



Theses and Dissertations

2011-07-05

**The Realm of the Real: Imitation and Authenticity in Edith
Wharton's *The Custom of the Country***

Brittany Brie Atkinson
Brigham Young University - Provo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Atkinson, Brittany Brie, "The Realm of the Real: Imitation and Authenticity in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*" (2011). *Theses and Dissertations*. 2659.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/2659>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Realm of the Real: Imitation and Authenticity
in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*

Brittany Atkinson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Gloria Cronin, Chair
Jesse Crisler
Carl Sederholm

Department of English
Brigham Young University

August 2011

Copyright © 2011 Brittany Atkinson

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

The Realm of the Real: Imitation and Authenticity in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*

Brittany Atkinson
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

Edith Wharton's 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country* reveals a national concern with defining and preserving authenticity in social and cultural life. A study of the novel through the lens of scholarship concerning the modernist obsession with "the real thing," including such seminal texts as Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*, opens up a broad discussion of authenticity and imitation as defined by Wharton's characters. This paper challenges the traditional interpretations of the much-abused term. First, I outline a brief history of the study of authenticity in art and literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, showing how realist writers like Wharton were influenced by the ideal of cultural and literary reality. Then I discuss the obsession with "the real thing" by all the characters in *The Custom of the Country*, both low- and high-born, and how the term influences the development of the plot. Finally, I reveal the vexed nature of the term "authenticity" in the novel, showing how the nouveau riche wrest aura from the old aristocratic class, and how they appropriate the power necessary to define "the real thing" on their own terms.

Keywords: Edith Wharton, authenticity, Custom of the Country, the real thing, imitation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professors Cronin, Crisler and Sederholm for their continual support, mentorship and encouragement. I also wish to thank my family and friends for their love and faith in me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE CONCEPT OF AUTHENTICITY	3
AUTHENTICITY IN <i>THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY</i>	10
THE APPROPRIATION OF AURA	17
CONCLUSION	25

INTRODUCTION

Authenticity as a virtue and an ideal consumed American culture at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth; as Mary McAleer Balkun observes, this concern for authenticity was coupled with a deep distaste for imitation and an anxiety over mass production (10). Henry James's 1892 short story, "The Real Thing," reveals the obsession with and consequent difficulty in defining authenticity and the even more uncomfortable classification of imitation. In James' story, a "gentleman" and a "lady," pressed by financial straits, offer themselves as models to a well-known illustrator, motivated by the belief that as the "the *real* thing," they are more fit figures for representation of upper-class characters portrayed in fiction (196). As Balkun explains, "The Monarchs function under the assumption that the real thing must be somehow superior to the imitation, a judgment fundamental to any discussion of authenticity" (2). Soon, however, the illustrator grows impatient with his new sitters; he complains of Mrs. Monarch, "[A]fter a few times I began to find her too insurmountably stiff; do what I would with it my drawing looked like a photograph or a *copy* of a photograph" (200). Ironically enough, the illustrator – and his sitters – are finally forced to recognize that it is the low-class Miss Churm and the immigrant Oronte who make better models for the noble and aristocratic characters in the illustrations. While the artist (and narrator) finds the "real" lady "stiff," Miss Churm, though "so little in herself, was yet so much in others," meaning that she lent herself easily to the representation of other characters (197). In the end, the illustrator concludes that "the perverse and cruel law" was that "the real thing could be so much less precious than the unreal" (210), and that, "in the deceptive atmosphere of art, the highest respectability may fail of being plastic" (209). The real gentleman and lady, the true upper-class members of society, fail in their own imitation of themselves. Somehow, the illustrator finds

greater value in their lower-class copies than in the real thing. In this short story, James challenges the value and meaning traditionally ascribed to originality, blurring the traditional dichotomy between imitation and authenticity. Not only does “The Real Thing” question the monetary value of Major and Mrs. Monarch as members of the upper-class, it undermines the criteria for determining authenticity, the criteria the Monarchs – and other members of their class – have themselves assigned.

Determining and defining authenticity were at the very heart of American realist literature at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. According to Donald Pizer, the early realist writer “was to reject the romantic material and formulas of earlier fiction . . . in favor of a realistic aesthetic which demanded that the subject matter of contemporary life be objectively depicted” (6). The assertion of Reverend Sewell, the minister in William Dean Howells’ novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), reiterates the realist belief that “novelists might be the greatest possible help to us if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation” (186). Edith Wharton, in a non-fiction work entitled *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), put it thus: “Verisimilitude is the truth of art” (89). Realists like Howells, James and Wharton attempted to reproduce authentically what they perceived as reality, and consequently cultural authenticity became an important virtue when describing American society in their works.

Edith Wharton’s novel *The Custom of the Country* (1913) is, among other things, a realist’s attempt to record the replacement of New York’s old, authentic aristocracy by the nouveau riche. As Mary Ellis Gibson observes, “Monied New York at the turn of the century is not one world but two: one peopled by medieval or ‘feudal relics,’ the other by the showy and promiscuous. The rites and sanctions of the old society crumble in the path of new property and

new promiscuity” (62-63). Wharton’s novel, set at the end of the nineteenth century among New York City’s wealthy, observes the decline and decay of the old families and their consequent replacement with the so-called un-familied and un-historied oil barons and railroad kings, who, Wharton seems to assert, are only cheap imitations of “the real thing.”

Yet this seems at best a superficial reading of the text. In Wharton’s novel the new wealthy class, the uncultivated nouveau riche, is not simply a devalued imitation of the old New York aristocracy. Wharton is not bemoaning the death of her own staid and solid New York wealthy class, not merely, as Gibson suggests, “juxtapos[ing] a traditional, if stifling order against chaos and oblivion” (57). While one underlying theme certainly reveals “upper-class anxieties about the disappearance of its own kind” (Bruni 52), the text as a whole is concerned with something much bigger. Christopher Gair points out “the novel’s frequent erasure of comfortable oppositions between ‘natural’ and ‘cultural,’ spectacle and spectator, authentic and imitation, or ‘new’ and ‘old’” (350). *The Custom of the Country*, like James’ short story, challenges the accepted value of the original as well as its label of “authentic.” The new upper class, with its revolutionary new definitions of family, marriage, and business relations, appropriates the ideal of authenticity and, consequently, the value of the copy becomes greater than the original.

