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Imprisoned and Empowered: The Women of Edith Wharton's  
Supernatural Fiction

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A thesis  
presented to  
The faculty of the Department of English  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Tonya F. Stansberry  
August 2003

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Keywords: Edith Wharton, ghost stories, women's issues, social  
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ABSTRACT

Imprisoned and Empowered: The Women of Edith Wharton's  
Supernatural Fiction

By

Tonya F. Stansberry

By focusing on the status and state of women as represented in selected supernatural fiction by Edith Wharton, we explore the socio-gender relationships, as well as the gender roles of women in general as they existed in the early part of the twentieth century. These associations are discussed, as is the influence Henry James may have had on Wharton's writing style within the genre of the ghostly tale.

The conclusions made within this study lead the reader of the tales to believe that Wharton expressed different feminist perspectives based on how she was developing as a person and as a writer.

The resources and scholarship that are strictly allocated to Wharton's ghost stories are not as vast as they may be for her other fiction; however, more attention is being given to these supernatural works, and this study iterates the literature's scholarly importance.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Reese, Hannah, Abigail, and Elizabeth for allowing me the time to be a student so I could finish this project and for giving me the spiritual sustenance that I needed to complete the task. I love you.

And to my Mother, Betty, you have been a wonderful encouragement.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take the opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Theresa Lloyd whose dedication to me as a student and as a friend helped me not only complete this project but also encouraged me to look at the literature in new and inviting ways.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

"Are you afraid of ghosts?" is a question that is most often posed in an eerie situation. Many people may feel that they do not believe in ghosts, but the same people who do not believe may hold on to some fear of the unknown supernatural world. The fear of the unknown was marketed in the form of a story for people who find themselves unexplainably frightened in dark, quiet circumstances. Stories of ghosts and supernatural beings have existed since the beginning of story telling. These stories passed down through generations through oral tradition and, fortunately for us, the tradition was captured in the written word. As this genre developed, many writers, men and women, became interested in the variety of topics that could be explored through the classification. For women writers ghost stories provide a format to introduce topics like marriage, loneliness, sexuality, aging, social milieu, parenting, and afterlife. One of the most influential women writers to explore the genre of the ghost story is Edith Wharton.

For the United States of America, being a virtually new country, the history of the ghost story is not as extensive as in other parts of the world, but some of our ghost story writers changed the genre for everyone who would come after them. In eighteenth-century American Gothic fiction such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Weiland*, we find an attempt to tap into the paranormal, but the end result is that of a psychological rather than a supernatural tale. Brown was trying to create an American Gothic, but the exact formula for doing so had not been set forth. Many writers, mostly men in the beginning, came into the genre of the ghost tale after such early nineteenth-century tales like Washington Irving's rendition of a German folktale, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," appeared in his *The Sketch Book* in February, 1820 (Kelly xxiii). Later, other famous men, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, would begin to lengthen the story into novel format. This would give America its first haunted house as Hawthorne created *The House of Seven Gables* in 1851. Hawthorne wrote the ghost tale exceptionally, and his "Young Goodman Brown" is a fine example of the genre that would flourish in the century to follow. Other males who thrived in the ghost story were such as Ambrose Bierce whose "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" reached legendary status. However, it would be a Virginian by the name of Edgar Allan Poe with his

stories like "Ligia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" who would revolutionize the story of the horrific for all those who followed. As for Edith Wharton's most innovating influence, that came from Henry James, whose best known ghost story *The Turn of the Screw*, along with his friendship and guidance, helped her to develop in style.

As for the women of the genre, it not only took longer for women to become interested in writing short stories, but because women as writers in general were not thought of as being of good quality, it took longer for their works to be recognized as high caliber. The ghost stories ended up like the other works of fiction written by women during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; women writers were taken less seriously than men, and, most often, the works ended up completely overlooked. The first women to write a ghostly tale in America may have been Harriett Prescott Spofford in 1872, with "Her Story." In this tale, a man uses the mental illness of his wife to gain a sense of freedom and his own individual needs. The scenario of the dominating male overpowering what is seen as the weaker woman, along with other similar circumstances where there is a female taken for granted in some way, would become the backbone for the nineteenth century ghost stories written by women. Some of the other women writers coming out of this

period are Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and of course, Edith Wharton.

Like most other fiction written by women, the ghost story focuses on women and the female world. Catherine Lundie points out that in these stories the "narrative voice is (almost always) female, the characters are (almost entirely) female, even the ghosts are (almost without exception) female" (1). Lundie also explains that "[e]ven critics who champion the stories tend to describe them in terms of the 'female fears,' 'female rage,' 'female desire,' or 'female pain' that emerges through their focus on issues of vulnerability and marginality" (2). Unlike many of their male counterparts, women writers of supernatural fiction tend to incorporate more than just a "spooky" story. The end result is different but encompasses the shock factor that Edgar Allan Poe succeeded at accomplishing; furthermore, they attempted to include the same sense of intoxicating writing including major elements of political satire. James, as well, was interested in portraying the problems with social class warfare and the embodiment of hypocrisy. The women writers want their readers to come away knowing that they read something not only truly extraordinary within the realm of the supernatural but also something that causes the ideas of societal values and milieu to be questioned.

The stories are more than superficial when viewed within their context; they are ghost stories which are meant to terrify, but also they reflect who the author is and what the author may be feeling about one of the aforementioned issues.

The complexities of the ghost story, especially those written by women, can be seen as a critique of their culture. They include the typical images presented within the haunted tale. The ghost is as much of a literary figure as anything, for we have traces of the ghost in all types of historical fiction, and it "is the most constant figure in supernatural fiction" (Penzoldt 32). Women tended to have the desire to go beyond the constant and explore the unexplained. Women writers were inclined to incorporate ideas that were important to women. Ideas such as the confines of marriage and children, the frustrations of sexuality, and the societal expectations to be content are all themes that occur in the majority of supernatural fiction written by women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With ideas like "[m]arriage, motherhood, sexuality, mental and physical health, spinsterhood, widowhood; over and over, with chilling insistence, the stories confront these themes" (Lundie 2). Like the ghost story in itself, these themes were hardly ever blatant, but most often implied; this technique gave the writers the opportunity to use

allegory to explore and expound upon ideas that they may have felt needed to be appealed. Lundie again explains that the "allegorical supernatural forces of the ghost story enabled them to displace their grievances onto supernatural forces, thereby safely giving voice to the political 'other' of their messages. Within the process, then, the ghost itself often acts as (speaking) symbol for the writers' dissatisfactions" (3). Within these dissatisfactions, we find that a woman will question her abilities, desires, and expectations. It is here that the modern feminist ghost story develops.

Before the women's rights movement, women were not permitted in some circles to speak openly about sexuality, or even show signs that there may be some sexual frustrations. Within the genre of the ghost story as well as the thriller genre, that subject found a home. It is supposed that it was acceptable within this genre because of the supernatural leanings of the stories' intentions. Whatever the reason, women were glad to have an outlet. We find

[i]n a startling number of the ghost stories on sexuality, the two female rivals are the first (now dead) and the second wives of the same man.[. . .] The anxieties attendant on filling the role of second wife to a husband with previously set expectations and standards, sexual and

otherwise, must have been enormous.[. . .] The second wife perceives the first wife as evil, and this evil has its locus in the first wife's beauty, her passion, and her hold over the husband, which the second wife can never achieve. (Lundie 12)

For women writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the themes that are most often recurrent are devoted to the roles of the wife and the mother. On the issue of marriage, Edith Wharton is no exception. Edith Wharton produced volumes of ghost stories over her vast career. It is in these stories that we find that she explores how the relationship of marriage is interconnected with the dimension of the unknown. It is marriage and its bindings that somehow leads Wharton into the realms of the supernatural. It is through these constraints that we see the irony of the situation. It is within marriage and the home that women are supposed to find themselves as a part of something that is larger than any individual effort, but for Wharton, and many others, the roles that are supposed to make one happy may be what are causing the hauntings. The idea that women are supposed to be fulfilled by familial duties "had by midcentury become firmly established, and although it operated most powerfully in the lives of middle-class, white

women, it was held up as a model to all females, regardless of class or race" (Lundie 4). Lundie goes on to describe that the "'true woman' was expected to be the embodiment of purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity" (4). These are the societal binds that Wharton and others are trying to expose and break through. They use the actions of not meeting expectations to cause friction within the already tense ghost story as a way to expose what happens when there are no boundaries. For it is outside of what the women are supposed to be doing, household chores for instance, that they find strength within themselves to stand up to the unmentionable things that may be haunting them.

Wharton seemed to understand exactly what a good ghost story needs, for her stories are the perfect blend of well-written prose and terrifying situation. She was trying, in the inner core of the ghost story, to expose the societal ills, but she was also trying to horrify. Wharton says that "[w]hat a ghost really needs is not echoing passages and hidden doors behind tapestry, but only continuity and silence" (9). That is the key to appreciating a Wharton ghost story. She does not use conventions like white images and clanging noises; her ghosts appear in the most natural occurrences, within the delivery of the mail or a person that is introduced along a path. Wharton

as a writer can be compared to British women such as the Brontes and Austen. But Wharton, as an American novelist and storyteller, has a style that is distinctly her own, for she was not afraid to test out and try new things. She distinctly placed herself as a premier author of social class/Marxist fiction. She planned her writing as a mirror of how she viewed her surroundings.

