

Simulation of Life: Laughter and Knowledge in *The Custom of the Country*

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Abstract

Laughter takes a great many forms in the novel of manners, signifying different things at different times for different characters in different situations. Linguistics, philosophy, rhetoric, psychoanalysis, poetry, art, and film have all attempted to tackle the subject of laughter, yet in relation to manners, and the novel of manners, the matter remains fraught and underexplored. By examining laughter in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), this paper attempts to show how laughter on a micro level mirrors the simulacra and simulations that comprise manners, characters, and even the progression of the novel on a macro level. What the study of laughter in *The Custom of the Country* reveals about knowledge, sign systems, and commodity and exchange, could nuance the way in which we read laughter in the novel of manners, a type literature built upon knowing and understanding the conditions of the personal and social simultaneously.

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It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself. – Jean Baudrillard¹

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a macro level. What the study of laughter in *The Custom of the Country* reveals about knowledge, sign systems, and commodity and exchange, could nuance the way in which we read laughter in the novel of manners, a type literature built upon knowing and understanding the conditions of the personal and social simultaneously.

Problematically, the bulk of scholarship on laughter deals specifically with humor: what is humorous, what is not, how humor functions, and why. Theoretical perspectives on humor abound as the comic, and by extension the laugh, is argued to result from specific social and psychological preconditions. Linguistic models of humor including The General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo and Raskin) attempt to propose overarching theories of how humor and laughter function. A far smaller body of literature disassociates laughter from humor and ponders the possible implications of such a disassociation. This paper intervenes at the intersection of laughter and manners by examining the at once personal and social functions of laughter in the *The Custom of the Country*, and by extension, the novel of manners generally.

Scholars of linguistics researching laughter have noticed the almost universal association of laughter and humor. Some however, examine laughter outside of these narrow confines. Robert Provine argues that “[there] is only a partial correlation between the behavioral fact of laughter and the abstract and subjective category of humor. The focus on humor deflects consideration of broader and deeper roots of laughter in human vocal communication and social interaction (296). John Morreall, a scholar of humor and comedy adds:

Laughter and humor do not always occur together, of course... something’s making us laugh is not a sufficient condition for its being humorous. Nor is laughter a necessary condition for humor. Often, especially when alone, we are amused by something without breaking into laughter. The link between laughter and humor is not one of constant correlation but one of tendency: humorous things or situations tend to make us laugh, under the right conditions. (294)

Significant in both Provine and Morreall’s disassociation of laughter from humor is the positioning of laughter within the social: we laugh aloud when in public, yet rarely “[break] into laughter” when we are alone. Laughter then is primarily social; it is produced in the face of the other

in order to relay information, to hide it, to divert attention, or to gain it. Laughter functioning in these manners permeates *The Custom of the Country*, while laughter as a result of something comic occurs only rarely. In this way, a bleak novel already colored by greed, adultery, and suicide, can be read as almost entirely comically void, filled with hollow laughs, signifying only their social function, and indeed their very emptiness.

The Custom of the Country concerns the beautiful, young, Undine Spragg who takes a decidedly business-like approach to the marriage market. By engaging in a series of marriages to men of ever greater fortunes, Undine manages to climb both the social and economic ladders. Ellen Dupree, reading *The Custom of the Country* through the theoretical framework established by Luce Irigaray, suggests that Undine's behavior in the novel is a feminist strategy, a:

form of mimesis in which a woman deliberately exaggerates or mimics patriarchal discourse for the purpose of escaping its power to define her. By momentarily 'jamming the theoretical machinery' it is possible to expose the disparity between the discourse and what it presumes to describe...[S]uch a response is the only way in which women can 'introduce ourselves into such a tightly-woven systematicity,' for, of course, it is impossible to use the male discourse to attack its own presumptions. (5)

Does laughter in the novel function similarly, as a form of mimesis, or does it function separately and differently from discourse? I argue that laughter in *The Custom of the Country* most often reveals an epistemological gap. It is variously "embarrassed," (352) "angry," (292) "disenchanted," (293) and even "astonished and agitated" (271). It is "scornful" (24) and "nervous" (34). Rarely, is it joyous or heartfelt; laughs are frequently about projecting something other than what one is feeling. Though the laugh in *The Custom of the Country* frequently reflects a certain type of knowledge, knowledge of power, people, situations, and savoir-faire, the intention of the laugh is often impenetrable, its true intention outwardly *unknowable*.