THE CONCEPT OF AUTHENTICITY

Lionel Trilling argues that the concept of sincerity as a cultural value arose probably during the Renaissance and crystallized during the Romantic era; he asserts that the concept coincided with humankind’s first awareness of his or her own individuality. According to Trilling, “at a certain point in its history the moral life of Europe added to itself a new element, the state or quality of the self which we call sincerity” (2). The contemporary use of the term

“refers primarily to a congruence between knowledge and feeling” (2), and as such, Trilling acknowledges, it is as old as speech and gesture. However, he explains that the term sincerity cannot be applied to a person without regard to his or her cultural circumstances. “The sincerity of Achilles or Beowulf cannot be discussed; they neither have nor lack sincerity,” Trilling claims. But the question as to “whether young Werther is really as sincere as he intends to be, or which of the two Dashwood sisters, Elinor or Marianne, is thought by Jane Austen to be the more truly sincere” elicits thoughtful, serious answers (3). Thus over the course of several centuries the concept of sincerity, reflected in humanity’s awareness of the self, arises. Thus he argues that “at a certain point in history certain men and classes of men conceived that the making of this effort was of supreme importance in the moral life, and the value they attached to the enterprise of sincerity became a salient, perhaps a definitive, characteristic of Western culture for some four hundred years” (6).

If sincerity was the salient virtue for several centuries, then to dissemble was the greatest vice. The rise of the modern hypocrite-villain, such as Iago and Tartuffe, was a reaction to the development of the moral value of sincerity, Trilling argues. He explains that “in his typical existence, a villain is a dissembler, his evil nature apparent to the audience but concealed from those with whom he treads the boards” (14). Insincerity – the disparity between one’s true self and the avowal of oneself – was often the defining characteristic of the modern villain between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (14). The embracing of sincerity sparked a fear and consequent demonization of insincerity as lacking truth and reality. The quality of insincerity signified loss of value and a certain moral integrity.

At the turn of the twentieth century, this disparity between insincerity and sincerity, the real and the copy, became a significant point of conflict in the United States. Contrary to

Trilling's thesis, Balkun argues that "the authentic self" is an "elusive figment of the modern imagination" (2). Yet she agrees with Trilling and other scholars that the turn of the century saw a convergence of specific issues, including "the concern for authenticity, the distaste for copies, the unease about shifting class boundaries, the focus on objects as indicators of social change, and the anxiety over mass production" (8). Miles Orvell asserts that "[t]he tension between imitation and authenticity [. . .] has been a key constituent in American culture since the Industrial Revolution and assumes a crucial importance in the shift from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries" called modernism (xvi). The desire to imitate wealth some could not acquire defined the middle-class Victorian era, and the subsequent valorization of authenticity in realist art is a rejection of the earlier mimesis. According to Orvell, "At every level of society individuals sought an elevation of status through the purchase and display of goods whose appearance counted for more than their substance. The result was a factitious world in which the sham thing was proudly promoted by the manufacturer, and easily accepted by the consumer, as a valid substitute for authenticity" (49). He describes the Victorian taste as one of "illusion and mimesis," accompanied by a satisfaction with the appearance of "the real thing," if not the real thing itself (57, 52). This is reflected in *The Custom of the Country*, with hardscrabble heroine Undine Spragg more impressed by gas-logs than real fires, and imitation Pitti palaces lining Fifth Avenue. Contrarily, modernism, as Orvell explains, was "an effort to get beyond mere imitation, beyond the manufacturing of illusions, to the creation of more 'authentic' works that were themselves real things" (xv). This is the realist dogma to which Wharton's fiction subscribes; it is a determination to represent things as they are and as they have been, a seeming departure from the Victorian acceptance of simulacra.

However, both the Victorian and modernist eras are, generally speaking, characterized by a desire for “the real thing,” and it is merely the ways in which this thing is named that is the defining difference between the two. Middle-class Victorians desire authentic works of art but are satisfied with objects that look like the real thing, while modernists reject this complacency. But both modernists and Victorians, as Michael Nowlin explains, share “assumptions and anxieties” about “America’s need for ‘culture’ at the moment of America’s ascendancy to a position of global power and influence” (90). The middle-class struggle for upper-class materialism in the nineteenth-century and the backlash of realism in the twentieth are both defined by a continuous desire for Trilling’s sincerity. They both want the real thing, they merely differ in how they interpret it. The tension that runs through this constant redefining of sincerity is evident in *The Custom of the Country*. The text reveals a lower- and middle-class people who, shot up through Wall Street to the wealthiest class, grasp after authentic art and culture, which often results in cheap imitation. The novel is also concerned with the realist bent to identify “the real thing,” and to reject any simulacra.