As for the ghost stories, we must recognize the idea previously discussed, that of the house as prison, or a haunted haven. This theme brings up the empowering of women which is the other pertinent and recurring premise that is in Wharton's stories; we can also compare how that is laid out in comparison with her British counterparts, and also we must recognize the connection that Wharton had with her friend and ghost story writer, Henry James. The relationship with James, one of the longest-lasting friendships of her lifetime, probably encouraged Wharton to continue writing and to expound her energy in other genres like the ghost story.

The Wharton ghost stories are becoming more adequately researched and critiqued, which is of great benefit to those who want to know more about the stories that may be less known by the general public than her major novels. The stories are a rare find, and in no way do they seem to be unpolished. Wharton

loved writing these stories and her advice to others interested in writing the ghost story is that "the teller of supernatural tales should be well frightened in the telling; for if he [or she] is, he [or she] may perhaps communicate to his readers the sense of that strange something undreamt of the in philosophy of Horatio" (Wharton 11). Taking this stance and opportunity to understand Wharton's perspective on what a ghost story should and should not do may help readers and writers to more poignantly place themselves in the desired mind set before entering Wharton's supernatural world.

## CHAPTER 2

### IMPRISONED

A home is supposed to be a haven, but in many of the supernatural tales and ghost stories created by Edith Wharton, the home does not represent a place where one can find solace. Instead, it becomes a prison, not only for ghosts that find themselves unable to move on to the next realm of the afterlife but also for the women of the home. The women in these stories are trapped by their surroundings and circumstances, and it is in these circumstances that they find that the ghosts, as well as themselves, are thoroughly encased in an unending prison. The reason behind the repetitive theme of "imprisonment" could be that Wharton too felt somewhat imprisoned in her own world. As Jenni Dyman points out in *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*,

[t]he social restrictions of Old New York also created a repressive environment for Wharton in her youth. Her world was made up of strict social codes and proper behavior that could only be abandoned at risk of being 'cut' and ostracized.(12)

The fear of not meeting societal standards, along with an unhappy twenty-eight year marriage to Edward (Teddy) Wharton,

and the fact that novel writing was considered to be "something between a black art and a form of manual labor," may have been just the inspiration that Wharton needed to present insight into the American aristocratic imprisonment of women (Wharton, *Backward Glance* 69). Not only are these women physically trapped within the four walls of the home, they are also trapped psychologically by the circumstances of their social status and by their gender. The imprisonment of these women leaves them very little room for any individuality. The development of the female consciousness is not uncommon when reviewing Wharton's other fiction; however, within stories of the supernatural, which sometimes are oversimplified as bits of entertainment, the political motivation should not be disregarded. The imprisonment of women by their society was a real issue for Wharton, and the recurrence of that theme can be acknowledged in almost all her work. Ted Billy makes the assessment that "Wharton often uses haunted houses and tomb-like rooms to represent the matrimonial predicament of women in her era"(1). Moreover, the image of the home as prison is repeated in several of her writings, but it is prominent within three of Wharton's most famous ghost stories: "Afterward," "Pomegranate Seed," and "All Souls."

The story "Afterward" first appeared in Wharton's first collection of ghost stories entitled *Tales of Men and Ghosts*,

published by Scribner's in 1910. The story is a complex one that stretches through the intricate designs of marriage and the routines of daily life. In *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, R.W.B. Lewis says that "Afterward", "begins promisingly but wilts into melodrama" (296). This oversimplifies the story's meaning to null. "Afterward" is much more than a ghost story, and it is much more than melodrama; it is a critique on the condition of women and the dutiful thankless roles that they play.

"Afterward" can be seen as a "woman's gradual journey to a terrifying enlightenment" (Billy 3). It is also a glance into a failing, loveless marriage. The conditions that these roles endure are debilitating to some extent, for the women have no choice but to give up any wishes that they may have. In the ghost story, this ideal is even more true, for they have to give up because the fear of the ghostly being or the unknown has grown to be too much to bear. The women are broken by the apparitions; the apparitions overtake the haven of home, and the women only gradually become aware of the detrimental effects they are having.

"Afterward" is a prime example of how an environment that should be a haven can become a reservoir for destruction. The Boynes, the main characters in "Afterward," seem to be an all-American couple. After Ned Boyne experiences a successful

business deal, the couple finds that they now have the good fortune to be able to move. The Boynes have romantic notions about living in England and occupying an old house. They long for a place in the country and so move to England and buy Lyng, which could be "a pun on lying," an estate in Dorsetshire (Billy 4). In "Afterward" Ned Boyne even goes as far as to say that he "should never believe [he] was living in an old house unless [he] was thoroughly uncomfortable" (58). They want all the amenities that an old house can give, which are basic shelter and no useless elaborations. It is also a given that the house must have ghosts, or at least one ghost. The Boynes will not settle "to have to drive ten miles to see somebody else's ghost" (59). It seems like all good fun, and the Boynes are expecting and anticipating the challenges that they believe the supernatural will have to offer them. What they do not know is that the ghost that will capture the home while they live there does not belong to the house, for "[t]he ghost that eventually materializes is not a spirit connected with the house but one that the Boynes bring with them from their own past" (Erlich 104).

Although people enjoy the belief that only they understand what is good and right for them, the opposite is almost always true. People need to be more accepting of the advice others

have to give. The Boynes are warned about the ghost at Lyng. However, they remain deaf to advice and cannot see past their own romantic notions of ghosts to see the reality of what may befall them. They are told that there is a ghost at Lyng but that no one ever knows it while there, but afterward, after leaving the house, one may become aware of the presence that has been around them. In the end, this presence that materializes itself to Mary Boyne is the key to understanding Mary's self-deception and denied admission to her husband's reality.

Mary Boyne is a woman typical to the Victorian era. Her husband, Ned, is a successful businessman, and the move to England seems as natural to her as any. However, her husband's business dealings may not be as honorable as she may like to believe. Ned appears very anxious to arrive at Lyng. As for Mary, she seems to have the opportunity to finally accomplish some things such as "painting and gardening (against a background of grey walls)" (Wharton "Afterward" 60). Mary's desires provide a glimpse into her life, not only at Lyng, but with Ned in general. By wanting to paint and garden against a background of grey walls, which are an image of a prison cell, Mary is trying to make something beautiful out of this loveless marriage and envisioning that she can live outside of the prison. Ned's anxiety, however, is not brought about by any

desire to reconcile in some way his relationship with Mary; rather, it rises from shady business dealing that Ned is trying to run away from. Ironically Ned's biggest concern while at Lyng will be to write his book "Economic Basis of Culture" (60). Of course, Mary knows nothing of his business, and her cluelessness is poignant in revealing the lack of communication and trustworthiness within the marriage. The lack of knowledge seems to be out of Mary's control. It is not as though she has separated herself from Ned's work purposefully; rather, she is simply a construct of her time. But, we are not fully aware of the circumstance until "afterward."

After the mysterious stranger comes to visit Ned Boyne one day, and then Ned follows him and they both seemingly disappear, we find Mary again, not trapped by fear of the unknown stranger, but torn over whether or not to enter Ned's library. For Mary, the library is full of secrecy and the unattainable. She sees the complexities of the library, and "[t]his image of constriction and claustrophobia foreshadows the implosive climax of the story" (Billy 4). The claustrophobia and the sense of dread that she experiences may have been manifested before her move to Lyng, but it is the power of the house that allows those feelings to subsequently overtake her, and after Ned's disappearance, she is entrapped by them. The ghost in

"Afterward" is the ghost of Ned Boyne's guilt. In the end, Mary Boyne uncovers who the stranger was: the ghost, Mr. Robert Elwell, the man whom Ned had swindled and who had committed suicide shortly after losing his fortune. Also, Mary finds out why she had lived within the veil of secrecy concerning her husband, and his business dealings are finally uncovered. But the revelations do not come until after she leaves Lyng. The imprisoning power of the house will not allow the revelation. This is why everyone says that the events of the home are not recognizable until "afterward."

Along with home imprisonment comes relationship imprisonment. The struggles of marriage are habituated in Wharton's short stories, and she regularly portrays the realities of its social milieu. The role that marriage plays in her supernatural or ghost stories is key to understanding the entrapment felt by many women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and beyond even to relevance for today.

One of her most acclaimed stories about a marriage and the trust factor involved in maintaining the relationship is "Pomegranate Seed." For a marriage to have any kind long lasting quality, there has to be an element of trust and respect. For a woman who comes into a man's life as the second wife, either by divorce or death, there has to be an element of living up to, or

maybe even superceding the role of the previous wife to secure one's position. Women in these types of situations face many fears, some of which may be unfounded. In "Pomegranate Seed," Charlotte Ashby has found herself in this position. Not only does she feel the need to be superior to the former Mrs. Ashby, but she also has to develop a relationship with the children, and all the while, she is living in the virtually untouched home of the deceased. We are told that the house is a "veiled sanctuary [. . . where] neither furniture or hangings had been changed" (219-20). The house becomes an image for what has been. It too becomes a haunting figure that embraces the figure of the ghost.