The Custom of the Country approaches the epistemological difficulties of laughter by revealing the laugh to be an extension of sign systems generally as they apply to the world outside of language. The "echo" of laughter occurring throughout the text is the prime example of laughter functioning in this manner. At several points in the novel, one character

will laugh, and another will “echo” it. These echoes inadvertently channel Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra in which the simulation of something comes to stand in for the real of something, until a simulacrum of the simulation is all that exists. Though he is concerned with systems of exchange, revolution, and capital, his theory is equally applicable to systems of manners. A laugh that is not rooted in humor, signifying something other than its true animating intention, which is then echoed by the laugh of another character, communicates only its remove from reality, its positioning as simulacrum, its entry into a hyperreal² world where manners come to speak their own language, absent and removed from the animating intentions on which they were once built.

Jean Baudrillard does not seem to be an obvious theorist to consult in regards to manners or laughter in that he applies post-structuralist critiques to economic theory, death, lust, and politics. Yet *The Custom of the Country*, with its emphasis on exchange, commodities, and commodification, and with a protagonist who continually adapts to be successful in such systems, begs for Baudrillardian critique. In “Simulacra and Simulations,” Baudrillard argues that representations have overtaken reality to the point where they come to represent reality itself. He builds upon linguistic theories which argue that a sign functions only because it gets repeated as something which is not perfectly unique. If a sign were completely unique, it could not signify, and therefore, by very definition, it must be repeatable. A written or spoken utterances’ capacity to function as a mark is constituted by its possibility of completely breaking off from its original context. It must be able to break, not just from its original context but from every context. Baudrillard’s analysis confirms this supposition by showing that indeed all signification mirrors this structure of language and that our perceptions of reality have broken off from their original anchoring in ‘the real.’ The hyperreal thus supplants the real. Enter laughter. Laughter, a variable sign signifying no reliably consistent meaning, signifies on the surface its own emptiness. It is a conduit in which meaning can be inserted, but it cannot anchor meaning; the laugh is always variable, and frequently unknowable. Interlocutors may endow it with meaning; however, the meaning with which it is endowed is highly suspect, possibly erroneous, and always revealing a gap in animating intention and reception. By employing the word “variable,” I imply that laughter is a vacant sign always waiting to have meaning bestowed upon it, even if that meaning is misunderstood or misinterpreted. Thus, I am arguing that laughter functions like all spoken or written utterance in its iterability, yet presents a unique

challenge linguistically in that it frequently, even purposefully, signifies an intention incorrectly, and this misalignment between intention and reception is built into its very structure.

Laughter as simulacrum is no place more obvious than in the echoed laughter of *The Custom of the Country*. Echoed laughter reverberates throughout the novel and functions as simulacrum: it is a simulation of a laugh that itself is a simulation of merriment, joy, or humor. Thus, this type of laughter in *The Custom of the Country* is hyperreal, being both removed from the original intention of the original laugh and radically removed from humor. And it is Undine, a hyperreal vixen obsessed with costume and beauty, who frequently echoes the laughter of others. The echoing further echoes the fact that Undine echoes the manners of her betters throughout the novel in order to climb to the next rung on the social ladder. Therefore, Wharton's use of the word "echo" as it relates to laughter mirrors, in language, the narrative of Undine learning to mirror, mimic, and echo the manners of the social sets she wishes to infiltrate. On a micro level then, Undine's echo of the laughter of others calls attention to Undine as simulacrum herself: she is a vessel, a receptacle for the manners she emptily mimes while voiding them of the meanings with which they were once laden. Undine, unlike Mrs. Heeny for example, is constantly morphed and shaped by the manners around her in order to make her into someone, or something, that can advance socially.

Mrs. Heeny, sincere and unchanging, plays a small but vital role in *The Custom of the Country*. Although by class she is an outsider, she is privy to the ways of the wealthy and understands certain things about them precisely *because* she is an outsider. After manicuring and beautifying Undine's hands, Mrs. Heeny tells Undine to put her engagement ring back on "with a laugh of jovial significance; and Undine, echoing the laugh in a murmur of complacency, slipped on the fourth finger of her recovered hand a band of sapphires in an intricate setting" (Wharton 84). The laugh of Mrs. Heeny is a knowing laugh. She knows what Undine has accomplished in her engagement to Ralph Marvell and she further understands the significance of the elaborate, though old fashioned setting of the ring. While Charles Bowen may be regarded as the social anthropologist of the novel, Mrs. Heeny is no less as keen an observer. Undine's laugh "echo[es]" Mrs. Heeny's laugh as hollow imitation of the "jovial" knowing laugh. The echoed laugh is a laugh in pantomime. This echoed laugh, laughed for affect, acknowledges the space it is meant to fill, but fills it only as simulation. Undine laughs because Mrs. Heeny laughs, but not because her engagement is particularly amusing. Yet it is

satisfying enough, and for the time being, it will do.