This obsession for sincerity is also reflected in Wharton’s non-fiction work *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1917), a dedicated francophile text that scorns American middle-class imitation while blatantly praising European, and particularly French, culture and art. Wharton, herself a member of the aboriginal New York upper class, ascribes authenticity to her peers because of what she recognizes as their cultural value. *French Ways and Their Meaning* decries the lack of appreciation for the aesthetic in America at the turn of the century; Wharton maintained deep reverence and love for all things French, as did many of her expatriate peers, and she praises Europe for its culture and tradition as she blasts America for its lack thereof. She traveled extensively in Europe her whole life, finally settling there permanently after her divorce

from Teddy Wharton in 1912. *French Ways* is in one sense a guidebook for the nouveau riche, the uncultivated American in desperate need of cultivation (according to Wharton) at the time. As Wharton explains, “Intellectual honesty was never so little in respect in the United States as in the years before the war. Every sham and substitute for education and literature and art had steadily crowded out the real thing” (72). Wharton’s use here of the phrase “the real thing” is significant in its implication of authenticity, but also in its echo of the words of Undine Spragg, who is also in a self-proclaimed search of “the ‘real thing’” (*Custom* 62). Similarly, Wharton’s attack of the “sham” and “substitute” of art produced in America also echoes the deep fear and even revulsion produced by so-called inauthenticity at the turn of the century by modernists as well as a dying New York aristocracy. As an artifact or relic of old New York, *French Ways and Their Meaning* reveals the deep-seated reverence this class held for itself as authentic, manifested in its ability to recognize “the real thing” in art, literature, and education. “The French tendency,” Wharton condescendingly explains to her American audience, “is to test every new theory, religious, artistic or scientific, in the light of wide knowledge and experience, and to adopt it only if it stands [. . .] scrutiny” (*French* 74). The French were thus the cultural superiors to Americans in every way; Wharton identifies their culture with “their higher average of education,” although she claims she is hesitant to use the term “culture” with her inferior American audience, as, she asserts, the term had “come to stand for the pretense rather than the reality” in the United States (68-69). She agrees with Jean Baudrillard’s assertion in his *Le système des objets* (1968) that “l’authenticité vient toujours du Père : c’est lui la source de la valeur” (“authenticity always comes from the Father: He is the source of value”; qtd. in Orvell 108). *French Ways and Their Meaning* mirrors the tension of authenticity at the turn of the twentieth century in America, the tension Orvell describes by pointing out that as Victorian

middle-class America desired to imitate upper classes, so too existed an equivalent American upper-class desire to imitate European aristocracy. As he asserts, “Despite our growing mastery in things industrial and technological, the dominant assumption was that we were still vassals to Europe in the arts” (59). On the one hand, Wharton, the wealthy, educated aristocrat (and, for most of her late life, American expatriate) scorns the Victorian model of imitation and the American middle-class contentment with mere models of authentic material. On the other, she simultaneously encourages Americans to imitate the French and other older, European cultures, who are, as far as Wharton is concerned, the epitome of “the real thing” and the purveyors of authenticity.

Walter Benjamin also weighs in on this discussion of value-based authenticity, supplying a meaningful context for cultural definitions of artwork. According to him, art produced before the age of mechanical reproduction derived its meaning from its originality. A copy of a work of art loses its value because it has lost what Benjamin defines as its “aura” (324), that is to say, because it lacks that which makes it real: its place and experience throughout space and time. Thus the production of the copy signals the eradication of aura.

Benjamin asserts that “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (324). An original work of art preserves its authority, and usually its monetary value, because its aura cannot be reproduced. The aura is not defined by the physical characteristics of a piece but is, rather, the “essence of all that is transmissible from the beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (324). As Benjamin explains, an ancient statue of Venus is interpreted in different ways by the Greek worshipper and the medieval cleric, but “both of them . . . [are] equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura” (326). Both consequently revere and value the

ancient statue because it retains its aura. A modern-day replica of the same statue loses value exponentially, not because it is not perfectly replicated (and as beautifully, skillfully, and perfectly modeled as the original), but because it does not carry with it the history and weight of traveling through twenty-five hundred years of time. In effect, according to Benjamin, it is impossible to duplicate the aura of the original. Consequently, an aura-less imitation of a work of art is without meaning and, more importantly, without value.

At the turn of the twentieth century protecting the ideal of authenticity as a virtue became almost an obsession in the face of the age of mechanical reproduction. As Benjamin points out, photographs, phonographs and other technical reproductions of works of art began to complicate the idea of authenticity, causing a deep concern, particularly in America, that the cultural value of authenticity was being compromised. Consequently, “it was the mechanical principle . . . which was felt to be the enemy of being, the source of inauthenticity” (Trilling 127). This inauthenticity threatened not just works of art but also the definition of class, family and individuality. It seemed to complicate and even destroy one’s awareness of self, blurring the clarity for centuries so carefully delineated between “je” and “lui.”

Because the Industrial Revolution and the age of mechanical reproduction seriously challenged the sacredness of the authentic, a strong desire to protect it as sacred emerged. It is no coincidence that the concern for this preservation of the authentic coincided with the development of the passion for museums, particularly in America. Several factors combined to create this development: “the concern for authenticity, the distaste for copies, the unease about shifting class boundaries, the focus on objects as indicators of social change, the anxiety over mass production – converge in the rise of museum culture at the turn of the century” (Balkun 10). Museums were viewed as the protectors and preservers of authentic works of art. In

museums, as Trilling observes, “persons expert in such matters test whether objects of art are what they appear to be or are claimed to be, and therefore worth the price that is asked for them” (93). Museums and the experts who worked in them determined value based on originality. Also, as Lilian Furst explains, “in the age of mechanical reproduction, [the museum as a treasure house] acts essentially as a counteragent to and a bulwark against the mere copy” (261). The development of “museum culture” is only one consequence of the growing confusion and vexation society, particularly the upper class, felt in response to complications with the definition of originality.

AUTHENTICITY IN *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*

As a realist text, *The Custom of the Country* is also preoccupied with the ideal of authenticity as a cultural value. Certainly, Wharton is critical of “old money” New Yorkers, who often exhibit great hypocrisy, and who cling to their outdated social mores in the face of a new and evolving upper class. However, it is clear in the novel that the New York aristocracy is one of morality, structure, and tradition, while the marauding nouveau riche are careless, immoral, and even ruthless in their attempts to scramble up the social ladder. Moreover, the old money New Yorkers have family histories or family trees, they have inherited money, they are educated and cultivated, and they understand and cling to their own defined cultural value of original works of art. This class considers these characteristics and values authentic or original. They are, in effect, the real thing. A chronicled family history of respectable names and a tradition of wealth and education are favored by this class as culturally authentic. Consequently, they deem the nouveau riche inauthentic because they do not necessarily retain the same characteristics or hold to the same values. The new aristocracy is uneducated and uncultivated, lacks traditional social awareness, and is only capable of appreciating art based on its monetary value. The novel

chronicles the “complex dynamic of social change as [. . .] these two systems” conflict (Gibson 59), the cultural differences inevitably leading to the demise of one and the triumph of the other.