It is not long into the marriage that

barely legible letters addressed to her husband [Kenneth] in a handwriting "visibly feminine" begin to arrive, Charlotte's confidence erodes.[. . .] With no thought to spectral possibilities, she imagines the letters are from an old or present mistress.

(Zilversmit 297)

It is hard for Charlotte to imagine that Kenneth is having an affair, or involved at least with someone he cares about, for "her husband turned white and had a headache on the days when

the letter came"(225). The news could not be well received, but Charlotte still hangs on to insecurity.

Although Charlotte loves Kenneth, she cannot help but think back to the days before they were married and how she was warned of what might happen. She is warned that Elsie, the deceased wife, may still have control over the house and Kenneth. Her friends tell her that Kenneth will "never let you move an armchair or change the place of a lamp; and whatever you venture to do, he'll mentally compare with what Elsie would have done in your place" (223). Charlotte's problem with Elsie is not that Elsie that is writing letters to her husband or that she is in some way a threat to the marriage. The threat comes when Charlotte finds herself controlled by the ghost of Elsie and a house still enchanted by Elsie's presence. Charlotte "simply felt as if she were fighting her way through a stifling fog that she must at all costs get out of"(227). This entrapment reflects many issues and dilemmas for Charlotte Ashby and women of the early twentieth century in general.

The letters continue to come, and as they do, Charlotte's aloofness comes from many attributes that Elsie's ghost, with the house as medium, is building up around Kenneth, However, Charlotte was

aware in him no hostility or even impatience, but only of a remoteness, and inaccessibility, far more difficult to overcome. She felt herself excluded, ignored, blotted out of his life. (233)

The feelings of exclusion may have a deeper psychological explanation. The need to fill the first wife's place is a common thread throughout many ghost stories. Here we see that the dead wife has a need to "preserve her image as angel in the house [. . . which may be] a curiously subversive example of appearance versus reality in the sexual arena" (Lundie 12). Charlotte may feel as though the ghost, which is not only controlling the emotions and actions of her husband, may also be controlling how much she can contribute as a wife sexually and to the family unit as a whole. Seeing as she is not the mother of his children, she needs to be recognized as more than just a nanny for them.

In a terminal effort to win back some sense of control, Charlotte asks Kenneth to take her away. She feels as though if they remove themselves from the house that they may have a chance to recover their relationship. Kenneth reluctantly agrees, and says that he will make all of the arrangements. He leaves to prepare for their holiday but never returns. Charlotte then realizes that Elsie has finally won, and she is

left to contemplate her position and her next actions. The ending of the story shows how Charlotte faces "the conviction that she is not as sexually desirable or legitimately deserving as her rival" (Zilversmit 304). Wharton again draws the reader into the image of the woman, mother, and roles of expectation. We see that

[a]fter nine months of marriage and nine letters, instead of becoming a secure and fertile (childbearing) wife, Charlotte Ashby, through her self-fulfilling prophesy of guilt and inadequacy, has driven her husband into the arms of her rival, although the woman is a corpse.(Zilversmit 305)

The house that had haunted her and made her feel deficient in some ways was now her own. The house that she had longed to share with Kenneth, in the shadow of Elsie, was now hers to have alone.

In the previous two stories, the women have had to contend with the reality of losing a spouse to a ghost. In Edith Wharton's final ghost story, "All Souls," she presents an image of a woman who is alone, widowed for years, and appears to be surviving at a very comfortable level. She explores the vulnerability of the situation and how easily that world of amenity can be shaken in a thirty-six hour period. Here the

woman does not lose a spouse to a ghost; rather, she is forced to face her own identity because of one. The imprisonment felt by Sarah Clayburn, the main character in "All Souls," is different from what has been previously examined. Because this story occurs as the last story of Wharton's career, many have wanted to draw similarities between the lives of the two women, Wharton and her character Sarah Clayburn. Of course age in itself is a prison, and that in some ways is a problem that not only Sarah Clayburn and Edith Wharton faced, but it is one that each of us face. However, it is more likely that Wharton uses Sarah Clayburn as the measuring rod or model for those most commonly found within the aristocracy of old New York and maybe of the upper class society in general. Sherrie Inness points out that

Sarah's story begins with her living alone at Whitegates, the colonial house where she and her former husband had lived for years. She refuses to move, although the house is miles from the nearest town. In this isolated spot, she feels fortunate to have two or three servants, inherited from her mother-in-law(6).

Evaluating Inness's description, one can see how this can be taken as a critique on the culture. By considering Sarah's

belligerent refusal to move, we see how that in Wharton's age, tradition was more important than practicality. In examining the location of the property, finding competent help would have been a chore in itself. In the story, we are told that the houses location "would have seemed remote and lonely to modern servants"(277). With that remoteness, concealment becomes more probable. Also, by characterizing the servants as inherited, we can understand that most of the people, in what was considered the upper-class, did not arrive at that station by their own merit; however, inherited wealth created an Americana Aristocracy. These boundaries of tradition and obligation are pronounced strongly from the beginning of the story and help the reader to understand the fortifications that will be questioned and challenged later.

Unlike some of Wharton's other stories, which take place over the course of several weeks or months, this story is an isolated event that occurs in the time span of thirty-six hours. Mrs. Clayburn is content and comfortable in this home as long as she has her servants to wait on her and care for her, but it becomes a terror on All Souls' Day when she finds "that her entire staff of servants has disappeared and that she is temporarily crippled by a badly sprained ankle"(Lewis 523). Much like the changing times of the industrial revolution, the

general public could not predict or dictate how their lives would be altered. Sarah finds that she too will face alterations, and the reasons for her incapacity are completely out of her control.

After passing a stranger on the path to Whitegates, who is later assumed by Sarah to be a ghost or evil apparition, Sarah finds herself curious about the stranger because "the way to Whitegates at the end of an autumn day was not a frequented one"(278). After the meeting, she simply "approached the house, slipped on a frozen puddle, turned her ankle and lay suddenly helpless" (279). She forgets her initial interest in the stranger after her fall. Although it is here that "the reader recognizes that Mrs. Clayburn might have only a partial notion of what goes on in her own household, hinting at the schism that exists between different classes," we see that she accepts that severity of her injury with difficulty(Inness 7). For Sarah cannot predict or control what happens to her, and it seems that she struggles with not being in total control over what is occurring on her property because she is uninformed about the arrival of this stranger. She does not seem to have control over the actions of her staff; although, she gains initial attendance from her servants. However, she seems to reconcile the isolation to her room as an opportunity "for going over her accounts and

catching up with her correspondence" (279). She is unable to produce the slightest amount of recognition or acceptance as to her placement in her room or for her movement restrictions because she is unaware that she is a prisoner at Whitegates.

The imprisonment of Mrs. Clayburn comes in two ways: literally and figuratively. The figurative imprisonment begins when the crippled Sarah Clayburn needs help and cannot find it. She is not only a prisoner to her circumstance, but symbolically, it is a difficult task to overcome the boundaries for labor that people assign themselves. Once people have convinced themselves that they cannot complete a task on their own and that they must have someone else to do the task for them, it is difficult to undo the principle. This is a prison wall that Sarah Clayburn finds hard to climb. She feels as though she needs her attendants, and when they are not at her beck and call, she has to convince herself that she is not imprisoned to her class and that she is capable of caring for herself. However, the belief in her own ability never fully materializes for Mrs. Clayburn.

The literal imprisonment is found when Sarah finds herself alone. It seems to be an oddity for a house the size of Whitegates with such a large staff that it would be suddenly empty, but that is exactly what Sarah finds when she awakens

after her accident. The doctor warns her against moving the injured ankle too much for fear that "any rash movement may prolong immobility" (279). Sarah, however, finds herself restless and feels the "long black hours moved more and more slowly" (280). She tries to overcome the temptation to get out of her bed, but realizing the inevitability of her confinement and remembering the doctor's words, she does not wish to "risk prolonging her imprisonment" (281). She realizes that because of her accident, and maybe even fate, that she is trapped in her own home: a prisoner in known, but maybe not comprehensible, surroundings.

The reality of Sarah Clayburn's incarceration becomes clearer to the reader as Sarah realizes that she has been left alone. She disregards the physician's orders and begins the search for her seemingly unattainable attendants. While she does not falter in her searching, she is "reluctant and unable to believe that her servants have deserted her, yet she finds no one" (Inness 8). She first acknowledges the possibility of her solidarity as she fumbles with the electric bell to call the maid and no sound is heard. With the image of the electric current being cut, we see Sarah Clayburn, not only alone in the home, but alone and cut off from the outside world as well. She is disenfranchised from her conveniences, so her isolation

becomes more intense. Sherrie Inness explains that it is "[t]hrough her [that] we discover that the upper classes slowly learn that their dependence on servants is risky and troublesome" (8). And in the case of Mrs. Clayburn, we see how her isolation leads her to the haunting.