Once married to Ralph, Undine echoes his laughter too. When Ralph “laugh[s] impatiently” (160) about Undine’s lack of understanding concerning the proper etiquette for a woman in society, it is also not a comic laugh. It is a grave laugh, an attempt at patience, a simulation of good humor. But when Undine “echoe[s] his laugh...with the good-humoured curtness that was the habitual note of intercourse with the Spraggs” (160), it reveals the simulacrum that laughter has become in Mr. and Mrs. Marvell’s discourse. The learning curve of manners is steep for Undine, and Ralph, at first genuinely in love and laughing out of true happiness, eventually tires of her insolence and unceasing selfishness. Here, his laughs turn “impatient” (161) as the understanding between the couple begins to fray. Undine takes these impatient laughs, already somber, and echoes them in “good-humoured curtness” that is hardly good-humored at all. This simulacrum of laughter matches haughty for haughtier, revealing even on the level of language that Undine always intends to get the last word, or to have the last laugh as it were. Ralph laughs because he is losing his patience and the laugh acts as a buffer between his thought and the articulation of this thought. Undine laughs because Ralph laughs, showing impatience for impatience, revealing little and communicating even less.

Echoed and impatient laughter continues to plague the Marvells’ union. When Undine announces to Ralph that Van Degen has asked them to sail home on the *Sorceress*, “[s]he flashe[s] it out on a laugh of triumph, without appearing to have a doubt of the effect the announcement would produce” (176). Ralph’s reaction is to feel disgusted. Looking at Undine, he finds her “no longer beautiful—she seemed to have the face of her thoughts. He stood up with an impatient laugh” (177). A laugh “of triumph” is parried with “an impatient laugh.” Ralph’s echo of Undine’s laugh may be an attempt to retain his composure. Though like so much of the laughter in *The Custom of the Country*, it occurs in an unfunny situation, signifying the inherent disconnection of laughter and humor in the novel, and reveals another instance of a laugh’s presence in a moment of tension and misunderstanding. The laugh in these instances functions as interpersonal lubrication in an attempt to make a social situation unfold with less friction.

The echo of laughter is also employed to teach Undine lessons or to show her the error of her ways. When Undine gripes to Van Degen about only

going to the Adirondacks for the summer, she complains that she will not need Paris clothes for the trip: “It doesn’t matter, at any rate,’ she ended, laughing, ‘because nobody I care about will see me.’ Van Degen echoed her laugh. ‘Oh, come—that’s rough on Ralph!’” (232). Undine laughs out of anger, jealousy, and disappointment. This is laughter divorced from the comic and firmly rooted in a bevy of negative emotions. Van Degen echoes her laugh in order to reverberate her shallowness and cruelty back at her. Rarely in the novel does anyone get through to Undine. Yet here, after Van Degen’s echoing of her laugh, she immediately, even if only for affect, admits that she should not have implied that her husband does not matter to her. This echoed laughter, because it is not Undine who animates it but her social better, is received by her with the appropriate solemnity and consideration. As Undine learns to navigate society and to properly imitate the manners of others, the emptiness behind her actions becomes more evident; here, Van Degen’s echo, endowed with meaning, forces Undine to confront the knowledge of her own cruelty.

Even as a child Undine fixates primarily on the social, with the genuine considered only an afterthought if considered at all. She forgoes regular childhood play and instead yearns only to play dress up. The interest in “play[ing] lady” never diminished, and as a young woman “she still practiced the same secret pantomime, gliding in, settling her skirts, swaying her fan, moving her lips in soundless talk and laughter” (22). Laughter for Undine from her childhood on is a practiced, mimed reaction. The pantomimed laughs of Undine’s girlhood become the pantomimed and echoed laughs of her womanhood. When her laughter is genuine, it is most often cruel. Her empty simulacrum of laughter is perhaps preferred to her laughter endowed with meaning, for that meaning most frequently reveals nastiness and baseness, and little more.

Beyond her simulacrum of a laugh and her cruel laugh, Undine has a laugh that is part of her manner which, also humorless, relays meaning despite itself. Mrs. Fairford actively works to engage young Undine at her first big dinner party in New York society, but Undine remains socially awkward. Her “nervous laugh that punctuat[es] all her phrases” (34) has the dual function of expressing her discomfort while simultaneously creating discomfort in her company. She, with her nervous laughter and awkward reactions, is the girl from Apex, an outsider, rendered highly visible by her audible discomfort. In this instance, laughter attempts to break the tension. It is a shield attempting to protect its originator from the judgments and unkind proclivities of the others. Yet it fails. A nervous

laugh is read as a nervous laugh; it reveals internal discomforts perhaps better than other audible cues ever could. The nervous laugh is the rare site where knowledge is perfectly relayed: a nervous laugh is legible. A nervous laugh is a specific kind of laugh which is one of a group of laughs that are more intimately bound to their signification:

...certain cultural standardization of meanings is built into at least certain kinds of laughter. And intuitively we interpret a wide range of meanings in the laughter we hear: sincerity, nervousness, vapidness, hysteria, embarrassment, amusement, mockery, friendliness, raillery, sycophancy, taste, strength of character, even sanity. The scope of these intuitions is indeed so great that it seems to me to raise serious questions about how much is encoded in the sound of laughter -- about how much even can be. (Edmonson 28)

A great deal may be encoded, and may even be knowable in certain types of laughter, but true intention may still prove elusive. Undine with her nervous laugh reveals first and foremost that she has not entirely mastered the manners she tries so earnestly to emulate. She is anxious to please and is not fully conversant in the language of New York society. Clare Van Degen too shares Undine's propensity to extraneous, excessive laughter. Clare "was neither beautiful nor imposing: just a dark girlish-looking creature with plaintive eyes and a fidgety frequent laugh. But she was more elaborately dressed and jewelled than the other ladies, and her elegance and her restlessness made her seem less alien to Undine" (36). Here, the laughter makes Clare akin to Undine: they are both girls out in society not always completely comfortable in their own skin. Yet Clare's jewels and elegance set her apart. Undine sees in Clare, and perhaps begins to understand, that if one has the proper name, the proper circle, and the proper accoutrements, a "fidgety frequent laugh," though not desirable, can be acceptable enough. Perhaps it reveals the socially precarious position of the young female in society: anxious to please, attempting to relay one's kindness through empty, incessant laughter, which seems implicitly to beg: "like me, please like me, I am likeable."

At the same dinner party, Undine becomes aware of some of the open secrets common to the social set she is trying to take by storm. Her "ear was too well attuned to the national note of irony" (36) for any of their cutting remarks to escape her. Suddenly, "[h]er attention was diverted by hearing Mrs. Van Degen, under cover of the general laugh, say in a low tone to young Marvell: 'I thought you liked his things, or I wouldn't

have had him paint me” (36). The “general laugh” here is a diversion, a guise. It is a chance for those not joining in the laugh to say true things, secret things. The consuming nature of laughter for an individual and the noise produced by a group laughing, provide an excellent cover for covert conversation. Laughter, genuine, uproarious laughter, acts as a camouflage for the exchange of actual communication in *The Custom of the Country*. Shielding the reader from the impetus of the “general laugh,” shared by the group and likely humorous, yet providing access to the truths exchanged beneath its veil, reveals the role of humor in the book: the narrative actively bears witness to its lack. The general laugh exists in the text. We read the words “general laugh.” But we are not let in on the joke. Instead the comedic laugh is background noise, signifying nothing but its own existence.

When Wharton does allow the reader into a comedic laugh, it most often has biting sarcasm or unkindness at the root. When Mr. Spragg secures an opera box for Undine, he asks if she has considered taking her parents, he and Mrs. Spragg, with her. Yet “[t]his was so obviously comic that they all laughed—even Mrs. Spragg” (42). This may be a rare instance where the knowledge gap is decidedly narrowed; all parties know the score. Undine would no sooner take her parents on this first outing to the opera than she would a pet. Everyone *knows* this. The laugh merely confirms the rare exchange of mutually shared knowledge. Yet even here, cruelty, or at the very least exclusion, is at the root of the humor. Undine would never think to take her parents to the opera because it would not advantage her socially to have the slightly crude, small town, nouveau riche parents at her side. Having their money in her bank account is well enough, but going around with them socially is another matter entirely. The whole family laughs because the whole family understands.

By examining who is invited to laugh and when, a great deal is revealed in regards to social hierarchies, power positions, and social strivings in the text. Frequently in the novel of manners, or at the very least this novel of manners, a laugh will allude to hidden knowledge or willful ignorance of place, time, or situation. Munro S. Edmonson, writing on the linguistics of laughter in the 1980s, argues it is:

...obvious that laughter signals far more than amusement, and more nuanced information than who is laughing and how hard. Laughter is primarily a mode of social expression, occurring only rarely in solitude. Its phonetic features appear to be organized expressly to enable an individual to vote audibly and identifiably

in a group context, and thus to make his feelings known in response to a certain range of situational cues. And each individual has the option of coding his presence and pleasure or displeasure, as well as participation or nonparticipation in a more or less complex proposition presented by the context. The sounds of laughter must thus encode a range of interpretable messages, feigned or sincere, revealing and sometimes involuntary. They do so, not in the segmental sequences of articulate speech, but in the overdetermination of the sound dimensions by multiple simultaneous emotional considerations. The laughter utterance is thus a multiple-track statement, more akin to music than to speech. And its structure is consequently elusive. (28)