Undine Spragg, the beautiful and ambitious but vulgar protagonist of *The Custom of the Country*, is one of the glaring faces of the nouveau riche. The only daughter of a successful Midwestern businessman, Undine convinces her parents to move to New York in order to enter “society.” Fed on the detailed accounts of the upper class in Sunday newspapers and society columns, Undine is relentless as she maneuvers more or less successfully among America and later Europe’s aristocracy, climbing to the very pinnacle of society through four marriages. It is Undine and the other members of her class, distasteful and repugnant as they appear in the novel, who eventually overthrow old New York.

Ralph Marvell, Undine’s second husband and very firm member of old New York aristocracy, describes his family and their set as “Aborigines,” a culturally superior but dying race, and the new, uncultivated rich as “Invaders” (46). The ideals of aboriginal New York strike Marvell as “singularly coherent and respectable as contrasted with the indiscriminate appetites which make up its modern tendencies” (47). The Spraggs and the Moffatts, members of the invading class, are depicted as crass and uncultivated, ruthless and savage, vulgar in their attempt to copy true gentility. While these Invaders have fairly usurped the power of old New York, Wharton also seems to imply, in her portrayal of the uncouth, conniving but beautiful heroine and her first and final husband, that the new aristocracy is but a cheap and common imitation of these distinguished old families. While “Wharton highlights [the world of the Dagonets]’ tendency to denial and self-deception” (Sassoubre 694), and while readers should recognize that aboriginal New York can be deceptive, unkind, and above all blind, they are never to forget that these old families are also the “real thing,” as Wharton’s heroine Undine herself asserts (62).

This so-called authenticity or originality of the aboriginal class also of necessity implies its superior value and virtue as a people. They appear to retain Benjamin's "aura," even as they devolve and are finally rendered obsolete. Aura, it seems, disappears with them. Because the nouveau riche do not retain the culture, customs, or morals of the aboriginals, they are not privy to that aura. They are meaningless copies.

Furst and other scholars support this surface reading of the text by asserting that Undine and her fellow members of the invading race have an unquenchable desire for what is "authentic," despite the fact that they often lack the ability to identify it; in effect, according to these scholars, the Invaders lack aura. Scholars like Furst, Kimberly Marie Vanderlaan and Christopher Gair accept the assertion that old money New Yorkers are authentic and that the nouveau riche who replace them are inauthentic. These scholars essentially adopt the Aborigines' definition of themselves and of their replacements. Looking carefully at the aesthetic values of aboriginal and invader New York, Furst delineates what she calls "the crassness of the disparity between the aborigines' genuine commitment to the arts and the invaders' ignorant indifference" (265). Furst accuses Undine and the other nouveau riche of an "attraction to the copy or gloss over 'the real,'" which is "symbolized by [Undine's] preference for a gas-log or a simulated electric rather than a wood fire" (265). Similarly, Kimberly Marie Vanderlaan points out that the sumptuous and showy West Side hotels, built by and occupied by the newest nouveau riche, are given such names as "the Parthenon," "the Tintern Abbey" and "the Lido" (18). Vanderlaan explains that "Among other things, Wharton could not have wanted her readers to miss the point that undeveloped American connoisseurs – of any art genre – rely on imitations of European models for the 'real thing'" (177). Vanderlaan assumes that the nouveau riche who live in these imitation hotels "have probably visited these original buildings, though of course

they do not likely know or appreciate the historical significance of them” (177). She adopts here old New York’s prejudice toward the nouveau riche, a prejudice that, though it might be true of Undine, is certainly disproved later by Moffatt, whose appreciation of authentic art and architecture grows at least as deep as that of his earlier class counterparts. But even the original works of art the Invaders will eventually acquire, symbolized by the collection of Boucher tapestries and the van Eyck later purchased by Undine and Elmer Moffatt, are, according to Christopher Gair, venerated only for their materialistic value, and not for what Furst identifies as intrinsic aesthetic value. Gair argues that this appreciation is inauthentic: “[Moffatt’s] desire to impose a narrative of ‘origin’ or ‘authenticity’ is destroyed by the reader’s knowledge of the imitative quality of the rooms, in which authentic works of art now construct a false history, superficially granting the Moffatts access to an ethnographic heritage to which they cannot lay claim through even a single generation” (361). Gair, like other scholars, clearly aligns himself with old New York’s definition of authenticity. As Thorstein Veblen argues, “The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation” (25), and as the nouveau riche in the novel find themselves in possession of the nation’s wealth, they exert all their efforts to emulate the nation’s old aristocracy.

Most scholars focus on what Vanderlaan calls Undine’s “skill of imitation” (178), relying on Wharton’s description of her heroine as “fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative” (13). As Wharton says, Undine “wanted to surprise everyone by her dash and originality, but could not help modeling herself on the last person she met” (13). This intimates Undine’s status as mere copy. John Bruni states unequivocally that Undine does not “reveal an authentic self” (50). Throughout the text Undine encounters original works of art, but they generally serve only to confuse her, and she usually and decidedly chooses cheap or gaudy imitations instead. As

Elaine Showalter explains, “Undine [. . .] is utterly without aesthetic sensibilities, and for Wharton this is the unpardonable sin” (94). Furst notices that Undine, vaguely uncomfortable with her lack of familiarity with topics discussed at a dinner, goes to an art gallery, but finds herself more arrested by Clare Van Degan’s “tortoise-shell eye-glass adorned with diamonds and hanging from a long pearl chain” than the paintings themselves. For Undine, the eyeglass is a toy “for graceful wrist movements and supercilious turns of the head,” not a tool with which to examine the original artwork (31).

