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# The Gothic Spirit in Edith Wharton's Ghost Stories

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## Introduction

*I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm afraid of them.*

(Edith Wharton, Preface, *Ghosts*, 7)

With this enigmatic statement, Edith Wharton starts her preface of *Ghosts*, a collection published in 1937 which contains a selection of some of her best short stories able to “send a cold shiver down one’s spine”. Even though she is most likely known for her realistic novels, Wharton has gone often beyond the limits of reason in order to explore the realm of the fantastic genre: in fact, many of her eighty-six short stories written throughout her career, recount events which lead the reader in a supernatural region far from reality as he or she knows it.

Beginning with a brief general introduction which clarifies the definition of “fantastic” and, in particular, of “gothic” in literature, this dissertation analyzes some of the most suggestive and meaningful gothic-marked texts of Wharton’s production: from *The House of the Dead Hand* (1898) to her last completed piece of fiction *All Souls* (1937), the analysis also considers two of the most famous realistic novels of the author’s career, *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), pointing out their gothic elements between the lines. The purpose of this work is to highlight how the traditional rebellious Gothic gave Wharton the possibility to avoid social and individual censorship, and thus to deal with

public or personal issues considered forbidden or unmentionable at the time: the condition of women, the exploration of relations between genders, sexuality, social class distinctions, death, solitude and so on.

From a scrupulous but stimulating reading of her autobiographical works, *A Backward Glance* (1934) and its unpublished version *Life & I*, clearly emerge those deep fears, the daily dramas and all the personal “ghosts” which haunted Wharton’s life: her despotic and rigid mother who was perfectly at ease in the capitalistic and sexist New York society which considered women as beautiful art objects; the fearful mystery of sexuality, discovered just several weeks after her unhappy marriage; the classic woman’s writer dilemma when writing was considered an unladylike act; and eventually the solitude of old-age and the terrifying approach of death. Wharton’s way to deal with her worries, was always to confront them with the help of words and thus by writing about them. Therefore, if in the early stages of her production Wharton denounces the condition of women by portraying female characters unable to express their opinions because oppressed by authoritative and overbearing figures, gradually we will see these characters growing together with their creator, finding the courage and determination necessary to speak their minds and to pursue their freedom and happiness.

This chronological analysis of Edith Wharton’s gothic stories is a journey into the author’s inner self: it narrates the gradual evolution of a woman who, armed only with her pen, boldly manages to travel far from the painful and lonely days of her girlhood, eventually achieving her craved independence and complete self-realization.

# I

## The Fantastic Text and the Gothic Fiction

When Edith Wharton defines her short tales as “ghost stories”, she places those works within a long literary tradition best known for choosing the ghost as a possible depiction of the supernatural: Gothic fiction, born in England in the eighteenth century. First of all, the Gothic can be considered part of the wider world of the fantastic literature.

Many critics have tried to give a specific definition of fantastic but the most famous for sure is by Tzvetan Todorov<sup>1</sup>, a French-Bulgarian philosopher. He starts his studies on the fantastic considering that in our world, where obviously there are no vampires or ghosts, there occurs an event that goes against any natural law or any logic reasoning. The one who experiences this event is either the victim of an illusion of the senses, or else, that event is real and so has no natural explanation. Todorov defines the fantastic as “that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting a supernatural event” (26); additionally he argues that “the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a

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<sup>1</sup> See Tzvetan Todorov, *La Letteratura Fantastica*.

supernatural explanation of the events described” (34). The fantastic is thus defined as an evanescent category that lasts just as long as a “hesitation”, a sense of mental bewilderment common to the reader and to the character of the story. But there comes a moment when their common path splits, when the reader, at the end of the story, has to make a decision even if the character does not. According to Todorov, if the events described can be explained by following the rules of reality as it exists in the common opinion, the story belongs to the “*uncanny*”. On the contrary, if the events can be explained just by new rules that are different from the laws of nature, than the text belongs to the “*marvelous*”. As we will see in the next chapters, some of Edith Wharton’s ghost stories belong to the first of Todorov’s categories and others, that find no rational explanation, belong to the second one.