This “range of interpretable messages, feigned or sincere,” is precisely where the epistemological gap occurs: a “range” is not one meaning, anchored and secure. It is a spectrum. “Interpretable” implies open to interpretation and thus able to be *mis*interpreted. “Feigned” suggests willful deceptive, purposely signifying something artificial. And even when intention and laugh are not misaligned, when they are precisely inline and functioning, where intention matches laugh and the willful intent is to relay this internally consistent message, things can still go awry. This is the case when Undine discusses divorce when dining with the Marvells. She suggests that Mabel Lipscomb will leave her husband Harry because “she’ll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him,” thus causing the entire dinner party to recoil in horror at her statements. After she speaks, there is a “palpitating silence, broken by a laugh from Ralph. ‘RALPH!’ his mother breathed. . . . Ralph interposed with another laugh, ‘You see, Undine, you’d better think twice before you divorce me!’” (95). Ralph is genuinely amused at the turn of conversation, thinks the elders are perhaps foolish for taking it so seriously, and laughs a joyous, heartfelt laugh. Yet in so doing he reveals his utter naiveté. In this scene, despite the sincerity of the laugh, there is a general want of knowledge and understanding. Undine does not understand traditional New York society. Her views may mirror those of the unfolding twentieth century, but these are shocking views to the vanguards of tradition. Ralph laughs because he does not see that Undine is deadly serious in her assertions of the righteousness of a woman leaving a man who does not live up to her expectations. The new worldview cannot comprehend the old, the old cannot comprehend the new, and Ralph, attempting to be the suture between the past and future, laughs. But his laugh is misplaced and ignorant to the coming disaster of his union with Undine. Rather than his laugh acting as the intended suture between disparate ideologies, it is

the laughter of the oblivious, of the fool.

Laughter, as empty echo, as naiveté or foolishness, is countered in *The Custom of the Country* by laughter as a call to action. Sometimes the laugh is employed to make *somebody* do *something*. Both Ralph and Undine attempt this tactic. For example, Ralph:

could not rouse in [Undine] any scruple about incurring fresh debts, yet he knew she was no longer unaware of the value of money. She had learned to bargain, pare down prices, evade fees, brow-beat the small tradespeople and wheedle concessions from the great—not, as Ralph perceived, from any effort to restrain her expenses, but only to prolong and intensify the pleasure of spending. Pained by the trait, he tried to laugh her out of it. He told her once that she had a miserly hand—showing her, in proof, that, for all their softness, the fingers would not bend back, or the pink palm open. (181)

Here laughter is a call to action, a rhetorical device attempting to *make something happen*. By laughing and teasing while shaming Undine, Ralph is trying to change her habits, to narrow the chasm he sees between his own genteel ways and her more crude methods. His mocking laughter has a dual purpose: make an unbearable situation bearable and politely, through light comedy, force Undine to change her behavior.

Undine too employs the tactic of laughter as impetus to action. When Undine finds herself in a situation with Chelles similar to her previous situation with Ralph, she begins to panic. Money in this new situation:

...represented not the means of individual gratification but the substance binding together whole groups of interests, and where the uses to which it might be put in twenty years were considered before the reasons for spending it on the spot. At first she was sure she could laugh Raymond out of his prudence or coax him round to her point of view. She did not understand how a man so romantically in love could be so unpersuadable on certain points. (495)

Again the laugh is a rhetorical device deployed in an attempt to change the behavior of another; again, it specifically concerns money. First, Ralph tries to laugh Undine out of her spendthrift ways. Then, Undine tries to laugh Chelles into them. The parallel structure in Wharton's language as

it relates first to one husband then to another suggests that in marriage, the person trying to laugh someone into something is the disempowered individual. Ralph tries to laugh Undine out of her spending, but she ignores him and spends him into debt. She controls the relationship. She tries to laugh Chelles into allowing her to spend more and it falls on deaf ears. In neither case is the attempt fruitful. Wharton implies through this parallel that laughing someone into something is an impotent and pathetic gesture and that power differentials are not easily bridged through laughter.

When Undine realizes she has no power over Chelles, she begins to revel in small acts of selfishness, slowly tainting the environment of Saint Desert. Yet:

[i]f anyone had told her, a year earlier that one of the chief distractions of her new life would be to invent ways of annoying her mother-in-law, she would have laughed at the idea of wasting her time on such trifles...Her husband had mastered her in essentials, but she had discovered innumerable small ways of irritating and hurting him. (518)

The fact that she thinks she would have found her current mode of existence laughable in the not-so-distant past is evidence of the small, cloistering effect wrought by being isolated with the du Chelles family. She would have laughed at the idea, but the reality is not laughable. In it, she is vindictive and takes pleasure in hurting people. If an Undine not of the situation could find the situation humorous, then the situation *is* inherently humorous, or at the very least, absurd. In the situation, Undine finds it far from amusing even with the knowledge that outside of it she would see the absurdity of her ways. There is a willful disconnection between understanding her behavior as absurd, and being so mired in the moment that she refuses to see it or cease the behavior. Yet it is all half-lies and half-truths because she is haunted by the ghost laugh of the Undine from “a year earlier” watching, silently laughing, revealing a knowledge that she will not admit to herself beyond a half-admission ascribed to this earlier, absent self.