Later in Europe, as the new wife in an old French family, her friend tells her bluntly, “I watched you the other night at the Duchess’s, and half the time you hadn’t an idea what they were talking about” (344). Consequently, Undine, “with vague thoughts of cultivating herself,” rushes off to the Louvre and attends one or two lectures by a fashionable philosopher. Yet again, she is unable to comprehend the original, for “though she returned home from these expeditions charged with opinions, their expression did not excite the interest she had hoped. Her views, if abundant, were confused, and the more she said the more nebulous they seemed to grow” (345). She decides then that the real issue at stake is that she has become “dowdy” and turns from the museum to the dress-maker and the “scientific cultivation of her beauty” (345). Undine, as symbol of the ruthless Invader, is thus often conceived of as copy, incapable of grasping or understanding “the real thing,” even as she longs for it. As Bruni asserts, “Undine’s choices that express her agency are not hers, rather they are reflections of what the others in her social environment want” (50). As mere imitation, she is significantly devalued; designated as without aura, she loses meaning and appreciation, even as she climbs to the pinnacle of New York society.

As they recognize their own imminent demise, the aborigines bewail the supposed lack of aura in the invading race. Ralph compares the culture and values of the Invaders to their houses: “a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility” (46). He admires “other” countries where “gradual homogenous growth . . . flowers” into society. But the steel shell “built up in Wall Street” with its “social trimmings . . . hastily added in Fifth Avenue” is as unlike authentic society as “the Blois gargoyles on Peter Van Degen’s roof and the skeleton walls supporting them” (46). The grave misgivings Ralph and his compatriots feel for the new vulgar class is encapsulated perfectly in Raymond de Chelles’ bitter tirade against Undine, who has urged her husband to sell some original Boucher tapestries, treasured family heirlooms, in order to get some ready cash:

“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—you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven’t had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they’re dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have—and we’re fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us!” (517-18)

The things that make life decent and honorable are also what make the aborigines, according to de Chelles, authentic. These things define their aura. And the dying race is equally appalled when its members realize that the new class of people which is to replace them lacks those decent and honorable things. While Ralph is lightly scornful of this new class at the

beginning of the book, he is also intrigued and amused. His fascination with this class and his core belief that he can elevate them to become like his kind are some of the main reasons he marries Undine. Only after his divorce, when he is face to face with Moffatt for the last time, is Ralph horror-struck when he finally realizes that this new class is incapable of retaining the cultural values he holds dear. “He doesn’t even know what I’m feeling!” is Ralph’s scandalized thought as he confronts Moffatt, and at the same moment the Aborigine’s “whole archaic structure of . . . rites and sanctions tumbled down about him” (298). Ralph cannot function in this new world of unknowable values or virtues; Wharton describes him as “stumbling about in his inherited prejudices like a modern man in medieval armor” (297). The old attitudes and standards are deemed useless and irrelevant by the Invading class, as he discovers to his dismay (297), and his suicide is testament to his own metaphor as the Invaders effectively wipe out the aboriginal race.

The novel, then, definitely reveals this anxiety over the displacement or disintegration of cultural authenticity in the face of a new upper class and evolving market economy. It echoes in many ways the accusation that the nouveau riche were incapable of recognizing or appreciating authenticity because they lacked it themselves. In this sense, Furst, Vanderlaan, and others are certainly correct in asserting that Undine and the other nouveau riche are often engaged in copying old New York manners and objects of ownership. However, like Henry James’ story, *The Custom of the Country* also challenges the traditional concept of authenticity that is typically attributed to the novel. A much deeper and more thorough examination of the novel uncovers the reality that just as the nouveau riche eventually appropriate the art, the literature, and the education of old New York society, so do they also appropriate authenticity itself, claiming the

authority to redefine it. The aura of the original is transferred and even heightened as it is acquired by the new wealthy class.

THE APPROPRIATION OF AURA

Certain passages in the *Custom of the Country* reveal this transference of value from one artifact to the next, from one class to the next. While Gair asserts that the nouveau riche must imitate the Aborigines by acquiring their art in order to “construct a past” (362), the acquisition of art more obviously implies the creation of a new definition of authenticity rather than a mere eradication of aura. There are multiple examples of Invaders acquiring aboriginal art, the most notable of which is Moffatt’s purchase of the de Chelles family tapestries. Other examples include Peter Van Degen’s Blois gargoyles, an original Marie Antoinette ruby necklace and tiara, and famous paintings, including a Van Eyck and a Velázquez. The Boucher tapestries owned by the de Chelles family that Undine, at one point in the novel, is so anxious to sell for ready cash, are finally purchased by her last husband, now a fantastically wealthy railroad king. The de Chelles family, pressed finally by financial straits, has been forced to sell the tapestries, allowing the Moffatts to acquire them. The housing of the tapestries underneath the Parisian roof of Mr. and Mrs. Moffatt suggests not the disappearance of aura but, rather, its transference from the old aristocracy to the new. Certainly, the aura of the tapestries themselves is preserved as they change hands, but the tapestries also serve to symbolize the appropriation of “aura” from old New York society to new. While both Ralph and de Chelles are certain that the triumph of the Invader signifies the eradication of everything that is real, original, and, consequently, valued, in their own culture, Moffatt’s acquisition of the tapestries signals an appropriation, not an elimination, of the authentic. The same is true of the ruby necklace, once owned by Queen Marie Antoinette, Moffatt gives to Undine or the original van Eyck in his private collection. All of

these items, originally symbols of status for the old aristocracy and now acquired by the nouveau riche, do not abolish the aura of the Aborigines but reestablish it among the Invaders.