However there are also some texts that sustain their suspense for the reader and their ambiguity to the very end. A very famous example is Henry James’ novella *The Turn of the Screw* where ghosts are visible only to one person, the governess who serves as both narrator and protagonist. Till the end James’ narration doesn’t permit the reader to understand whether ghosts do haunt the old house or whether the governess is mad and so the ghosts are just the fruit of her imagination.

The Gothic genre presents some different and distinctive features within the fantastic literature world. As previously said, Gothic literature was born in England in the eighteenth century and the first published work to call itself a “Gothic story” was “*The Castle of Otranto*<sup>2</sup>” by Horace Walpole printed in 1764. Gothic fiction, indeed, is not *gothic* at all. It is an entirely post-medieval and post-renaissance phenomenon. By Walpole’s time the Gothic Age was seen as a long period of barbarism that covered a large era from the invasion

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<sup>2</sup> The novel is a medieval story of love, adventure and supernatural occurrences set in a creepy castle full of secret passages and mysteries.

of the Visigoths that caused the fall of the Roman Empire, to the Renaissance. “Gothic” also stood for something obsolete or old-fashioned. Many critics argue that probably Walpole used it as a literary term because of the analogy with the Gothic revival in architecture that also took place in the mid-eighteenth century. However Walpole’s use of “Gothic” in the title of his novel constituted a manifesto for a new genre of romance that exploded in the 1790’s throughout the British Isles, in Europe and eventually in the United States.

There are some general features in texts like Walpole’s, that allow us to identify fictions as substantially Gothic. A Gothic story is usually set in an isolated place like a castle, an old uninhabited house, an abbey, a graveyard, a theatre and so on. This place hides some secrets from the past that haunt and obsess the characters either psychologically or physically. Frequently these hauntings assume the features of ghosts or any kind of monsters; at this point Gothic texts cross the boundary between conventional reality and the world of the unlimited possibilities of the supernatural.

Sound, or rather its absence, is another basic element that plays a very important role during this cross-the-boundaries moment. Sound acts as a sign of life, whereas silence is usually a predictor of supernatural encounters. Gothic fiction makes silence a mark of the unnatural and nonliving. For example, considering again Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, whenever the governess is about to experience a ghostly apparition, all of a sudden the world around her sinks in a dreadful silence.

It was as if, while I took in, what I did take in, all the rest of the scene had been stricken with death. I can hear again, as I write, the intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped. The rooks stopped cawing in the golden sky and the friendly hour lost for the unspeakable minute all its voice. But there was no other change in nature, unless indeed it were it were a change that I saw with a stranger sharpness. The gold was still in the sky, the

clearness in the air, and the man who looked at me over the battlements was as definite as a picture in a frame. (16)

This quote describes the moment when, for the first time in the book, the author starts playing between the real world and the fantastic one. This opposition, that can be considered the beating heart of the Gothic fiction, affects not just the characters but also the reader, forcing him to confront what is psychologically buried in his mind like his fears or forgotten desires from the past. This theory is at the basis of Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny" where he presents his psychoanalytic reading of a fantastic text and in particular of a Gothic one. According to Freud, "*the uncanny*" is able to uncover what has been hidden for years and which he defines as "*the unconscious*": a deep storage of repressed and infantile memories, the underworld of the self that reappears only in repellant and unfamiliar forms. The critic Rosemary Jackson also moves toward the same direction when she writes: "A fantastic text tells of an indomitable desire, a longing for that which does not yet exist, or which has not been allowed to exist, the unheard of, the unseen, the imaginary, as opposed to what already exists and is permitted as 'really' visible<sup>3</sup>". The characters of a Gothic story feel fearful and guilty about what they most desire. Considering many of Wharton's female Gothic heroines, we'll see that they both seek to please and to free themselves from the oppressive male dominance.

Gender distinction has always been one of the main cultural problems that the Gothic has confronted for years: through novels or short stories this genre has investigated what genders mean for western structures of power and what happens when boundaries between them start to blur. The Gothic is all about a struggle between opposite categories: life and

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<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, 91.

death, male and female, natural and supernatural, ancient and modern and so on. This confrontation offers the reader a way to proceed toward complete self-awareness, meeting the roots of his being in their actual multiplicity. It's a new method to approach the world with a brand new point of view: a way to dissolve some of the rigidities by which the reader was accustomed to live.