While the particularities of laughter in the novel are dark, rhetorical, or even sad, the general sense of laughter is as a metaphor for the social. Realizing that Ralph must know she is spending time with Van Degen, Undine questions his silence and wonders what he knows. Such “thoughts were with her as she dressed; but at the Ellings’ they fled like

ghosts before light and laughter. She had never been more open to the suggestions of immediate enjoyment" (225). The actual relationship with her husband is of no consequence to Undine. Only the social, the "light and laughter," are what matter. They draw her out and give her sustenance. Laughter as a metaphor for well-to-do society is an apt one indeed: as an empty sign endowed with unstable and largely unknowable meaning, laughter reflects the vapid, rapidly shifting situation of the society Undine breaches. The "light and laughter" occupy her; they temporarily shield her from the knowledge that she knows that her husband knows she is spending time with Van Degen.

It is no coincidence that the character continually brought into unfortunate, undesirable knowledge reacts by laughing hysterically, uncontrollably, maniacally. This character is Ralph. Ralph, recalling the night of dinner party where Undine made the flippant comment that Mabel would likely leave her husband "could still hear the horrified murmur with which his mother had rebuked his laugh. For he had laughed—had thought Undine's speech fresh and natural! Now he felt the ironic rebound of her words" (322). Knowledge in the character of Ralph is inexorably tied up in laughter: he laughs when he does not know but he laughs even harder when he does. When he receives a letter he thinks is from Undine and instead it is from "a firm of private detectives who undertook, in conditions of attested and inviolable discretion, to investigate 'delicate' situations," he begins to come unglued. For a while, "Ralph sat and stared at this document; then he began to laugh and tossed it into the scrap-basket" (325). Ralph laughs a defeated laugh; a frantically melancholy laugh. The groan which follows says a great deal, but the laugh expresses something the groan cannot: the absurdity of the situation in which he has allowed himself to be drawn. Laughs, perhaps more than any other utterance, reveal absurdity and the failure of language to properly express the full extent of the absurdity. No character in *The Custom of the Country* has a keener understanding of absurdity than Ralph. Wharton reiterates this point later when Ralph is talking to Mr. Spragg and learns the entirety of Undine's plan:

...nothing was clear to him save the monstrous fact suddenly upheaved in his path. His wife had left him, and the plan for her evasion had been made and executed while he lay helpless: she had seized the opportunity of his illness to keep him in ignorance of her design. The humour of it suddenly struck him and he laughed.
 "Do you mean to tell me that Undine's divorcing ME?"

“I presume that’s her plan,” Mr. Spragg admitted.
 “For desertion?” Ralph pursued, still laughing. (333)

In a moment of great sadness, Ralph laughs. It seems an inappropriate reaction, but laughter as a malleable sign waiting to be endowed with meaning--is just as applicable in times of shock and grief as in moments of hilarity. Later, after thinking on the matter, Ralph becomes hysterical. He “had begun to laugh again. Suddenly he heard his own laugh and it pulled him up. What was he laughing about? What was he talking about?” (334). These moments of Ralph’s laughter, particularly the ones that occur in private, are at odds with theories of laughter in that “[l]aughter is a universal, stereotyped, species-typical component of the human vocabulary that is emitted almost exclusively in social settings” (Provine 291). Further, “[t]he few examples of solitary laughter may be responses to imagined or recalled social encounters, an auditory example of so-called ‘displaying to the people in your head’” (291). Though male hysteria has been explored at length elsewhere, it is noteworthy that Ralph’s hysteria always centers on coming into unwanted knowledge. Again when Ralph hears of Undine’s engagement, he reverts back to the uncontrolled, feverish laugh. Upon hearing the news:

Ralph laughed, and his laugh sounded in his own ears like an echo of the dreary mirth with which he had filled Mr. Spragg’s office the day he had learned that Undine intended to divorce him. But now his wrath was seasoned with a wholesome irony. The fact of his wife’s having reached another stage in her ascent fell into its place as a part of the huge human buffoonery. (431)

Ralph’s laugh *seems* to be uncontrollable and wild, but it is precisely the opposite. His laugh indicates that he knows. He knows Undine’s plan, he sees it in action, and he understands his part in it. This laugh, this “dreary mirth” is a kind of delirium which only the truth and insight bring forth. Ralph laughs because he sees the truth, and the truth is ugly. This laugh is “an echo,” a simulation of the his earlier laugh, indicating that it no longer has the same meaning as the earlier laugh. Perhaps Ralph has accepted Undine too as the simulation, as the empty, embodied sign that she is; yet this is inherently destabilizing as “it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them” (Baudrillard 4).