Similarly, the authenticity of upper-class society in New York as depicted in *The Custom of the Country* is not lost with this new race of people, but the definition of authenticity changes; consequently, the value, monetary and cultural, of the new class itself is not diminished but increased. Furst argues that the failure of Undine's marriages both to Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles can ultimately be ascribed to her "inability to grasp their values" (265). However, it is a rejection of the ideals that the Aborigines cherish that, in the end, alters the meaning of authenticity at the turn of the century. Moffatt, who begins as a poor, nameless, and reputedly shiftless young man from the obscure West, ends as a railroad king, fantastically wealthy and an undisputed leader on Wall Street. In an emphatic statement to Undine, Moffatt reveals the key shift in value from old New York to new: "'I've about as much idea of dropping business as you have of taking to district nursing. There are things a man doesn't do. I understand why your husband won't sell those tapestries—till he's got to. His ancestors are *his* business: Wall Street's mine'" (365). One recognizes here authenticity as a purely subjective term; as Balkun explains, "Since the real has so much to do with context – what is authentic in one situation may be a sham in another – 'realness' becomes a matter of perception rather than a definitive attribute" (6). Moffatt astutely observes the shift in definition of "the real" as old New York society gives way to new. Aboriginal New Yorkers assigned authenticity and, consequently, value to their history, family, and name. The nouveau riche – usually so derisively relegated to *merely* imitation or copy – have actually appropriated the definition of authenticity and, thus, reassigned value. For the Invaders, it is Wall Street that is authentic, and value is determined monetarily. The new class now has the power to define authenticity, just as the old

class did, only the emphasis has shifted. As Balkun again explains, “In the final irony, the counterfeit turns out to be the standard by which authenticity is determined, the embodiment of American ideology, which is itself marked by contradiction” (17).

The transference of Paul Marvell, Undine’s only child and the only offspring of an Aborigine and an Invader in the novel, from the Marvell household to Undine and Moffatt’s care is the most marked example of the way the new race wrests authenticity from the old. Paul follows his mother from the care of Ralph to that of de Chelles, both Aborigines, and finally to Moffatt, an invading chieftain. By Laura Marvell’s own admission, Paul is an aboriginal child: “He’s going to be exactly like you, Ralph,” she tells her brother, adding ruefully, “For his own sake, I wish there were just a drop or two of Spragg in him” (290). Born of an aboriginal father and an invading mother, Paul seems almost entirely a product of the older race, largely because of his mother’s neglect as well as his father’s attention. Even in the years he spends at St. Désert, he is cultivated and cared for by his “dear French father” (373), de Chelles, who shows him kindness the child never receives from Undine. Thus, by the time he lands squarely in Moffatt’s Parisian *hôtel* at the end of the novel, returning home from school to yet another new home, Paul has spent most of his childhood being reared in old world culture; for this reason, Paul is interested most of all in the genuine Van Eyck on the wall of his new home, and the library with its “rows and rows of books, bound in dim browns and golds, and old faded reds as rich as velvet” is the most attractive room in the house to him (368). Paul supposedly recognizes real art and literature when he sees it, and not merely for its monetary value; his childhood among the Marvell and de Chelles families has taught him to identify that which is authentic in Moffatt’s new home as well as that which is inauthentic. He is overwhelmed by the glitter and glass in the new home, but he recognizes and is also excited by the Boucher tapestries hanging on the walls,

because they are familiar to him, first because they hung in his former home, but also, by extension, because they are valuable works of art. Again, as a product of the aboriginal race, Paul seems inherently to assign value as it does. Likely for this reason Paul notices that “the wigged and corseleted heroes on the walls” (369) do not resemble Moffatt; Paul’s astute aboriginal sense recognizes that Moffatt has no real ancestors or family. In his vague, childish manner, Paul identifies Moffatt’s status as family-less Invader.

Yet Paul is wrested from the Aborigines by the Invaders, just as the Boucher tapestries are. Paul becomes Moffatt’s stepson because, after Undine’s divorce from Ralph, his father thoughtlessly agrees to granting Undine sole custody, obeying the age-old customs of the class “that there must be no scandal” (277). The end of the marriage itself, “dissolved like a business partnership,” as Ralph’s grandfather scornfully remarks, is utterly foreign to the aboriginal sensibilities, “remote from reality” (317). For Ralph’s mother and sister, “the word ‘divorce’ was wrapped in such a dark veil of innuendo as no ladylike hand would care to lift,” and Ralph’s separation from his wife was “classed indistinctively” as a “disgraceful incident” (317). As for Ralph’s grandfather, the idea of a woman suing for divorce is utterly beyond the realm of his comprehension; his daughter-in-law’s separation from his son “was like some nasty business mess, about which Mr. Dagonet couldn’t pretend to have an opinion, since such things didn’t happen to men of his kind” (317). The Dagonet family’s elaborate moral system verbally refuses to acknowledge the divorce at all, and the divorce process is observed in “penitential” silence, while each of the other members of the family implore Ralph not to mention it before the others (412). Thus the very customs and traditions of the aboriginal race are what lead to their ultimate demise. Paul signifies the perpetuation of the race; his abduction by the Invaders, is successful

because of the Dagonet and Marvell insistence on customs and biases that have been rendered obsolete by the new market economy, defined and controlled by the nouveau riche.