This is the revolutionary power of the Gothic and thus the key that Edith Wharton chooses to confront her fears and to find a language for her forbidden desires.

## II

### Edith Wharton: a Modern Persephone

Edith Wharton was born in New York in 1862 to George Frederic Jones and Lucretia Stevens Rhineland. Since she was born during the Civil War, from 1866 to 1872 she travelled throughout Europe with her family: she went to Spain, France and Italy and so she had the occasion to learn many foreign languages. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton's autobiography, and in *Life and I*, the unpublished version, the author recalls her precocious passion for telling stories. She remembers that when she was just a child she used to spend hours walking back and forth in her father's library with a book in her hand, pretending to read it aloud and enjoying the mere sound that the words produced, regardless of her inability to catch their meaning. This passion that she defines "*making up*" was connected with the act of writing even before she learnt how to do it.

From that moment I was enthralled by *words*. It mattered very little whether I understood them or not: the sound was the essential thing. Wherever I went, they sang to me like the birds in an enchanted forest. And they had looks as well as sounds: each one had its own gestures and physiognomy (*Life and I* 1074-1075).

The magic of words led young Edith to exclusive places, far from reality and secrets to the others. Words were brought to life and, as she writes, they:

were visible, almost tangible presences, with faces as distinct as those as the persons among whom I lived. And, like the Erlkonig's daughters<sup>4</sup> they sang to me so bewitchingly that they almost lured me from the wholesome noonday air of childhood into some strange supernatural region, where the normal pleasures of my age seemed as insipid as the fruits of the earth to Persephone after she had eaten of the pomegranate seed (1075-1076).

It's as if her whole world were suddenly split in two: on the one hand the "enthralled", "enchanted", "strange" and "supernatural" world of literature; on the other the "wholesome" and "normal" world of everyday life. She became a modern Persephone who, just like the goddess in the myth, had tasted the forbidden pomegranate seed and had found an ecstatic release in the world they have led her into. This intermingling of the real dimension and the supernatural is the quintessential Gothic atmosphere.

The act of writing guided Wharton to a mysterious knowledge, to a magic region that made her feel different, isolated but yet free and guilty at the same time. The door between these two worlds was set in her father's library: like many of her Gothic characters, Wharton discovered a new intellectual knowledge and an uncanny awareness in the realm of words: this room became analogous to her strange inner world. She was actually trying to escape from reality. In *Life and I* Wharton portrays herself as a Gothic heroine: trapped in suffocating interiors and oppressed by superior restraints personified by her mother. The

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<sup>4</sup> In German and Danish folklore Erlkonig was a spirit and the king of the fairies: his daughters were kind of elves who used to sing and dance in the forest entralling the wayfarers with their enchanting voices. In literature they are an ambivalent figure which can be both beneficent and maleficent.

latter embodied Wharton's uneasiness with the social system that considered women as an art object, passive possessions worthwhile only if they looked attractive: "To look pretty is one of the deepest-seated instincts of my nature; I say 'to look pretty' instead of 'to be admired', because I really believe it has always been an aesthetic desire, rather than a form of vanity" (1065). This instinct identifies her as both art object (female) and artist (male).

In the eighteenth century society women risked being excluded if they appeared to be intelligent, strong willed or in other words unfeminine. A woman considered respectable should have obeyed male authority and should have been subjected to his will. This model of old New York womanhood fits perfectly with the portrait of her mother Lucretia Jones, whom she remembers as "the best dressed woman in New York" (*A Backward Glance* 20). What emerges from Wharton's words in her autobiography is that Lucretia Jones was everything but a tender and caring mother: the young child looked at her as an icon of style and beauty, always flawless and never out of place. In her memories we read of a young Edith Wharton who was rejected by a cold mother who restrained and criticized more than she nurtured and accepted: "my parents - or at least my mother - laughed at me for using 'long words', & for caring for dress (in which heaven knows she set me the example!); & under this perpetual cross-fire of criticism I became a painfully shy self-conscious child" (*Life and I* 1069). Like other little girls with normal curiosity, Edith asked where babies come from, but whenever she did, her mother turned her away with a disgusted tone and an unvarying response: nice little girls didn't investigate such matters. Repeatedly Edith probed her mother for an explanation of the nascent feelings of passion but she always received nothing more than denial and humiliation. In fact, as Edith Wharton herself later affirmed, she did not manage to find out where babies came from until several weeks after her marriage. This shy little Edith is closely linked to her passive and powerless female Gothic heroines who repress their sexuality and are always afraid to speak. From this maternal

judgment grows a self-hating voice and a strong self-criticism that will always be part of Wharton's life, making her feel inadequate in every situation.

