" (165).

"She had the look of a young woman who, by her beauty and her confidence, could command whatever she wanted from life" (Wharton #). Here, Wharton demonstrated the ways in which social forces and ideologies motivate female protagonists like Undine to participate in their own objectification and domination. Priest describes this as the nature of the trap in which Undine finds herself complicit in her own oppression, although she is sometimes able to use that complicity to her advantage. Undine Spragg is portrayed as a highly seductive and manipulative character whose beauty plays a central role in her ability to control and influence those around her. Wharton's description of Undine often highlights the power she exerts through her physical attractiveness and her ability to manipulate social situations for her own gain.

Undine exploits others' desires and assumptions, constantly reshaping herself to fit their expectations. She doesn't just manipulate relationships for wealth or status—she speculates with her identity. Her constant reinvention exposes the emptiness at the core of modern desire. Her second and third husbands, unable to resist her transformations, adapt to her, which erodes both their sense of self and their social roles. Through this, Undine taps into social anxieties of the time, positioning herself as an "invading" force that destabilizes her husbands' identities. In this way, feminine self-making in American modernism isn't about building a stable identity, but about strategically hollowing it out (Priest 110)

` Priest further explores this claim by contrasting figures like Undine with earlier female characters who functioned primarily as cautionary tales and argues that while earlier American literature portrayed female anti-heroines, such as Eliza Wharton in *The Coquette*, these figures

largely served as cautionary tales. Modernist anti-heroines like Undine, however, present a more complex and ambiguous figure—simultaneously sympathetic and repellant. They do not simply rebel against social norms; they thrive within them, undermining traditional values and exposing the contradictions at the heart of modern society. As Priest notes, such characters not only implicate themselves in their moral failings but also implicate the world that shapes them.

> "Modernist anti-heroines [characters like Undine] offer a more balanced version of the story that tells not just of victimhood and failures of self-making, but of the period's newly available choices, and the anxiety to which those choices gave rise" (Priest 5).

The modernist anti-heroine is implicated of her own accord, but she also implicates the brutal world that makes and unmakes her. As a result, she sullies not just herself, but everyone around her. And she gives rise not just to pity, disdain, and fear, but to admiration and envy—an "ambivalent readerly affect.. Repulsed, we nonetheless want what she has and thus, in a sense, to be who she is" (Priest 8). If the choices newly available to women derive from the period's expansions, then when the anti-heroine chooses or feels wrong, destroying others or herself in the process, she personifies that which is unsettled and unsettling about the times themselves. These deplorable female protagonists are both symptom and disease—or "*parasitic"* as the reviewer from the Record Herald would say. They foster discomfort not because they oppose the [systems] that would and do oppress them, but because they buy into—failing and succeeding within—those very systems.

While her compulsive behaviors may offer temporary relief or a sense of power for her, they ultimately lead to exhaustion, disconnection, and a compulsive search for meaning that often results in greater emotional and social alienation. Undine highlights the very emptiness at

the heart of modern desire, a feeling for which there is no prospective cure. This ambivalence challenges readers to confront their own emotional responses, blending admiration and disdain in ways that complicate moral judgment. Unlike these earlier representations, modernist anti-heroines like Undine are more complex, simultaneously repellent and sympathetic. They do not merely rebel against societal norms but thrive within them, exposing the contradictions inherent in modern life. Undine's actions, driven by a desire for status, highlight the ambiguities of modern femininity, where readers are invited to both admire and despise her. Priest's analysis reveals how Undine, far from simply embodying moral failings, implicates the very system that shapes her—challenging readers to confront their own emotional responses and complicating the moral judgment of her actions.

Undine's compulsive behaviors—her marriages for status, her manipulation of others for material gain—reflect a deeper emotional dislocation and dissatisfaction with her social position. These actions, while temporarily providing her with power, ultimately lead to exhaustion, alienation, and emotional emptiness. Affect theorist Sianne Ngai's concept of "ugly feelings" is essential in understanding the emotional landscape of Undine's character.