Knowing what he knows, seeing Undine for who and what she is, Ralph

finally attempts to move on. As he begins to write his novel, Ralph slowly feels the spark return within. He does not go about bragging about his writing, “[h]e kept his secret with the beginner’s deadly fear of losing his hold on his half-real creations if he let in any outer light on them; but he went about with a more assured step, shrank less from meeting his friends, and even began to dine out again, and to laugh at some of the jokes he heard” (427). Here it can be assumed that Ralph’s laugh is an honest one, a hungry one. In it is no doubt a yearning for mirth, for a return to a former time and a former self. He laughs not because he is happy, but perhaps because he thinks he can be.

But Ralph’s happiness does not last: he kills himself after learning that Undine had been Moffat’s bride before she was his own. Ralph’s hysteria and eventual suicide result from a confrontation with the realization that Undine herself has proceeded through the “successive phases of the image” (Baudrillard 4). The young Undine married to Moffat represents “a reflection of basic reality.” She is a small town girl who marries a small town boy with the ambition she so admires. After she moves to New York and passes herself off a woman never engaged, much less married, she is in the second phase of the image which “masks and perverts a basic reality.” When she leaves Ralph and converts to Catholicism, it becomes apparent that she has moved into the third phase of the image which “masks the absence of a basic reality.” There is no stable reality to Undine. Her manners are all citation and grafting, simulacra and simulation. She is what she needs to be in any situation to further herself socially. As she perfects her manners, she moves from reality to simulation. Finally, at the end of the novel, married to Moffat but longing for more, in her pastiche of a home littered with precious artifacts ripped from their cultural contexts, she is pure simulacrum, detached and devoid of any connection to reality whatsoever. Because Undine can imitate a virgin, a never-married woman, and a Catholic with ease, she inadvertently proves that there is nothing behind these designations. If there were an essence, a stable identity or an inalterable *something* to any of these designations, she could not merely speak their language, coopt their signs, and thus borrow their identities. She merely says she is *something*, and so she is. When Ralph realizes that there is nothing behind the façade, that Undine was never what she pretended to be, he can no longer face the world. This new hyperreal environment into which his knowledge thrusts him, where nothing is as it seems, where meanings are endlessly adrift and gaps and slippage constitute *the* reality, it is more than his delicate, artistic soul can bear. And thus, he like so many referents before him, is annihilated.

Yet hope springs eternal for the men in the novel as each takes his turn marrying Undine. The scene where Chelles first sets his sights on Undine is a crucial one. Charles Bowen tells Chelles that marriage in America is not like marriage in Europe. Chelles wonders why Americans still have marriage at all and Bowen answers “Oh, it still has its uses. One couldn’t be divorced without it” (278). At this:

Chelles laughed again; but his straying eye still followed the same direction, and Bowen noticed that the fact was not unremarked by the object of his contemplation. Undine’s party was one of the liveliest in the room: the American laugh rose above the din of the orchestra as the American tables dominated the less daring effects at the other tables. Undine, on entering, had seemed to be in the same mood as her companions; but Bowen saw that, as she became conscious of his friend’s observation, she isolated herself in a kind of soft abstraction; and he admired the adaptability which enabled her to draw from such surroundings the contrasting graces of reserve. (278)

Chelles does not take Bowen’s discussion of divorce seriously, just as Ralph did not take Undine’s flippant talk of divorce seriously. In the laughter on both of these occasions seems to lurk a willful ignorance: they do not see what they do not want to see. The simulation successfully masks itself. That the American laughs are so much more obvious than the other laughs, and that Undine is the most conspicuous of the Americans is no coincidence: she has learned to stand out precisely as she has learned to fit in. And she will laugh all the way to the bank.

Undine’s laughs, for all their emptiness or cruelty, urgings or impatience, also reveal that she slowly comes to witness herself as an extension of the commoditization metaphor which drives the text. That she trades husbands like the brokers around her trade stocks is no chance parallel: exchangeability is precisely the point. Upon hearing the news that Indiana Frusk has married James J. Rolliver, for example, Undine becomes distressed: “‘Oh—’ she stammered with a laugh, astonished and agitated by his news. Indiana Frusk and Rolliver! It showed how easily the thing could be done. If only her father had listened to her!” (271). Undine’s laugh reveals her petty jealousy: she is not happy for Indiana; she is only sad for herself. The “astonished and agitated” laugh may sound like any other laugh, but behind it is pure pettiness. Significant though is not just the jealousy directed at Indiana, but the anger directed at her

father over “how easily the thing could be done.” Trading up, marrying well or better than well, begins to consume Undine. This stammered laugh reveals a peek into her machinations: if it can be done, if someone else is doing it, then she should be doing it. The laugh reveals that Undine has accepted her lot as a prize to be won, and she is frustrated that the prize has yet to go to the highest bidder.

