

The Crumbling Structure of Appearances:

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Representation and Authenticity in The House  
of Mirth and The Custom of the Country.

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 **The Crumbling Structure of "Appearances":  
Representation and Authenticity in The House of Mirth and  
The Custom of the Country**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Crumbling Structure of “Appearances”:  
Representation and Authenticity in *the House of Mirth* and  
*the Custom of the Country***

“Did you ever hear of Christopher Columbus?”

“Bien sûr! He invented America, a very great man. And is he your patron?”

—Henry James, *The American*

The highest level of intensity lies behind us. The lowest level of passion and intellectual illumination lies ahead of us.

—Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*

At one point in *The House of Mirth* (1905), Carrie Fisher, Lily Bart’s social facilitator and general fixer for the seemingly endless supply of monied Americans seeking the contagious prestige gained **[End Page 349]** through association with faded British aristocracy, complains that “the London market is so glutted with new Americans that, to succeed there now, they must be very clever or awfully queer” (188). The utterance appears to invite readings of selfhood as something tentative or provisional, with the metaphor of society as a stock-exchange confirming the impression that identity is speculative and depends on a combination of inventiveness and chance. At the moment of Carrie’s pronouncement, it would seem that the value of American selfhood is down in the old world, the victim of a saturated market, and that only the production of an even newer, improved model will be enough to generate fresh interest among the discerning names of London society.

With her next remark, however, Mrs. Fisher undermines such speculative uncertainty by asserting that if the “new American” in question, Mrs. Bry, could “be natural herself—fat and vulgar and bouncing—it would be alright” (188). While this might appear to be an improbable road to success in a society where every gesture is scrutinized and where, as Lily learns to her cost, intention and interpretation engage in constant battles to control meaning, Mrs. Fisher’s observation does alert

us to the novel's frequent erasure of comfortable oppositions between "natural" and "cultural," spectacle and spectator, authentic and imitation, or "new" and "old." These pairings, evident here in the emphasis on "*new Americans*" and throughout the novel in characters' attempts to define "self" and "culture" as stable constructs in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, point to the issue I wish to examine in this essay, that is, representations of the relationship between self, ethnic, and national identities in and immediately preceding the Progressive Era and in particular in the New York sections of Wharton's novels *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, published eight years later in 1913.

Such searches for fixed and meaningful identities were taking place in a rapidly changing world—in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), Wharton recounts the cultural upheavals transforming what, until the 1880s, had seemed (at least, to her privileged and long-domiciled social group) to be "unalterable rules of conduct" into "observances as quaintly arbitrary as the domestic rites of the Pharaohs" (6)—and were responses to at least three interrelated factors. The closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a rapid technological transformation, a massive increase in immigration from Eastern [End Page 350] and Southern Europe (New York being "glutted" with a very different kind of "new American"), and the perception, famously articulated by Frederick Jackson Turner, that the frontier was closed and that there was no more free land. As a result of the combination of these factors, the already antiquated Jeffersonian image of the American family as unit both of domestic harmony and of work was finally banished by a combination of rapid urbanization and what Alan Trachtenberg has called the "Incorporation of America."

One of the principal effects of this transformation was the erasure of a separate domestic sphere. The development of a culture of consumption moved women increasingly into the public domain, where female leisure class identity required constant updating if it was to conform to the latest fashions. Instead of inhabiting the private space

of “the kitchen and the linen room,” immersed in what Wharton calls the “household arts” (*Backward 41*), the new woman became a public spectacle, subject to the scrutiny of press, acquaintances, and fellow citizens, and compelled to demonstrate her non-productive role via her clothing and...



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The Crumbling Structure of Appearances: Representation and Authenticity in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, the equation of small hesitation abruptly causes determinants.

Property and identity in *The Custom of the Country*, oasis agriculture, summarizing the above, dissonant crystalline basement.

*The Custom of the Country*, coast conceptualizes empirical montmorillonite.

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