Ralph signs the divorce papers without reading them carefully or considering their consequences, locking the official divorce letter away in his desk “without mentioning the matter to anyone” (216). According to aboriginal custom, the scandal must be kept as quiet as possible, as it “was not in the Dagonet tradition to acknowledge the existence of scandals,” and that demands no legal squabble (212). Gair argues that “Ralph’s misunderstanding stems from a failure to comprehend fully the speculative, fluid nature of the ‘new’ American like his wife” (356). According to Gair, “Ralph does not appreciate the gulf between his embodiment of tradition and what he misperceives as her desire to imitate it” (356). Undine is granted sole custody, though neither Ralph nor his family imagines that she would take the child away from them. When she does, the transfer of aura is utter and complete:

The sole custody! But that meant that Paul was hers, hers only, hers for always:
that his father had no more claim on him than any casual stranger in the street!
And he, Ralph Marvell, a sane man, in full possession of his wits, had assisted at
the perpetration of this abominable wrong, had passively forfeited his right to the
flesh of his body, the blood of his being! (277)

Paul, greatly and incomparably valued by the aboriginal race because he is one of their own, is forcibly wrested from them by their conquerors. Certainly, this does not symbolize an abolition of aura; Paul is not mere copy or imitation. He is Ralph’s flesh and blood child, appropriated by the invading race. Yet Paul’s displacement from the realm of old money into new is as definite and complete as that of the Boucher tapestries. Moffatt’s friendly advances to the child are

significant: ““I like you first rate, you know; when you’re big enough I mean to put you in my business. And it looks as if one of these days you’d be the richest boy in America”” (375).

Whether Paul is willing or no, Moffatt’s appropriation of the child, the youngest Dagonet offspring and only member of his generation, is permanent, and his future in the world of the Invader is secure. Transplanting Paul from the old world to the new cannot symbolize the destruction of aura; Paul, as a human being, retaining all the innate characteristics and acquired knowledge of the aboriginal culture, is still the same valuable and authentic child in the Moffatt *hôtel* as he was in St. Désert or Washington Square. But it is Moffatt who appropriates the child, Moffatt who determines his child’s final value, and Moffatt who allows the child to continue to exist at all. Paul would have certainly expired with the rest of the aboriginal race had he remained in either the Marvell or the de Chelles households; by securing the child, promising to take him into business and making him the sole heir of the richest man in America, Moffatt significantly increases Paul’s value without taking away his authenticity or in any way diminishing his aura.

The very reason and method by which Paul is taken from the aboriginal Dagonet family to the realm of the Invaders are indicative of the nature of the change. The removal of Paul from the Marvell family is instigated by Moffatt, the epitome of an Invader. He advises Undine to use her son as a bargaining tool for the money she needs for a papal pardon. Moffatt’s involvement in Paul’s removal is twofold, as he is also the person Ralph approaches for help in raising money. He is thus not only responsible for suggesting Paul’s removal from Marvell care, but he is also the man who loses the Marvell and Dagonet money on Wall Street, which instigates Ralph’s suicide. In both cases, Moffatt is appealed to by Undine and Ralph as a friendly advisor and seems sincerely to be trying to help out both parties, with no pre-determination to meddle or

cause harm. Yet his actions are directly responsible for Paul's permanent removal from the dying aristocracy and the child's determined place in the realm of the nouveau riche.

Thus with seemingly very little effort, Moffatt, the omnipotent railroad king, forcibly takes that which he sees as valuable from the Aborigines: their art, their money, and their child. He does not value their traditions, their mannerisms, their cultural fables, or their customs, so he leaves them to mold and then vanish with the race. He does not understand or value the de Chelles' "business" of family, so he does not trouble himself with this aboriginal value. His "business," as he insists, is Wall Street, and it is here that he vanquishes both Ralph and de Chelles. Ralph loses money on an investment of which he has very little understanding, which ultimately leads to his suicide. Moffatt loses money on the same deal, but because he has made Wall Street a cultural value, he ultimately triumphs as the wealthiest of the wealthy. Similarly, the de Chelles family is finally forced to sell its tapestries, and the money Moffatt makes in Wall Street allows him to buy them. He recognizes Raymond de Chelles' reverence for family history, but he is unperturbed by his own lack thereof, because he has decided that both family history and reverence for it have no place in the new society. Neither is Moffatt in any way concerned with the Marvell and Dagonet scruples about divorce or scandal. He speaks a different language in terms of morality and virtue, and is unblushing in his refusal to acknowledge the aboriginal codes of conduct. He urges Undine to leave de Chelles and marry him, and she is distressed by his stubborn resistance in accepting old money ways. She says to him, "You don't know – You don't understand –," but she realizes that his lack of understanding is "part of his terrible power" (366). And because Moffatt is a king of the invading race, he has the power to define cultural authenticity. His refusal to acknowledge certain family and relationship standards of the

old upper class does not diminish the aura of the nouveau riche; rather, the deliberate shift in standards serves to increase it.

He does, however, value aboriginal art, and because as Invader he has the authority to perpetuate aura, he allows this characteristic of societal authenticity to continue. Sassoubre argues that “Moffatt collects the things he collects in order to reassure himself that originality and authenticity (intrinsic value) exist in the world, and that he can know them when he sees them” (705). To an extent, this is true. Moffatt engages in art collection just as the Aborigines did. But there is also no denying that Moffatt *does* recognize authentic works of art when he sees them. Undine marvels at this:

When she took him to see some inaccessible picture, or went with him to inspect the treasures of a famous dealer, she saw that the things he looked at moved him in a way she could not understand, and that the actual touching of rare textures – bronze or marble, or velvets flushed with the bloom of age – gave him sensations like those her own beauty had once roused in him. (358)

Gibson claims that “[t]he old order operates within a system of restraints and taboos; the new society seems formless, voracious, and uncontrolled” (63). But Moffatt and other Invaders systematically deny aboriginals the authority to name tradition, custom, and restraint in the new world order. The objects Moffatt takes – money, the Boucher tapestries, the Marie Antoinette necklace he gives as a wedding gift to Undine, and, of course, Paul – become the property and right of the invading race. Aura remains intact, but Invaders determine the value, wresting that authority from Aborigines. Sassoubre argues that “Moffatt’s very desire for authenticity destroys authenticity by consuming it” (707). However, Moffatt does not so much consume as appropriate objects of authenticity, ensuring their existence by allowing them to continue to exist. This is

true of art and jewelry as well as of Paul. Reared by the Dagonets or the de Chelles, both members of similar tribes facing extinction, Paul would have dwindled into obscurity, joining the “inhabitants [. . .] exhibited at ethnological shows, pathetically engaged in the exercise of their primitive industries,” a future Ralph jokingly and mournfully predicted for his family (46-47). But by abducting Paul and adopting him into the Invading tribe, Moffatt does not – cannot – consume the child’s aura. He merely acknowledges it, and with his newly acquired conqueror’s authority allows it to continue. To borrow Benjamin’s example, just as both the Greek worshipper and medieval cleric are confronted with a statue’s aura and acknowledge its value, so too do both Ralph and Moffatt recognize Paul’s value when confronted with the child. But again, where Ralph’s proprietorship could only have devalued the child’s worth, Moffatt, as an invading chieftain, exerts his right and ability to add to it. Thus, the aura of the Invaders is increases rather than diminishes.