Her sensibility and intelligence increased this sense of feeling different and isolated: "it humiliated me to be so 'different' " (1068). Her own passion for words soon became the cause of being rejected and almost avoided because it was considered a "family disgrace", something unfeminine and met with silent disapproval:

None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or blame - they simply ignored them; and among the immense tribe of my New York cousins, though it included many with whom I was on terms of affectionate intimacy, the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace, which might be condoned but could not be forgotten (*A Backward Glance* 143-144)

She faced the classic woman's writer dilemma, since writing was considered an unladylike and threatening act because it involved honesty of feelings and talking of things not acceptable to acknowledge. It's important to highlight this idea of the writing act as something connected to magic: the word itself becomes a key to open the door of the supernatural world.

As a matter of fact, Edith Wharton affirms that, in her early years, her first writing productions were everything but fantastic; actually as a teenager she started writing poetry and realistic fiction: she just didn't like children fairy-tales and fantasy books. In fact until she was a young lady, she lived in an intense fear of the uncontrollable and the unexplained. She remembers in her autobiography, that when she was nine years old she suffered from a typhoid fever while the family was travelling around Europe, and during her recovery she was given a book to read:

To an unimaginative child the tale would no doubt have been harmless; but it was a ‘robber-story’, & with my intense Celtic sense of the supernatural, tales of robbers & ghosts were perilous reading. This one brought on a serious relapse, & again my life was in danger (*Life and I* 1079)

Unable to rationalize this fear, the girl felt constantly haunted by a threatening and dark force that got even more terrifying every time she returned from her daily walks with the nurse or with her father, waiting for the door of her house to be opened.

During the last few yards, & while I waited on the door-step for the door to be opened, I could feel it behind me, upon me; & if there was any delay in the opening of the door I was seized by a choking agony of terror. It did not matter who was with me, for no one could protect me; but, oh, the rapture of relief if my companion had a latch-key, & we could get in at once, before it caught me! (1080)

This “agony of terror” in front of a closed door became a real obsession and Wharton states that it would have lasted for a long time in her life influencing also her future Gothic production. In her works the terror of the outside unknown will turn into terror of the internal and inner unknown, within the house and within the self; just a few characters of her Gothic stories will show the courage to face this terror, admit its existence and look beyond it into a realm that promises new understanding of themselves. Wharton writes in *Life and I*: “till I was twenty-seven or eight, I could not sleep in the room with a book containing a ghost-story, and that I have frequently had to burn books of this kind, because it frightened me to know that they were downstairs in the library!” (1081). This fear of the uncontrollable in the

young Edith turns slowly into a great desire to deal with her nightmares and rationalize this terror; she will find her personal way to do it through words and writing.

However fear will never play the leading role in Wharton's Gothic fiction. *The Turn of the Screw* and James' narrative style strongly influenced Wharton's Gothic production on this level. Neither author was fond of literature's stereotypical frightening and screaming ghosts; they both preferred to create weird extensions of objective reality. Quoting James himself, they wanted to write about "the strange and sinister embroidered on the very type of the normal and easy" (*New York Edition*. vol.17, preface). Explicit terror doesn't belong to Wharton's style, which, instead, prefers thin vibrations and subtle hints of fright. She creates the fantastic effect through specific elements such as silence, loneliness and emptiness. Silence often becomes overwhelming since it can be intensified by natural elements like fog or snow. The dark atmosphere of intense loneliness in an empty and silent space pervades many of her ghost stories especially those of the late production.

