

# Custom of the country by edith wharton



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Nikhila S. 20852, Academia Research 9 - 11 - 2008 Discuss How Wharton Uses Setting, Costuming, Lighting And Other Aspects Of The Surrounding Environment To Achieve Mood, Emotional Effects, Foreshadowing, Etc.

Edith Wharton is a writer of great power and expression. From the start of the novel where the setting is the hotel Stentorian, she describes the opulence of the setting to project the loneliness and boredom of the women. So lonely is Mrs. Spragg in that hotel, away from any contact with her kind, that she entreats Mrs. Heeny, her masseuse with a plaintive, " Oh, don't go yet, Mrs. Heeny. I haven't seen a human being all day, and I can't seem to find anything to say to that French maid" (Chapter 1).

The force and power of Wharton's words is felt throughout the book. In the last chapter, Paul Marvell, home for Easter, finds himself completely alone in the huge 'museum-like' hotel that is to be his home. The descriptions of the rooms with their empty splendor and that of the library with its untouched volumes, is gripping. The reader cannot miss the empathy that Paul feels with Vandyke's Grey Boy with his face " infinitely noble and charming, and yet (in spite of the dog) so sad and lonely that he too might have come home that very day to a strange house in which none of his old things could be found" (Chapter 46). With a few well chosen adjectives and phrases - " the white fur rugs and brocade chairs seemed maliciously on the watch for smears and ink-spots" (Chapter 46), " none of the new servants--they were always new" (Chapter 46), " massive unused inkstands and immense immaculate blotters; not a single volume had slipped its golden prison" (Chapter 46), Wharton has made the very loneliness the boy feels to emanate from the book and grip the reader.

In the scene where the Spragg family gathers for breakfast, Wharton

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describes the settings superbly. " About them sat other pallid families, richly dressed, and silently eating their way through a bill-of-fare which seemed to have ransacked the globe for gastronomic incompatibilities-" (Chapter 4).

One wonders at the terrible sacrifices these rich families make - living in sumptuous stuffy rooms where the " spongy carpets might have absorbed a year's crumbs without a sweeping" (Chapter 4), eating indigestible fare and generally living inactive and unhealthy lives.

Wharton creates one more incomparable scene where Undine goes to the art gallery, a socially fashionable activity (though she does not remember any of the canvasses later!). While she ostensibly watches the pictures raptly, she is fully conscious of the picture she herself is making. This gives us an inkling of the extent to which she would go to be one among the top society.

The description of the scenes before Ralph Marvell's suicide also takes us by storm. " The blindness within him seemed to have intensified his physical perceptions" (Chapter 36). The shock that Marvell had taken that day when Moffatt reveals to him that her was also Undine's husband once is portrayed by the author vividly, as he walks down the Subway, to his Office, to his house. His home brings him no comfort and the reader feels all the terrible distress and agony that Marvell feels at his wife's duplicity.

The last straw that makes him use the revolver - the dread that the servant would not leave him alone and would invade the privacy of his room are so graphically written, we feel one with Ralph when he thinks that it is " perfectly intolerable that anyone should cross the threshold of the room again" (Chapter 36).

As the story unfolds, the reader is first exasperated, and then starts hating the character of Undine. Even while basking in the triumph of acquiring the

Marquis' ancestral tapestries and hosting a grand dinner party for leading Socialites, she hears about, and thus yearns for the fame of an Ambassador's wife and is dismayed to learn that divorced women can never be one.

Wharton has been able to catch and hold the attention of the reader with her settings and the brilliant use of imagery to create mood. Her writing casts a spell that even a disliked heroine cannot dispel.

#### Works Cited

" Custom of the Country - Edith Wharton". The Literature Network. Jalic Inc. 2000-2008. 5th November 2008.