As Sarah makes her way through the home, we see that although "no one was in sight, [. . .] the snow seemed to have the place to itself" (283). Nothing is going as Mrs. Clayburn has planned, but nature is still overcoming and completing the work that must be accomplished, for the snow "was still falling, with a business like regularity, muffling the outer world in layers of thick white velvet, and intensifying the silence within" (283). Much like prisoners in cells who have no control over the activities that occur in the prison around them, Mrs. Clayburn is not able to control the deafening silence that is her torture, for "it was not the idea of noises that frightened her, but that inexorable and hostile silence, the sense that the house had retained in full daylight its nocturnal mystery" (286). The house, the house that she had loved and lost in, was now becoming the thing that she did not understand or know.

For the end of Sarah Clayburn's experience, we find that the servants, doctors, and others return to the house and try to convince her that she had not been alone. But Mrs. Clayburn

knows the loneliness that she had felt to be true. The house had imprisoned her to her loneliness, and that "deep silence accompanied her; she still felt it moving watchfully at her side, as though she were its prisoner and it might throw itself upon her if she attempted to escape"(289). It is to escape that Mrs. Clayburn finds herself doing what she had thought to be incomprehensible: she "determines never to return to the house which has been the scene of her ghostly visitations"(Fryer 165). She flees her home because a stranger, or ghost, entered the property and she felt out of control, but we also see that she is fleeing from the fear of isolation and loneliness. She avoids the fear of the unknown; she leaves Whitegates.

Edith Wharton, the inhabitant of an aristocratic life, often questions the necessity of material goods, people, and small talk. Not only in her supernatural fiction, but in her Pulitzer Prize winning Age of Innocence the heroine, Countess Ellen Olenska, challenges all the social mores that confine women. Marriage, children, and home-keeping were to be the main goals of a woman's life, and Wharton is a master of showing how those images and entanglements may be blessings for some women, but for others, they may be the prison that rips the spirit out of feminine existence.

We see through the use of the supernatural stories, like "Afterward," "Pomegranate Seed," and "All Souls" that Wharton tries to expose how some women are given and are told by society what they must have: family, security, hobby, and home. Under these circumstances, some women may not respond with joy. The nature of the ghost story adds to the depression and represents the realities of isolation. These stories, "vary in what Wharton called the 'thermometrical quality,' the ability to send a shiver down the reader's spine" (Lundie 23). The mundaneness of the everyday situations is what gives the stories their intensity. It is then common to find that "the horror could lie in a woman's everyday life. These women are not dealing with fantastic worlds; they are dealing with their own" (Lundie 23). These concepts may cause the deepest ingrained fear that these women could know: the loss of an identity.

## CHAPTER 3

### EMPOWERED

In the previously cited readings in this study, the format of the trapped female, surrounded by her circumstance and situation, unable to do anything about her position within society and within her own consciousness, is prominent. It is no secret that Wharton pointed out the ills that she perceived within her society, but she also had the opportunity, at several times within her career, to portray women in the position that she wished most for them. Strong but feminine characters are found within the fiction of Wharton; the Madame Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* is probably the most noted. However, there are women who fall within the independent and strong category lying within the ghost story genre as well.

The idea of a strong female character was something that Wharton embraced early in her career, but the tones of the independence feel somewhat subdued in her early works. One example would be the ghost story "The Lady's Maid's Bell." The main female character is a maid, but she still holds onto independence that even Wharton in her own life could not know. Hartley, the maid, earns her own money,

and her dependence on the family in which she works does not have to be permanent, for if a better opportunity comes along, she can take it.

We are able to see this shift in Wharton's approach and focus. In previous discussion, we can see how Wharton is struggling with weak women. Through a more thorough look at her work we can envision how she wanted women to be. In Kathy Fedorko's book *Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton*, we get a clearer understanding of how this transition aimed to uplift and embrace the power of the feminine. Fedorko explores the fear of the feminine in much of Wharton's work, but she explains that through stories like "The Lady's Maid's Bell," Wharton is able to enter "the world of women who, unable to accept or act on their sexuality and autonomy, accede control to their self-hating masculine selves" (22). As Fedorko explains it, in these first examples of strong-willed women such as with "The Lady's Maid's Bell" or with Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, that what the characters actually accomplish is to become more masculine in order to gain strength rather than seeing and welcoming the strength through their femininity. Other evidence of a strong-willed women exist within some of Wharton's other ghostly tales. With "Miss Mary Pask" we find a woman whose existence is questionable, and only she

holds the key to the true understanding of her being. Another is with "Mr. Jones," where we find the overbearing male figure whose authority is brought in question by a female who is not frightened by his supernatural nature and refuses to give into his wants and ways. However, the transition for a strong-willed women to survive independently is a leap that most often left women struggling to reach this independence by looking at the only image of independence that they could find, which was the men.

In one of Wharton's earliest eerie tales, "The Lady's Maid's Bell," many items of controversy could be explored. In this story we find differences from what she expresses in some of the other ghost stories, for although the house of the Brymptons is the isolated setting for the story, it is not remote. Also a differing factor is that this house is always filled with people. These servants, maids, cooks, and mistresses form a bond with one another, and that formation of that bond does not leave them feeling alone as we find many of the other women in ghost tales. The relationships that are formed are virtually unmentioned, but the idea is there, and they are "undernourished but nonetheless [they are] potentially supportive" (Fedorko 23). These women include Hartley, the

narrator and new maid to the invalid Mrs. Brympton, Agnes the housemaid, Mrs. Blinder the cook, Mrs. Brympton, and Emma Saxon, the former maid to Mrs. Brympton.

As with other stories that we have seen, Wharton again uses the image of the absent male who seems to have no clue as to the occurrences on his property or with his spouse. Hartley tells the reader that she "had been near a week at Brympton before [she] saw [her] master" (17). Hartley again does not mince words for she says that it "was plain that nobody loved him below stairs" (17). With a master who appears to be that intolerant and difficult to accommodate, it is no wonder that the women form a bond with one another. These women find strength with the comfort that they can offer one another and with the security that the group can provide. For Mr. Brympton's stay is never lengthy, which is probably better for everyone in the house. Hartley finds that "he came and went, never staying more than a day or two, cursing the dullness and the solitude, grumbling at everything, and [. . .] drinking a deal more than was good for him" (19). The absence of Mr. Brympton is good not only for the morale of the house, but it also gives time for the women in the house time to form those relationships that they need for survival in a place like Brympton. His absence is also

ironically beneficial because his home and behavior are the typically oppressive patriarchy one finds in Wharton's stories.

At Brympton, not only is the independence of mind of these women remarkably unlike other women of the period, but also the story's focus is unlike others by Wharton in that it is told from the perspective of a servant, and the focus of the story is what is happening between the servants. Albeit, there is some side story: Mrs. Brympton and her non-relationship with her husband, Mr. Brympton's distrusting Mr. Ranford, the neighbor, and Mrs. Brympton's inability to maintain a maid. However, with the focus of the story surrounding the actions and thoughts of the servants, the tale gives a different perspective not only of the characters but Wharton's perspective of them as well. This move "undermines the established social order and reveals the myth behind service, the myth that servants are naturally lower and less important than those who hire them" (Inness 5). It is evident here that Wharton, even though raised aristocratically, did not believe in that hierarchy. She shows clearly how women of all class structures can reach independence. Her example here leads to the image of the fool as used by Shakespeare. For Shakespeare, in *King Lear* for instance, it is the fool who

gives advice to the King on how to handle his daughter. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, it is the clown who uncovers the mistake made on poor Hero's good name. In "The Lady's Maid's Bell," the servants are the "only individuals intelligent and capable enough of averting the impending tragedy" (Inness 5). It is also important that these servants are the female servants; therefore, not only do they invert the social scale, but they also invert the gender scale.

The weak Mrs. Brympton dies near the conclusion of the story, and the event places Hartley in her presence. Because Hartley is the narrator of the story of Mrs. Brympton's life, Mrs. Brympton's death symbolizes "the untold female story" (Fedorko 31). Mr. Brympton finds Hartley and the now passed Mrs. Brympton. Hartley asks Mr. Brympton to do what Hartley has been forced to do: look at the deceased figure of her mistress. Mr. Brympton refuses, and as the ghost of Emma Saxon appears to them, he "threw up his hands as is to hide his face from her" (35). After his wife's final breath, he just "stood motionless, as if the strength had run out of him" (35). He cannot face his dying wife, nor can he face the figure of her maid who has loved his wife more deeply than he ever has. We want to root for Hartley in this situation, but some mystery still

remains, for she does not openly confront Mr. Brympton's actions. However brave Hartley may seem in this circumstance, we find that she is no help either to clarifying the mystery. Although sensitive to the menace in her situation, she is courageous enough to ask questions and probe for the secret of the house.