Ngai identifies emotions such as irritation, envy, and frustration as pivotal to understanding social dynamics, and these emotions are central to Undine's portrayal. Her relentless pursuit of wealth and social elevation stems from a deep sense of dissatisfaction with her position in life, an emotional excess that mirrors broader societal breakdowns. These "ugly feelings," often dismissed as minor or trivial, are vital to understanding the forces that shape Undine's behavior and reveal how modern desires can become disconnected from genuine emotional fulfillment (Ngai 16).

Undine's emotional detachment and manipulation of her identity further reflect the instability of social and familial roles in a changing America. Her ability to continually reshape herself to fit the expectations of others mirrors the fluidity of social and gender identities during the period. Wharton contrasts fixed social structures of family and kinship with the dynamic, shifting nature of the early 20th-century social experience. In *The Custom of the Country,* while family relationships (e.g., marriage and parent-child dynamics) are often portrayed as rigid or commodified, the characters themselves experience these bonds as fluid, evolving, and fraught with emotional complexity. This notion of fluidity is even more interesting when considering an interesting piece of history regarding the origins of Undine's name.

"Undine," is derived from a water spirit or nymph, reinforcing this sense of fluidity and adaptability (OED). Living true to the origins of her name, Undine is not fixed in her identity but continuously shifts according to her circumstances, relationships, and ambitions. This speculative approach to identity—viewing selfhood as something to be manipulated for personal gain—underscores the emptiness at the heart of modern desire. Moreover, it critiques the commodification of relationships and identities in a society obsessed with wealth and status. Her initials "U.S." could also be seen as symbolizing the nation's evolving identity—a blend of different forces, like water, that come together to form something larger. Much like the undine herself, a mythical being caught between the world of nature and human desires, modern America could be seen as a nation caught between its natural resources (land, water) and its aspirations for personal and collective freedoms.

Undine's beauty, which plays a central role in her manipulation of others, further complicates her character. Wharton emphasizes how Undine uses her physical attractiveness as a tool to control and dominate the men around her, transforming them into instruments of her

social ascent. This power, though seductive, is ultimately dehumanizing. While Undine transcends traditional gender roles through her beauty, she simultaneously undermines the emotional and social bonds that are meant to define familial relationships. Her marriages, for example, are not built on love or mutual respect but on the transactional exchange of wealth and status. "Her beauty was like a flame; it blazed out and dazzled, and those who were nearest it burned in the light without being able to resist" (Wharton #).

Wharton compares Undine's beauty to a flame, emphasizing its consuming and irresistible nature. This metaphor suggests that people are drawn to her beauty even though they might be aware of its dangers. Undine's beauty, paired with her boldness and sense of entitlement, makes her an effective manipulator of men. She doesn't just attract them; she controls and consumes them. Her pursuit of social status and personal gain through marriage destabilizes conventional family dynamics and reveals the limitations of familial bonds in a society focused on wealth and social position. Her manipulation of family relationships in The Custom of the Country illustrates this tension, as her personal ambition disrupts traditional familial roles, transforming kinship into a transactional relationship rather than a nurturing one.

This transactional view of relationships extends to her family dynamics, where Undine's interactions with her parents are similarly manipulative. This warrants backtracking a bit to explore what shaped her into the wife and mother she became over the course of the novel. Her earliest family ties with her parents are transactional, not emotionally fulfilling. The quote "How can you?" at the beginning of novel is spoken by Undine's mother. Her mother is expressing incredulity and frustration over Undine snatching a note from her hand. This opening scene reveals a lot about Undine's character and sets the tone for her relationship with her mother and the social world she inhabits.

She views her mother as naive and incapable of navigating high society, reinforcing her self-centered worldview. Undine's lack of interest in emotional fulfillment or familial bonds illustrates her view of family as merely a means to an end—tools in her pursuit of upward mobility. Wharton's portrayal of Undine as a manipulative wife and neglectful mother reflects the broader emotional and social tensions of early 20th-century America. Undine's relationships with her husbands and children are also marked by transactional motives rather than emotional connections, driven by her single-minded pursuit of wealth and status. Her manipulative behavior, coupled with her neglect of her child, exposes the emotional void at the heart of her character and reveals how her selfish desires undermine traditional family structures. This shift in how family is perceived mirrors the societal transformation occurring at the time, where materialism and social mobility were reshaping conventional familial roles.

Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling" offers a valuable framework for understanding these emotional dynamics. Williams argues that "structures of feeling" are the lived emotional experiences that shape social consciousness in real-time (21). Undine's manipulation of family ties reflects the emotional tension between traditional family roles and the evolving realities of modern life. Her desire for status and wealth disrupts the traditional model of family as a space of emotional intimacy and mutual support, transforming it into a site of transaction. This shift illustrates how new social formations emerge in response to changing societal values, where materialism increasingly influences interpersonal relationships.

This shift presents a powerful critique of the emotional and social structures that define familial and gender roles in a rapidly modernizing society. Undine Spragg, as a manipulative wife and neglectful mother, embodies the contradictions of modern femininity, where personal ambition and societal pressures intersect in ways that disrupt traditional notions of family and

kinship. Dr. Jennifer Fleissner's book *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* introduces the concept of "compulsive feminine temporality", which aligns with affect theorist Sara Ahmed's theory on how emotions, particularly the pursuit of happiness, are shaped by societal expectations of time (Fleissner 26) (Ahmed 30). This challenges conventional narrative closure, illustrating how women's repetitive behaviors serve as forms of affective resistance against societal norms.

Fleissner also identifies the concept of the "pregnant pause" —the moment of unresolved tension—which echoes Ahmed's view that emotions shape collective histories (Fleissner 56). Undine's emotional detachment and inability to forge meaningful familial bonds demonstrate how women's emotions and bodies are impacted by societal forces they cannot control (Ahmed 42). This pause symbolizes the larger societal forces that Undine, despite her attempts to transcend them, cannot fully master. Ultimately, Fleissner's analysis reveals that women in modernist texts, like Undine, often engage in repetitive, compulsive behaviors as a form of resistance to societal expectations. This resistance reflects Raymond Williams' concept of "structure of feeling," where emotional responses to societal changes influence cultural narratives (21). Undine's actions, driven by self-interest and frustration, are shaped by the emotional undercurrents of her time, demonstrating how personal desires and broader historical forces intersect in shaping women's experiences. This emotional resistance, marked by Fleissner's idea of the "pregnant pause," underscores the emotional and social crises that women, particularly in this era of American literature, often face.

Through the lens of modernist feminist studies like Fleissner's and affect theory from Ngai, Williams, and Ahmed, we gain a deeper understanding of how Wharton critiques the commodification of relationships and identities in a society obsessed with wealth and status. By examining the emotional and social dynamics within Undine's relationships, Wharton captures

the complexities of a changing social order, where personal desires and societal expectations are increasingly at odds. The *affective response* of the reader to Undine's character is a complex interplay of emotions, ranging from irritation and disgust to fascination and, at times, sympathy.

At the heart of these emotional reactions lies the character of Undine, our modernist anti-heroine whose relentless pursuit of social status, manipulation of relationships, and emotional detachment elicit strong and often contradictory feelings from the reader. Affective criticism, which explores how texts provoke emotional responses, can help us understand how Wharton uses Undine's character and actions to draw out deeper emotional and moral reactions from her audience.

One of the most immediate and pervasive affective responses to Undine is irritation, a feeling rooted in her self-centeredness, manipulative behavior, and lack of genuine emotional attachment. Undine's incessant quest for wealth and social advancement, particularly through marriage, makes her seem callous and opportunistic. Her relationships are transactional, devoid of emotional depth, and driven solely by her desire to climb the social ladder. This behavior makes her both an unsympathetic and, at times, repellent character. As she manipulates her husbands, disregards her children, and disrespects the emotional bonds expected in a family, readers may feel frustration or even disgust at her lack of empathy. and the concepts of "ugly feelings" and "structures of feeling,

This response can be understood through the lens of Sianne Ngai's theory of "ugly feelings", which includes emotions like irritation, envy, and frustration—feelings that are often dismissed as minor or inconsequential, yet are critical in understanding the social dynamics at play. Undine, in her unrelenting pursuit of social power and material gain, stirs these emotions in

her readers, making them acutely aware of the moral and emotional contradictions of her character. The "ugly feelings" evoked are not just reactions to Undine's personal flaws but are tied to a larger societal critique, where personal ambition and materialism often clash with traditional notions of loyalty, love, and familial duty.

