

The Custom of the Country

Edith Wharton

Reader's Guide

Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* centers around a young woman named Undine Spragg who attempts to rise in turn-of-the-twentieth-century New York and France through a series of marriages and divorces. Through the character of Undine, Wharton explores with sharpness and precision the values of a decadent society not entirely dissimilar from our own.

The Custom of the Country is a story of an antihero—or, in this case, antiheroine. Antihero stories work differently than stories with conventional heroes.

In a hero-based story, we root for a generally virtuous and likeable but imperfect hero to overcome an obstacle or achieve a goal or resolve a conflict (think Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* or Carol Kennicott in *Main Street*). We hope for the hero to find happily-ever-after.

In an antihero story, however, we deal with a protagonist who is significantly lacking in virtue, and we hope for that character's eventual comeuppance or downfall. Think of Elisha ben Abuyah in *As A Driven Leaf* or Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*.

Approach *The Custom of the Country* with this in mind.

We will see if Undine Spragg gets her just desserts or not. But we must read to the very end of the novel to get there.

Characters

Undine Spragg, a young woman from Apex, a city somewhere in the Midwest

Abner E. Spragg, Undine's father, a businessman

Leota B. Spragg, Undine's mother

Elmer Moffatt, a cunning financier

Ralph Marvell, a New York society gentleman from an "old family"

Peter Van Degen, another New York gentleman from an "old family"

Clare Van Degen, Peter Van Degan's wife

Charles Bowen, an elderly man from New York City

Raymond De Chelles, a French aristocrat

Paul Marvell, Undine's and Ralph's child, Raymond's stepson

Laura Fairford, Ralph Marvell's sister

Henley Fairford, Laura Fairford's husband

Claud Walsingham Popple, a painter

Mrs. Heeny, a gossipy masseuse who serves as the Spragg women's guide to New York society

Celeste, the Spragg family's French maid

Jim Driscoll, an American ambassador to England