Through her, Wharton portrays female ambivalence: to see horror of one's situation and not speak, to be afraid of one's aware self, of the darkness that yields knowledge. (Fedorko 31)

We know that Hartley is more intelligent and more of an intellectual than Mr. Brympton, which brings the new essence of the female to the forefront of this story. It is in the ending of the story that we realize the power that these women hold in the Brympton home. For it is a home that they do not own, but of which their actions prove them to be the mental proprietors. After Mrs. Brympton's funeral, Mr. Brympton "drove off without a word" (35). The female servants do not engage in the luxury of running away from the horror that has been experienced. Instead, they "went back to alone to the house" (35). Although Hartley seems more independent than most of the other sniveling female characters in other Wharton ghost stories, she has

not yet fully acquired the security that Wharton expounds on in latter stories.

Many of Wharton's ghost stories lend their focus to the events encountered by the dominant female in the story. There are a few, however, that have a male narrator or dominant figure. One of those stories is "The Eyes," which is told entirely from one man's perspective and leads to no significant female characters. There are adamant criticisms placed on Wharton's writing because of the elimination. We find

The most common criticism of her fiction has always been that her male characters do not compare with her women, and the charge is just. No man in Wharton's canon can come up to the mark of a Justine Brent or an Ellen Olenska or a Rose Sellars-to name only three out of the many. In part the men do not measure up because Wharton's point , exactly, is that patriarchal society has made of men tyrants and fools. But lying even deeper, it must be admitted, has been her gut belief in the innate inferiority of men. (Ammons 194)

Therefore, because of this format with writing her ghost tales, there are a number of strong female characters

prevalent within these works to choose from. Another ghost story that helps us to see a strong female character is "Miss Mary Pask." This story is also told from the male's perspective. We detect the narrator's duplicity as the story progresses and see that he is "emotionally timid, condescending toward women, determined to repress an encounter with his deepest fears" (Fedorko 104). The development of the story shows how Wharton viewed the power that women can have over men and how using that power in the right way can lead to unexpected joys.

"Miss Mary Pask" is much in the form of a quest. There is a journey to an unfamiliar place to face something that is not wished to be faced, and we receive a surprise ending. In Wharton's tale, "a nameless male narrator, a bachelor who suffers from recurring nervous disorder, recounts his meeting one foggy night with the ghost of a lonely spinster, Mary Pask" (Thomas 109). The narrator in the story remains nameless; this happens most likely because Wharton builds him as an alpha male. He is not afraid to go to see Mary, and yet we see his placement there as uncomfortable and his intentions as untrustworthy. We come to understand him as the antithesis of masculinity.

Wharton portrays the narrator as a hysterical bachelor, whose intermittent artistic pursuits

are punctuated by frequent visits to various European sanitariums for rest cures. Thus the reader is invited to judge the cruelty and absurdity of patriarchal pretensions in the form of his easy assumption of superiority over a woman who commands a social situation, maintain a sense of humor, analyze own experience with perceptiveness, and assert her independence and individuality. (Thomas 111)

His character may be an accurate portrayal of most men within the early twentieth century, or he may be the image of all the traits that Wharton despised.

The story takes us through a journey. The narrator makes this trek from America to visit Miss Mary Pask. He is only vaguely familiar with Mary, and it is only because he is so fond of Mary's sister, Mrs. Bridgeworth, that he agrees to go and visit her while he is Brittany. The long drive and approach to the house are among the first curious instances in which the existence of Miss Mary Pask is made openly questionable. The narrator and his boy driver "seem to crawl on for a long time through a wet blackness impenetrable to the glimmer of [their] only lamp" as they search, what appears to be aimlessly, for Miss Mary Pask's home (149). They agree that they have seen light up ahead

and that they must belong to Miss Pask's house. However, just as they inch closer, the lights are gone. The roles are reversed here. We see men acting as babies; Wharton even uses the word "crawl" to describe how they are moving. They are very cautious, fearful, and doubtful. Most often these types of timorous attributes are placed upon women.

After the characters finally reach the house, the narrator realizes that he has experienced a memory lapse. He remembers that he has been told that Mary Pask has "died suddenly the previous autumn" (151). This lapse of memory adds a convenient element to the story, and it also takes away from the legitimacy of our narrator's perspective. Much in the way that a woman was to never have been seen as giving trustworthy information, we now find our male narrator showing himself as a questionable source. After he realizes his disingenuous presence at Mary Pask's home, she appears to him. She is not a ghost as he is imagining that she should be; however, she "bore a strange resemblance to that of the Mary Pask as [he] used to know her" (152). Then, in a thought very much like that of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, the narrator tries to convince himself that he has indigestion and has seen nothing. We see that

Mary Pask can profoundly spook the narrator because his male ego distorts his vision not only of her but of himself as well. Wharton reverses the stereotypes of the active bachelor and the passive spinster to expose the narrator's false sense of security. (Thomas 111)

Mary then has truly overpowered him. He questions his sanity and finds himself in the dilemma of doubting his own eyes.

Other ways in which Wharton plays on the ego of our nameless narrator is to expose his large sense of self-worth in the sexual attraction category. After Mary has invited him in, he immediately begins to think that she, a supposedly dead woman, is trying to seduce him. In his observations "she still practiced the same arts, all the childish wiles of a clumsy capering coquetry" (153). He seems to believe that he is so desirable that even a dead woman would want to, and even feel the need to, have him sexually. For we see that "ghost or not, in his mind Mary is a spinster still eager to catch an eligible bachelor in the bonds of matrimony, or into her grave, and he is not amused to reflect that there may no longer be any real difference between the two" (Thomas 114). Mary at this point has already noticed his uncomfortable reaction to

her, so she begins to play up the image of the dead. She plays the image well, for even as readers, we are unsure of her state until the end of the story. Whatever her state, she is in full control of the situation with the narrator and seems to enjoy that power. Seeing "Mary's presentation of herself as a spook rather than a spinster implies Wharton's protest against a world in which women must be perceived as dead in order to escape masculine scorn and claim an empowering autonomy" (Thomas 114). Wharton shows how only in death are women able to overcome the power of the men who have tried to overwhelm them.

As the story progresses we see Mary becoming stronger and more intense just as the narrator becomes weaker and more afraid. It is through this reversal that Mary gains strength by seeing that she has caused fear and a lack of resolve in this young man who has come to visit her. She uses her newfound power to upset this gentleman caller by using sexuality that has long been repressed. In a Victorian society where all sexual behaviors and thoughts were to be repressed, especially by women, we find Wharton showing Mary Pask expressing her sexual desires and needs as she "flung herself toward [him]. 'Oh, stay with me, stay with me . . . Just tonight . . . It's so sweet and quiet here . . . No one need know . . . No one will ever trouble

us'"(157-58). It is not for certain if her plea for partnership is genuine, but even the idea that she would express the sexual need is beyond societal mores. The thought of her open sexuality frightens him so much that he flees the scene and "bolted out into the night" (158). The strict construct of a woman as either a mother, a virgin, or a whore is categorized here as well, and Wharton shows satirically how when faced with the choice, this man chooses to flee to a mother figure and run from the whore. For as he flees the scene, he "slammed the door on that pitiful low whimper, and the fog and wind enveloped [him] in healing arms" (158). This may be a statement on the incongruent attitude men take, and that they themselves may not know what they want or need any better than women do. However, in this case, Mary Pask seems certain of her needs.

As the story ends and we find our narrator ready to explain his visit with Mary Pask to Grace, Mary's sister, his sudden abandonment of thought concerning Mary's state of being is made clear. He begins this section by questioning Grace's absence from her sister and her seeming inability to recognize the seriousness that he feels that he has experienced. The problem with the scenario is that she does not understand his grievances concerning the state

of Mary's grave. He tells Grace that he has gone and seen her sister and that he "saw everything, in fact, but her grave" (161). It is then that the validity of his character again comes into question, for we discover that Mary "didn't die . . . She isn't dead! There isn't any grave, my dear man! It was only a cataleptic trance" (162). Our narrator does not take the news like we would stereotypically believe that a male would, for he does not express anger or frustration at the actions and behaviors of Mary Pask. Rather he expresses his dissatisfaction with a typical female perspective by holding a grudge and vowing to "never again be interested in Mary Pask or anything concerning her" (162). We know that Wharton's perspective may have been different, but we definitely can see that

Mary's real power to spook the narrator with her reversals of night and day, indoors and outdoors allows Wharton to suggest, perhaps playfully, perhaps seriously, that the image of the witch that has so terrified the patriarchal imagination can be used by women to turn the tables on patriarchal tactics. (Thomas 112)

Mary is the epitome of the anti-Victorian female: she lives alone, she expresses desire, and she does not consider social mores to dictate those actions. It is

through the role reversal and the irreverence for commonly accepted rules that

This narrator ultimately can't accept the femaleness he has encountered in Mary Pask's house, especially if it is 'real' rather than ghostly. The 'weakness' it engenders has to be purged from his identity rather than integrated. We know, however, since the narrator is telling us the tale in retrospect, that rather than begin "overlaid with layer upon layer of time and forgetfulness," this encounter still lives in him, rejected but alive. (Fedorko 108)

The lapse of time from the event and the telling of the story also adds an element of unreliability. This is another recognizably female trait that Wharton has imposed on this nameless male character.

