

---

# Modernism and Transatlantic Hotel Domesticity

Deborah Clarke\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Arizona State University – United States

## Abstract

This paper examines the hotel as domestic space in Edith Wharton's *Custom of the Country* and, if time permits, Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Domesticity is an embattled site in modernism, associated with the 19th rather than the 20th century. Given the modernist mantra, to make it new, domesticity may appear to be a relic of the past. Modern writers, however, (in which category I include both Wharton and Loos) often represent domesticity as a conflicted and contested space, exhibiting the destabilization associated with modernism. Few critics have examined the intersection of modernism and domesticity, so this paper represents an opportunity to mesh often contradictory scholarship. Hotels provide a productive lens from which to consider the full extent of what I term "modernist domesticity." Generally conceived as transitional, temporary sites in current times, hotels have different functions within the modern era. Undine Spragg, protagonist of *Custom of the Country*, launches her New York career from a hotel. Functioning as domestic space, commercial enterprise, and social milieu, the hotel lays bare the extent to which modernist domesticity has been co-opted and redefined. No longer a female space, the domestic sphere now highlights the commodification of domesticity itself. In France, however, the hotel serves a slightly different function. First, the word itself conveys a double meaning to Anglophone readers, as in French, "hotel" does not mean a commercial establishment for short-term lodging. It refers to a private town house or town hall. By thus calling attention to the slippage between English and French, Wharton highlights some of the comparisons between American and French domesticity. In New York, Undine operates in a commercial sphere; in France, she feels imprisoned in her French husband's country home. Both forms of "hotels" destabilize the domestic.

---

\*Speaker