As previously mentioned, despite the irritation that Undine elicits, there is also an undercurrent of fascination with her character. Her beauty, ambition, and ability to manipulate social situations are compelling traits that draw readers into her world. There is a certain allure in Undine's audacity and her refusal to conform to conventional expectations of womanhood. As a character who challenges traditional gender roles, Undine forces readers to question their own assumptions about women's roles in society. Her capacity to navigate the male-dominated world of high society through sheer will and cunning can provoke a reluctant admiration, even though this admiration is often tempered by moral disapproval.

This ambivalence is central to the reader's experience of the novel. Reflecting again on Priest's analysis of modernist anti-heroines, readers can understand why characters like Undine evoke both sympathy and repulsion. Unlike traditional heroines, who are either virtuous or villainous, modernist anti-heroines like Undine embody contradictions that make them simultaneously relatable and detestable. They represent the complexities of human desire and societal pressures. The reader may sympathize with Undine's desire for social mobility and personal power, yet feel repulsed by her emotional detachment and manipulative tactics. This tension between admiration and disdain reflects the emotional ambiguities inherent in modern life, where personal ambition and societal constraints are often in conflict.

Undine's character also prompts an emotional response tied to the broader social critique Wharton offers in the novel. Through Undine's relationships, the reader is forced to confront the commodification of familial ties and the emotional emptiness at the core of social ambition. Her marriages and familial connections are transactional rather than nurturing, turning the family unit into a space where material gain is prioritized over emotional bonds. Readers may feel a sense of alienation as they witness Undine's disregard for the emotional depth of her relationships. The emotional coldness of her actions—her manipulation of others, her neglect of her children—produces an emotional distance between Undine and the reader. This emotional alienation is further underscored by Undine's lack of self-awareness or remorse, which keeps the reader at arm's length, unable to connect with her on a human level fully.

This sense of alienation can also be understood through the emotional climate described by Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling." Wharton captures the emotional landscape of a society undergoing rapid social change, where traditional emotional responses—like familial loyalty, love, and care—are increasingly overshadowed by materialism and the pursuit of status. Undine's behavior highlights the emotional dislocation that accompanies such a society, where personal relationships are reduced to commodities, and the pursuit of wealth often supersedes genuine emotional connection. The reader's emotional response, therefore, reflects a broader social critique, as they grapple with the emotional alienation of a society where the values of loyalty and affection seem to be eroding in favor of ambition and self-interest.

By the novel's conclusion, readers may experience a mix of discomfort, pity, and even resignation in response to Undine's fate. Her continual striving for social success and her emotional exhaustion lead to a life that is ultimately hollow. Undine's pursuit of wealth and status

leaves her emotionally desolate, alienated from the people who could have provided her with real emotional fulfillment. This tragic emptiness can elicit pity from readers, who may feel a sense of sorrow for the loss of what could have been a more meaningful life for Undine had she prioritized emotional intimacy over social ambition. However, this pity is often mixed with a sense of moral resignation, as Undine's actions throughout the novel suggest that her downfall is, in some ways, self-inflicted. Her refusal to change or reflect on her behavior leads to a sense of inevitability about her ultimate isolation and failure.

The affective response of the reader to *The Custom of the Country* is deeply shaped by Undine Spragg's character, whose emotional detachment, manipulative behaviors, and pursuit of social ascension stir a complex blend of irritation, fascination, alienation, and pity. Through the lens of affect theory, we can see how Wharton's portrayal of Undine not only challenges traditional gender roles and social norms but also critiques the commodification of familial and emotional relationships in a rapidly modernizing society. The emotional reactions Undine evokes—ranging from resentment to reluctant admiration—serve as a window into the contradictions of modern life, where personal ambition and societal expectations collide in uncomfortable and often contradictory ways. Through these emotional responses, Wharton invites readers to confront the moral complexities and emotional ambivalences that lie at the heart of modernity, making *The Custom of the Country* a poignant exploration of not only the shifting emotional and social structures of early 20th-century America but also those of the 21st-century in which we live.

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