Moving from one eponymous story about an empowered female, we find "Mr. Jones." This a cleverly written story about a strong-willed female, Lady Jane Lynke, who struggles to overpower the story's namesake. This classic recreation of a Gothic tale gives us a

Middle-aged woman [who] does nothing less than reclaim her female heritage from male control, both internal and external, by reclaiming her

ancestral home and the women's stories and lives it embodies. By entering the house and crossing the thresholds within it she claims her right to control her own body. (Fedorko 119)

The story begins with Lady Jane's understanding that she has just inherited an antique family estate, Bells. We are told in the very first sentence of this story that "Lady Jane Lynke was unlike other people: when she heard that she had inherited Bells, the beautiful old place which has belonged to the Lynkes of Thudney for something like six hundred years, the fancy took her to go and see it unannounced" (188). She is unlike other people; she is unlike other women of her time. She is like the author in this story who fled to Paris in her middle age and tried to capture something of her own. For Lady Jane, there seems not to be within her that need for self-affirmation, for she appears to be not lacking in that category. However, we see the struggle when she has to face the evil in the house and has to face the unseen figment of the being that causes the turmoil at Bells.

Lady Jane's struggle with the patriarchal hierarchy is first seen in the beginning of her endeavors to go to Bells. When she arrives at the house she is told that she cannot be admitted for "Mr. Jones says that no one is

allowed to visit the house" (192). We then are quickly given a response to this occurrence and what Lady Jane's response normally would have been. For when she is asked of the situation, she is asked by her hostess why she did not insist on being let in to the house. She responds that she was afraid. Her hostess then immediately says, "'Afraid, You darling?' There was a fresh hilarity. 'Of Mr. Jones?'" (193) This statement affirms that Lady Jane was not known as a woman that would likely be afraid of a caretaker or anyone else for that matter. The fear is something that she is determined to overcome. We see as the story progresses that "male dominance lives within her, and her own story, 'Mr. Jones,' shows her confronting it, but it also leaves ambiguous whether she overcomes it" (Fedorko 120). Overcoming the male patriarchal overbearing force will be the focus of the remainder of the story. Jane becomes focused on two missions: uncovering the evil that is hiding within Bells and confronting the unseen Mr. Jones, who seems to be the cause of the female oppression.

After deciding to not only go back to Bells but also actually make the old estate her home, Jane finds herself consumed with the thoughts of the house's history. She was not as impressed with its splendor as she was with

The very shabbiness of the house. [. . .] [A]fter its long abandonment, [it] seem[ed] full of the careless daily coming and going of people long dead, people to whom it had not been a museum, or a page of history, but cradle, nursery, home, and sometimes, no doubt, a prison. (194)

She knows immediately that something in that house is not right, and she sets out to find out what it is. Mrs. Clemm, the housekeeper, plays as the antithesis to Jane, for she is content with letting Mr. Jones have control. She does not seem to want to contradict the duties and limitations that are placed on her and admits that "living at Bells all these years has been ageing to me; it would be to anybody" (196). However, even until the very end she refuses to go against the orders of Mr. Jones.

Jane has some trouble assimilating into the house at first; she just feels that the "house was too old, too mysterious, too much withdrawn into its own secret past, for her poor little present to fit into it without uneasiness" (202). She then invites her fellow writer friend, Stramer, to come and stay with her while he finishes his latest novel. Wharton may be saying here that women need to be in the company of men in order to find their "masculine" selves, for that surely happens to Lady

Jane, or it may just be that this is how Wharton, herself, was able to find that confidence of inner self and strength, for Wharton "drew more substance from the company of men than of women, and the more so if the men in question could give her their undivided attention" (Lewis 57). In Stramer's presence, Lady Jane grows stronger and more audacious.

Stramer is the first to notice the painting of Juliana, known as *Also His Wife*, for that is the only inscription on the painting. It is not until he lifts "the lamp closer, deciphering the inscription on the border of the lady's India scarf: *Juliana, Viscountess Thudeny, 1818*" that they realize her true identity (206). He questions Jane about Juliana's paperwork and archives, and Jane admits that she has not seen them as of yet. However, this conversation leads them to trying to uncover what has happened to this lovely lady in the painting. Jane and Stramer then decide that they will look for the papers. They search, struggle, and scheme to find a way to unlock the drawer where the papers are kept. Finally, Mrs. Clemm informs them that the key has been found. Mrs. Clemm is very uncertain about Jane and Stramer's little adventure and tries to convince them that "there are a great many things in old houses that nobody knows about" (211). Jane

quips that she does not want things to be that way in her house. Jane expresses great determination during the search; she is unstoppable. She gains strength from Stramer and becomes more independent, although it is his presence that acts as a catalyst in order for her to do so.

They have no luck with the papers, so Jane finally confronts the area of the house that she has been forbidden, the Blue Room. Mr. Jones keeps his things in the Blue Room, and she is sure that he has had something to do with whatever awful thing befell Juliana. In Mr. Jones's desk, they find the papers that detail how Juliana was the heir to Thudney. The man who married her has done so only for her money and stayed away incessantly. They also find out that Juliana has been deaf and mute but has written to her husband pleading for his return. The husband has then written to Mr. Jones telling him to keep her locked away. She becomes a tortured prisoner and dies childless, which then is why the fortune and estate reverts to Lady Jane, who is a distant relative. Mrs. Clemm seems very upset that they have bothered Mr. Jones's things, so she runs to her room. Jane and Stramer find her there strangled by, they are told, Mr. Jones. It is then that Mr. Jones's state of being is discovered, for Mr. Jones is a ghost, and his patriarchal control has never wavered

until now, until Lady Jane. We see Lady Jane evolve:  
"Stramer assists but never overpowers Jane. Instead, his presence in her house provides her with additional strength to do what she wants to do. Stramer is Jane's masculinity, meshing with her femininity to her best advantage" (Fedorko 124). Jane needs to be assured that she can handle the situation, and Stramer provides that surety.

Wharton uses the empowering of women to show how society did not approve of or encourage women to question authority. In "The Lady's Maid's Bell" Hartley forces Mr. Brympton to realize his loss of control in the home. For "Mary Pask" we see a woman who is in complete control of the situation and strikes fear into the heart of this unnamed narrator. And for "Mr. Jones," we find a woman, Lady Jane, who is able to literally break down generations of patriarchal power to expose the evil that lies within. These empowered women come to symbolize what Wharton wished for all women, which was equality. Although in Wharton's time women were "regarded by men as no more than momentary ornaments," she saw this as a "bitter fact of life" (Lewis 486). With all the regard now given to Wharton as a trailblazer for women's equality, I hope that she would be pleased with the progress accomplished so far.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE WHARTON/JAMES FORMULA

Understanding the feminist perspectives conceived in Wharton's ghost stories can lead us to the discussion of her influences. However, she really need not have been influenced by anyone in order to produce the quality of supernatural fiction that she did. The way that Edith Wharton perceives her ghostly tales and the way she presents them are not that different from how her other fiction is presented. For Wharton, satirizing her culture and questioning the political correctness of the day came to be expected. She, of course, was not the only writer of her time period to question the aristocratic attitudes of the early twentieth century. One of her most influential fellow writers may have been one of her closest confidants who was also involved in this type of social criticism. Henry James, the stellar novelist who also is known for using satire to expose a societal malfunction, also took a chance with the popular ghostly tale. For James and Wharton, the opportunity to show contradiction and fallacy within their social structure was an opportunity for them to showcase their talent and disguising their intent in the

supernatural genre. Although on the surface the tales "Kerfol" by Wharton and *The Turn of the Screw* by James may seem like ordinary supernatural tales, at the heart of the stories lie several reprehensions of the male dominating contradictory circumstances that James and Wharton wished to uncover.

For the story "Kerfol," as in other Wharton stories, the estate represents a prison, and the unfortunate wife, Anne, is given no choice but to be stranded in the estate and her circumstances. The same is true for James's *The Turn of the Screw*. The lady of the house in James's story is not the wife, however, but is the governess. In the same way, the governess is installed in the house and made to feel trapped by it and her elements. Wharton and James were evidently counteracting the given notion that all women are happy in their surroundings and with the lots that have been cast.

Another factor that ties these stories together is the male characters. For "Kerfol," Yves de Cornault, Anne's husband, stays away for most of the story and panders to his wife with presents to make up for his absence. She has an affinity for dogs, so he appeals to that aspect of her personality. He tries to fill her time with a little dog so that she does not have time to consider and condemn him.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, James uses the guardian of the children as the absent male character. The children are given to the governess, and the guardian wishes not to be bothered with particulars about them. He intentionally buys them off by just sending the children what they desire instead of trying to form a relationship with them. The women in the stories are removed from the reality of the day-to-day business of the men, who try to occupy the women with other things.

The last aspect that draws these two stories together is how in the end the women are punished for loving too much the things that they have been given. Anne suffers in "Kerfol" with the one-by-one deaths of her dogs, for they are what bring her joy. For the governess in *The Turn*, as the children are placing their affections elsewhere, we see the governess slip away from reality to a mental state in which she can no longer function and as a result she loses the children whom she loves. Again, Wharton and James are making political and social statements here concerning the treatment of women and the torments that had to be endured in order to survive in the society that they knew. The context seems to present that women are not even allowed to love without a man's consent and approval.