Ultimately, Moffatt is that bidder. Moffatt tells Undine that she is not as beautiful as she once was, but is now “a lot more fetching” (568). This “oddly qualified praise made her laugh with mingled pleasure and annoyance.” Undine understands that it is not just her beauty which carries her now: it is her commodification. She is a highly sought after commodity with a value exceeding her beauty by novel’s end. Her fading beauty annoys her because she understands that her value will decline in proportion to its decline. Human value, like the value of stocks, peaks and falls. But, for the time being, she is still “fetching” and this fact is pleasing enough, so long as she fetches the right suitor.

Moffatt, having longed to possess Undine the entire novel, finally throws down the gauntlet, telling Undine that she has not got the nerve to divorce Chelles. In reply, she “laughed a little and then sighed. She wished he would come nearer, or look at her differently: she felt, under his cool eye, no more compelling than a woman of wax in a showcase” (374). The laugh here is knowledge. She knows that he wants her as part of his collection. She sighs because a part of her also knows that it will inevitably happen and she will do what she needs to do to be as wealthy as she wants to be. The laugh is a wretched laugh—Undine understands herself and yet in her laughter we see a certain resignation to her abhorrent nature: when she laughs, the reader sees that she sees who she really is. The simulation is self-aware.

When Moffatt has acquired Undine and she has acquired his money, they manage to purchase Chelles family tapestries after all. When Undine first sees them in the couple’s new home, she complains about how small they look. To this, “Mr. Moffatt gave a slight laugh and walked slowly down the room, as if to study its effect. As he turned back his wife said: ‘I didn’t think you’d ever get them.’ He laughed again, more complacently. ‘Well, I don’t know as I ever should have, if General Arlington hadn’t happened to bust up.’ They both smiled” (587). The complacent laugh and the shared smile reveal that the procession is complete: there exists no reality outside of them; they are pure simulacra. The tapestries have moved from their rightful place and the context for which they were designed, into

a new context. The old meanings do not signify here in quite the same manner; here they signify only wealth and acquisition. The paraphernalia of the French aristocracy is cited and grafted, cut and pasted into the gauche ballroom of the American nouveau riche. The Americans usurp their manners, their products, and their ways, but their manners, products and ways are emptied of the contexts and meanings upon which they were built. Taking Chelles' family heirloom tapestries and placing them in the ballroom completes both Moffatts and Undine's march to a hyperreal environment full of signs signifying realities to which they are no longer attached. And, of course, in this instance, they laugh.

Laughter, one of any number of utterances in a system of signs, does not signify a reliably consistent message in the novel: between animating intention and an interlocutor's reception, there is inevitably a gap. This gap is frequently a knowledge gap. It reveals a possessor of knowledge, a transfer or exchange of knowledge, or the supreme want of knowledge that there is even knowledge to be exchanged. Laughter is a site of knowing and not knowing: one laughs because s/he knows, but one may also laugh because s/he does not know that s/he does not know, that s/he does not know. Laughter, and by extension language and sign systems generally, Undine and thus manners, and the larger metaphor of exchange which drives *The Custom of the Country*, all reveal a certain obliteration of the signified. Wharton's emphasis on exchange reiterates the claim that "it was capital which was the first to feed throughout its history on the destruction of every referential, of every human goal, which shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange" (Baudrillard 12). In this system, meaning and the real are thus supplanted by the unknowable and the hyperreal. Manners in the novel are mimed and emptied, a mere 'going through the motions' signifying nothing but their own self-referentiality, acting as a means to an end. By pairing critiques of systems of manners with that of systems of signs and exchange more generally, we are allowed a fresh framework for evaluating that well-trod territory of that most highly canonical form of literature, "the novel of manners."

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Notes

1 The full quotation from "Simulacra and Simulation": "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced...A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference" (Baudrillard 2).

2 The "hyperreal" is Baudrillard's term for a reality no longer resembling anything in profound, or basic, tangible reality. His primary example of this is Disneyland where everything is crafted to resemble the real world, but in creating these simulations, a world removed from profound reality begins to take on a life of its own. Things in this world signify with no allusion to the referents upon which they were based. For the purposes of this essay, the "hyperreal" comes to represent the world of manners no longer attached to the cultural imperatives which gave rise to them.