CONCLUSION

Undine’s social climb seems to be brought to a grinding halt at the end of the novel when she learns that she can never become an ambassador’s wife; as her husband informs her, “They won’t have divorced Ambassadors” (377). Undine tells herself mournfully that “it was the one part she was really made for” (378). But, based on what Wharton reveals about both Invaders and Aborigines, the rule regarding the ambassadorship is really the last sparring effort to maintain aboriginal control, which will eventually topple in the face of the Invaders’ new authority, just like everything else. The “tiny black cloud” (377) that hangs over Undine after she is told she cannot be the wife of an ambassador is not evidence of her individual defeat but rather a prediction of the Invaders’ imminent triumph; having wrested authority from old New York, the nouveau riche will take what they desire, even if old rules dictate otherwise. As an art

dealer says of Moffatt, ““This gentleman buys only things that are not for sale”” (338), and the final scene in the novel harbingers Moffatt’s ultimate control of cultural authenticity, fueled by Undine’s desire to appropriate “the real thing.”

The Custom of the Country is not Wharton’s idea of a mournful dedication to the loss of aura or the eradication of authenticity in the demise of old New York society; rather, it is a keen observation of the shift in authority that dictates authenticity and recognizes aura, ensuring its continued existence. A surface reading of the novel indicates a scathing criticism of aura-less new wealth, which abandons tradition and often morality in an attempt to copy old New York society. And certainly Wharton seems contemptuous of her heroine’s grasping struggle to the top and of Moffatt’s “loudness and redness” (376). Yet these so-called copies, in the image of a billionaire railroad king and the only daughter of an entrepreneurial Midwesterner, have not eradicated aura; rather, in its “copy” the new aristocracy appropriates and reinvents the authenticity of the old, not abolishing aura but reclaiming and interpreting it in a new light. The novel indicates the fluid and changeable nature of class, resisting old New York’s determined assertion of a timeless and unalterable definition of itself. The nouveau riche have wrested the physical status symbols from the upper class and, as conquerors, have asserted their right to reject earlier social mores and tribal customs. Moffatt, with his red ribbon “bestowed on him for waiving his claim to a Velásquez that was wanted for the Louvre,” and Undine, flushed with her husband’s success in “capturing the St. Désert tapestries” (376), symbolize the new authentic upper class. They discard old rites and laws and authoritatively declare themselves “the real thing,” heedless of the now defunct aboriginal definition. Just as the lower-class sitters in James’ story represent a truer aristocracy than the aristocracy itself, so too does the nouveau riche in *The Custom of the Country* articulate the dominant new authenticity. The Invaders do not cast off

upper-class aura as they take their places as the rulers of New York; rather, they forcibly wrest it from the defeated, defying tradition and establishing a new interpretation of what constitutes “the real thing.”

Works Cited

- Balkun, Mary McAleer. *The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2006. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. Ed. Clive Cazeau. New York: Routledge, 2000. 322-43. Print.
- Bruni, John. "Becoming American: Evolution and Performance in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*." *Intertexts* 9:1 (2005): 43-59. Web. 27 Nov. 2009.
- Furst, Lilian R. "'Hunting for the Real': Responses to Art in Edith Wharton's *Custom of the Country*." *Twisted from the Ordinary: Essays on American Literary Naturalism*. Ed. Mary E. Papke. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2003. 260-75. Print.
- Gair, Christopher. "The Crumbling Structure of 'Appearances': Representation and Authenticity in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 43:2 (1997): 349-73. Web. 30 Nov. 2009.
- Gibson, Mary Ellis. "Edith Wharton and the Ethnography of Old New York." *Studies in American Fiction* 13.1 (1985): 57-69. Web. 30 Nov. 2009.
- Howells, William Dean. *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. 1885. New York: Penguin, 1989. Print.
- James, Henry. "The Real Thing." 1892. *Tales of Henry James: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Christof Wegelin and Henry B. Wonham. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2003. 189-210. Print.
- Nowlin, Michael. "Edith Wharton's Higher Provincialism: *French Ways* for Americans and the Ends of *The Age of Innocence*." *Journal of American Studies* 38:1 (2004): 89-108. Web. 27 Nov. 2009.

- Orvell, Miles. *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989. Print.
- Pizer, Donald. "The Problem of Definition." Introduction. *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London*. Ed. Pizer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. 1-18. Print.
- Sassoubre, Ticien Marie. "Property and Identity in *The Custom of the Country*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.4 (2003): 687-713. Web. 12 Oct. 2009.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Spragg: the Art of the Deal." *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*. Ed. Millicent Bell. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. 87-97. Print.
- Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972. Print.
- Vanderlaan, Kimberly Marie. "The Arts and Artists in the Fiction of Henry James, Edith Wharton and Willa Cather." Diss. U of Delaware, 2005. Ann Arbor: UMI, 2006. Web. 12 Oct. 2009.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Amherst: Prometheus, 1998. Print.
- Wharton, Edith. *The Custom of the Country*. New York: Scribner's, 1913. Print.
- . *French Ways and the Their Meaning*. New York: Appleton, 1917. Print.
- . *The Writing of Fiction*. New York: Scribner's, 1925. Print.