The Gothic elements existing within the two stories are obvious. Each bring remembrances and sometimes blatant references to Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Each of these Gothic stories has supernatural or unexplained events that lead one to believe that the references here are purposefully to place the reader within that Gothic mind set. The setting is most important for the Gothic, for the right mood must be set in order the story to work. For Wharton, the actual geographic location is not as important as is seeing that the "female definition is most successfully achieved, not through a man, but through the reclaiming of a house, which serves as her most powerful sin of body/self" (Fedorko 18). There are other elements of the Gothic besides the house that Wharton employs well, such as the abyss, loveless marriage, and sexuality.

Here Wharton not only makes references to the theme of the Gothic, but she also uses the techniques within the story to develop the ideas like "house as prison." From the beginning of "Kerfol," we are given detail of its surroundings that suggest a vision of entrapment. Wharton uses the details like "fortified gate," "long wall," and "iron gate," so that there is no question as to the strength or size of the structure or to the ideas that

these symbolize (93). As the story progresses past the frame and into the events behind the mysteries of the house, not only does the house appear like a prison, but there are also suggestions to the idea that the Lady Anne is treated like a prisoner by her husband, Yves de Cornault. Kathy Fedorko says that Cornault "has essentially purchased Anne from her bankrupt father; then once he has married her, he buries his 'treasure' by not allowing Anne to leave the prisonlike Kerfol" (66). We are given this sense in the passage where we are informed of Cornault's travels, for "she was never taken--she was not allowed so much as to walk in the park unaccompanied" (102). Later, while Anne is being questioned as to her connection with Cornault's death, we are told of how Anne sees her relationship with him.

It was true that her husband seldom spoke harshly to her; but there were days when he did not speak at all. It was true that he had never struck or threatened her; but he kept her like a prisoner at Kerfol, and when he rode away [ . . . ] he set so close a watch on her that she could not pick a flower in the garden without having a waiting woman at her heels. (107)

Anne acts as though she would have gone with him on his journeys, but Cornault feels that wives need to be stationed "at their own firesides" (107). This power over Anne does not end with the death of Cornault, for even his extended family in the end would continue with this imprisonment of Anne. After Anne's courtroom appearance, the judge turns her over to be dealt with by Cornault's family, who has inherited the estate. They choose to "shut her up in the keep of Kerfol, where she is said to have died many years later, a harmless madwoman" (116). The idea of one's home is supposed to bring forth images of a place of refuge or retreat. It is a place where we should feel safe and secure, but for so many of Wharton's ghost stories, the women are tormented by the place in which they live. Looking further in Kerfol as an estate we see a "manor house that is a repository of ever-accumulating histories, of present lives lived in the context of consuming past ones" (Goodman 121). Reflecting on this idea, Wharton shows how that women fall victim to their circumstances and that even the elite class are not always circumstantially happy. This theme also represents of how women on a whole were being oppressed by men and being forced into this repressed state of isolation.

For Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, the people imprisoned in the estate in Essex are the employees, especially the newly employed governess. James does not name this governess, and this choice serves to purpose for good reason. By the governess remaining nameless, we get more of a sense of how she is viewed by her employer and the children. So not only do we get a perspective of how women in the aristocracy were treated by men in the aristocracy as Wharton does. James examines how the affluent male patriarchy can oppress women even in the lower class as happens with the governess. She is just an employee and need not have a name in order to do her job. By using this idea, Sami Ludwig explains, we are able to see that "the real horror of the tale is the role that Victorian culture scripts for persons like the governess, which James, most powerfully is able to show within the cognition of the victimized governess"(39). However, it seems that not only are the governess's actions scripted by society, all members of society fall into these roles and expectations that are placed within the class.

As the story moves, we see how James employs a frame technique as does Wharton, and we are able to see the circumstances surrounding the hiring of the governess and what is going to be expected of her. The two children,

Miles and Flora, whose parents have recently died, have been left to be cared for by a young bachelor. This young bachelor has hired the unnamed governess after the recent death of the past caretaker, Miss Jessel. The children will not be cared for in his home; rather, "[h]e had for his town residence a big house filled with the spoils of travel and the trophies of the chase; but it was to his country home, an old family place in Essex, that he wished her immediately to proceed" (James 7). At this country estate, Bly, the governess is not only given care of the children but is in essence in charge of them.

As the governess begins to see apparitions of the deceased Miss Jessel and the deceased Mr. Quint, we are able to question the meaning the visions. She is the only one who ever admits to seeing them. The visions become nightmarish to her and leave her in a unbelievable state of mind. The state of mind, however, coincides with her circumstance. She is trapped and frozen by the visions just as she is trapped and frozen by her class and circumstances. The house becomes the prison that she cannot escape. She is not so much trapped by the house itself as she is by her placement within it, and this reality is a constant reminder of those circumstances. Looking at the behavior of the governess as a guide, Thomas

Cranfill notes that the governess is "obsessed with class distinctions. [ . . . ] As victims of genteel poverty often are, the governess is inordinately aware of the only possession which sets her apart from the ruck and run- her gentility" (107). She tries to give herself a class distinction by drawing those distinctions between herself and Mrs. Grose, the house-maid. Her predecessor, Miss Jessel, may also serve as a clue into this idea of class entrapment. For those interested in name choices, Sami Ludwig points out that the name "Jessel may in turn relate to 'jesses,' straps of leather used in falconry to fasten hawks' legs. The life of a governess seems to be harnessed by social forces beyond her control" (43). This idea translates into a struggle for the governess to accept and understand the society in which she lives.

Maintaining these differences and these distinctions, the governess must create the boundaries for the children and herself. Within these boundaries, the other fortified prison wall is created. By setting limits for where, when, and with whom the children can be, Lustig explains that, "a border between the inside and the outside is either to legislate transgression into existence or to become aware of the border only by its crossing" (131). The inside and the outside that Lustig speaks of contributes to the idea

that Lustig goes on to say that the governess is creating larger boundaries than she is intending to, and that most often she attempts "to control the frontier between the inside and the outside produce effects opposite to those intended" (131). The governess has created a two-fold prison here. One prison is that of her class distinction; the other prison lies in the relationship that has established itself between her and the children. She is not the mother of the children, and no matter how much she "mothers" them, she never will be. By the governess's losing the children, we see how that could be a critique of the absence of control that women were given in society. Here, the woman does not even have control over the things that she had supposedly been given. The same happens for Anne in "Kerfol." She too is seemingly out of control concerning the fate of the little dogs that have been entrusted to her. Although she is the one that loves and cares for them, she cannot protect them.

Another distinctive characteristic that links these two stories is the concept of the absent male. For Wharton in "Kerfol," Cornault is away with business dealings for a substantial amount of time. We are told of Cornault in "Kerfol" that he "was a rich and powerful noble" (100). This detail is told early on in the story to leave no doubt

for the reader of his prestige or duty. He does travel in excess, and Anne claims that her "only grievance [ . . . ] was that Kerfol was a lonely place" (102). Several other places throughout the story we read the terms "husband away at the time" or in "Cornault's absence" (109-10). The events that occur in his absence are when Anne is the most happy. She has her dogs to care for and a way of life that she can tolerate.

This same idea is expressed within James's *The Turn of the Screw*. From the beginning of the tale, the guardian of the children is not only absent in body from the children, but he is also absent in spirit. The governess is said to have seen "him only twice" (9), and one of those times occurs before she leaves for Bly. The reasons behind his absence are unsure, but before she could even secure the position she has to promise that "she would never trouble him- but never, never; neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything" (9). It is certain that the guardian feels too busy and important to trivialize his existence by worrying about what is going on with the children.

Wharton and James may have another cognitive reason for these men being so displaced from others. Not only may these writers want to show how secluded from the outside world women of this time period were, but also to show how

self-seclusion may cause suffering for the men in the stories within their relationships because they were unable to relate to people that may be living in their homes. After determining how women are treated in the stories, we see how they are categorized more as chattel and thus lay the idea that they are also kept from the daily business lives that the men is living as well. They were not allowed to know what he did or how he spent his time, but that did not stop the curiosity.

The last concept that ties the stories together is the concept of losing what is being held onto too tightly. For Wharton in "Kerfol," Anne is subjected, week after week and sometimes day after day, to the suffering and death of these animals that she has grown to love. In the story, we are told that the first dog she receives from Cornault is a present. He has "paid a long price for the dog, [. . .]but Anne's pleasure was do great that, to see her laugh and play with the little animal, her husband would doubtless have given twice the sum" (104-05). However, once Cornault has suspected the least bit of truancy from Anne, he seems to have mentally collapsed and so acts on emotional impulses. After this emotional outburst, she discovers "her little dog strangled on her pillow. The little thing was dead, but still warm" (110). This would not be the

only dog that this would happen to or that would be lost. It is the first of many. After she takes in one last puppy and tries to hide it from her husband, she finds that it too has suffered from Cornault's wrath. It is then that she "dared not make a pet of any other dog; and her loneliness became almost unendurable" (111). Much like Wharton herself, she has no children, but the little dogs are her precious things; however, Cornault insists on controlling her. He takes away the only things that ever make her happy.

As for the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, the children become her only link to the life she does not have. She is in constant reminder of their previous affection for Miss Jessel, and by the appearance of Miss Jessel's "spirit," she is sure to be facing some feelings of animosity toward her. Her feelings for the children seem to be beyond general affection. She really begins to love them intimately. Early on she makes the decision that is up to her to guarantee the safety of the children from the ghosts and says that "the children in especial I should thus fence about and absolutely save" (35). She places claim on them, and when she feels that her relationship with Miles and Flora is being threatened by the appearance of the ghosts, she calls them her own. She feels that

Quint wants Miles whom she calls "my boy" (36), and she is sure that Miss Jessel is after Flora. After this realization, she admits that "[w]e were cut off, really, together; we were united in our danger. They had nothing but me. And I—well, I had them" (38). This danger that she perceives is not really danger, but a created or imaginary danger. She, however, cannot see the lunacy in her visions and believes that the power of the spirits is too strong and exclaims that "It's far worse than I dreamed. They're [the children are] lost!" (45). They will be lost, for the governess is holding on too tight. She is holding on too tightly to a life and to children that are not her own. She wants to be the mother of the children and the lady of the manor, but that is not a realistic dream. She is not punished by someone else for loving the children too much; however, she is punished by her own iniquity and by the boundaries of her social class. In the end the children are lost to her, as well as her ability to be in touch with reality. Little Flora is taken to "safety" by being sent to her uncles. But Miles's fate is different. The fear being instilled in the children about the ghosts is too great, and after the last episode with Peter Quint, it is implied that the governess takes the life of Miles to save him from Quint, he dies and "his little heart dispossessed,

had stopped" (113). She loses the things that she loves because of the driving insanity that is caused by her displacement from the entrapment within her social class.

By examining the two tales side by side it is a possibility to see how the themes overlap. It is not, however, necessarily true that *The Turn of the Screw* served as a source of inspiration for Wharton's "Kerfol" or for any other of her ghost stories. It does, somehow, lead to the conclusion that the topics being explored were relatively universal themes. The textual similarities also lead us to draw conclusions surrounding the social climate of the times.

As for the house being a prison, we can gather that women of all classes felt trapped by their circumstances. In both stories, the women are trapped. Anne is trapped in "Kerfol"; she is physically forbidden to leave the estate and is psychologically trapped into the role of lady of the manor, and in *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess is trapped by the struggling resistance to step above her class and by the fact that she has no husband, no child, and as she feels, no importance.

Looking at the absent males in the stories, it easily reminds us of the submissive state that women were forced to bare. In "Kerfol," Yves de Cornault's absence leaves his

wife, Anne, with nothing of her own, and he feels that the presents that he returns with should make up for his absence. Anne is secluded into her own world and is denied access to his. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess is not only denied access into the world of the guardian, she is forbidden to have any access to him at all. His seclusion leaves the governess to govern herself, Bly, and children. His absence is a reminder that men often viewed the work of women, household duties and child caring, as beneath their concern.

Lastly, as the women lose the things that they love most, we are reminded that women were often treated as children or animals; in some cases, women were considered an asset or an ornament. For Anne, her loss seems to give pleasure to Cornault, and the fact that she hides her remorse from him enrages him more. Cornault seems to feel that Anne needs to hurt and be anguished in order to be punished for seeking help from an outsider. She forbids herself to acknowledge the pain she feels in front of him, so his torture continues until his death. For the governess, her loss of the children emotionally leads to her acting on her debilitated mental state, which in turn causes her to lose the children physically.

The stories, though loosely similar, seem to project a critical view concerning the treatment of women in and around the male-dominated society. James and Wharton use their talents to cause others to question the system of social norms and mores in order to provoke change.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Understanding the ghost story or the supernatural tale goes beyond the scope of simply understanding the tale in itself. The genre of the supernatural is more than a scary story that involves a surprise or a catalyst that leads to an unexpected or undesired ending. Like other fiction, the true meaning can hide behind the tale. For Edith Wharton, her ghost stories seem to transcend the genre and her own writing style and techniques in some way. She does not remain consistent in her themes or styles throughout. And like her other fiction, she seems to progress in thoughts and ideals that are most likely troubling her at that particular time in her life. She finds herself writing these stories consistently throughout her entire career, so one cannot claim that they simply developed out of a phase that she was going through, nor did they develop out of the reading public's desire for them. She became versed in the tale, and as her stories prove, she became a wordsmith quite unmatched within the genre.

As my study within this subject developed, the ideas proclaimed, however, did seem to remain consistent. Wharton always seemed to resent being born into the upper crust of

society, and that feeling is always easily seen in her portrayals in fiction. The ghost story is no exception to that rule. I do not feel as though it is the society itself that she rejects, rather the images and faux images that the social class projects and rejects. She not only approached ghost story or supernatural fiction in this way, but all of her writing was approached through looking at the surroundings and experiences. She states in *The Writing of Fiction* that

True originality consists not in a new manner but in a new vision. That new, that personal, vision is attained only by looking long enough at the object represented to make it the writer's own; and the mind which would bring this secret germ to fruition must be able to nourish it with an accumulated wealth of knowledge and experience.

(18-9)

She explores the idea here that the story may not need to be original per se; rather, it just needs to have a "new vision" or a new color added. She knew that she could present the same stories with or without the ghostly element. However, she knew that not every topic would work in the ghostly tale. She compares writing to digging in a gold mine. She says that "a gold mine is worth nothing

unless the owner has the machinery for extracting the ore, and each subject must be considered first in itself [. . .] then novelist's power of extracting what it contains" (The Writing 26). The story line must be completely uncovered to know if it is worth the effort to write. In this sense she knew what would be good and what would work as a story-line before ever delving too deep into a story. These same credentials apply to all of her work.

She also knew that the ghost story was a genre that most readers accepted. She states that "No one with a spark of imagination ever objected to a good ghost story" (The Writing 28-9). She goes on to explain that a ghost story should not be full of horrific events as it would overwhelm the reader. She believes that "once the preliminary horror is posited, it is the harping on the same string-the same nerve-that does the trick" (The Writing 39). She was not a novice or a happenstance writer; she had a direct formula and knew how to capture that audience directly.

Just as we have seen here, although the stories are not presented within a linear order from their publication date, there is something to be said about how the stories did progress and the image of how and why Wharton's opinions changed, or at least seemed to. The first story

that is discussed here, "Afterward," also happened to be one of Wharton's first ghost stories, published in 1909. In "Afterward" we find that that the female, Mary Boyne, is completely oblivious to the world of her husband. This was most likely a regular situation considering the story was written before women's suffrage. And that event within itself may have been the turning point for all the stories that followed. The women's rights movement of the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries not only produced a voting female society, it changed how women viewed their roles within that society. Not only did women in America become more independent, but the characters that Wharton created mirrored what she saw happening within society, so therefore, it is, or at least should be, understood that her female characters would become more independent as well. "Miss Mary Pask" was written in 1925 and "Mr. Jones" in 1928. Both of these stories with their stronger female characters give us an image of how the societal role for women was changing. In her last attempt at the ghost story, we find another voice from Wharton; this one is one of the aged. Close to her death in 1937, she created the character of Sarah Clayburn as an image of woman who had seen the world change and had not known really what to make of it. I am not sure that Wharton imposes herself onto

Sarah Clayburn, but the situation of the story "All Souls," which was published posthumously, could be an image, not of the way things were for Wharton, but maybe of what she herself feared, being alone.

Much has been said about the feminist perspective and approach to her supernatural fiction, but reading these stories is much more than an exercise in trying to uncover an agenda. For "her best tales reveal extraordinary psychological and moral insight; and they achieve distinction through her exploration in them of human situations on considerable complexity" (McDowell 1). She reaches beyond the stereotypical appearance and expectations. She sees that, "The stories often move into a realm of the symbolical and allegorical, especially in those dealing with the supernatural" (McDowell 1). Wharton was able to use the ghost tale as a venue to explore subjects that would not have been openly discussed in her conservative milieu such as loveless marriage, spinsterhood, legal and illicit love, or abuse.

Wharton gave us a fine collection of ghost stories, most of which were published in volumes, others individually. However, in the course of her career, she published two collections in her lifetime and one posthumously. The material is vast but the criticism is

somewhat limited. There have been great strides to uncover the beauty in Wharton's supernatural fiction, but there is much room for the generations that follow as more and more attention is given to these stories.

It seems somewhat ironic that the last story Wharton ever wrote was "All Souls." It shows us that even near the end of her life this writer was influenced greatly by the unexplainable, and she gave us the reader the gift of being able to see her supernatural world through her supernatural eyes. It is the complexity of the Wharton tales that make them extraordinary. Within her best tales we find "psychological and moral insight; and they achieve distinction through her exploration in them of human situations of considerable complexity" (McDowell 1). We are complex beings, and at times, the complexities within us desire to have more than sheer entertainment. Wharton does entertain; however, we can walk away from the entertainment that she gives, and ponder.

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