Wharton takes and adapts many elements from traditional Gothic fiction in her short stories: the mysterious and isolated house, a helpless and passive woman unable to save herself from male domination, an external person who saves or at least try to save the woman, threatening weather, ghosts and suggestions of incest or other sexual abuses. She revises these elements in order to create a new Gothic that allows her to explore what was considered taboo or too dangerous to speak about and, furthermore, to analyze the nature of women and men. The traditional rebellious Gothic gives her the freedom to write about those topics considered unspeakable by nineteenth-century society and by her family, such as: the antisocial, the erotic, sexuality, the grotesque, feelings and conditions that could threaten men and women because connected to the uncontrollable.

Wharton's Gothic also reveals her contradictory point of view on gender roles and the conflict at the base of their idealization. She was with no doubt influenced by different

elements like society, family and historical time. Her persistent sensation of feeling different is evident in her letters, diaries and self-portraits where there emerges a sort of gender ambivalence. She seemed uncomfortable with traits typically considered masculine like rationality and control, as she seemed with passivity, submission and vulnerability traditionally associated with women. Her Gothic stories can be read as an interaction between versions of her feminine and masculine selves. Many qualities such as ambition, passion and intellect, which she identified in herself as masculine, caused her a profound discomfort and a constant fear of the inner self.

The same fear belongs to many characters of her ghost stories when they anxiously face the mysterious: an irrational experience that traditionally threatens damnation, but, in Wharton's new Gothic, hides a new meaning. It can be seen as a "coming to awareness" process that renews the sense of who they are as women or men and their relationship with the world that they live in. This process starts with a supernatural experience in an isolated house or castle that stands as a symbol for the character's inner consciousness. These houses hold secrets about uncontrollable emotions such as passion, fear, rage or greed, and are usually locked up or kept inaccessible just like the stories of the characters that inhabit them. So where the house is threatened by rain or fog, the character usually has to deal with his own inner issues that could be for instance vulnerability, repressed erotic desires, rage, oppression and so on. Among these characters, some are brave enough to accept this experience and understand its value, but others are too timid or just not ready and either try to escape or deny it.

Wharton borrows stereotypical characters from Gothic tradition that she modifies and revises throughout her career. Usually there will be a captive woman threatened by an arrogant and oppressive male figure that will make her unable to reach her self-awareness.

When the heroine (or the hero) is too cowardly to go beyond the limits and face the dark abyss, Wharton relies on the reader to catch her lost and potential completeness.

There are some early Gothic stories, written between 1900 and 1904, that follow this pattern and that cannot actually be considered ghost stories because there isn't any apparition; however they present a mysterious atmosphere or recount some events difficult to explain. Because of this reason they were not included in the collection *Ghosts* published in 1937. These are the stories that will be commented on in chapter III, and which, just like *The House of Mirth*, portray weak and dumb women succumbing to lives as art objects.

Chapter IV analyzes some stories, written during the 1910's, where characters are well aware of the supernatural experiences that they live but they are too afraid to accept the consequences of facing them and to uncover their inner selves, so they hide or escape.

The stories studied in chapter V together with the novel *The Age of Innocence*, represent a breakthrough in Wharton's Gothic. Women in these stories are able to express their desires and opinions and determined to live an independent life: they have faced the abyss and so are well aware of who they are and what they seek. They show a renewed strength that both attracts and scares the men that they meet on their path.

The final chapter considers the stories of the late production that explore a world where everything seems to be ruled by absence and silence. The characters walk on the edge between the real world and Hades and it becomes hard to distinguish the two regions. The main theme of Wharton's late production appears to be the encounter with death itself, portrayed as an anguish of loneliness, absence and dark emptiness. Once again the author uses the Gothic to deal with her fears. Her old age, the threshold of death as the only possible future, reminds her of the agony of terror in front of a closed door. She uses her only weapon in hand, her pen, as a key to open that door and face what concerns her the most.

### III

## The Woman: a Beautiful Piece of Art

In the Gothic stories written between 1898 and 1904 Edith Wharton revises the tradition to express and confront her own personal fear of femininity and to denounce classic genders' stereotypical roles. What can be read between the lines, is her personal struggle of trying to accommodate the artist she was becoming to her womanhood. In the stories of the early production like *The House of the Dead Hand*, *The Duchess at Prayer*, *The Angel at the Grave* and *The Lady's Maid's Bell* Wharton hides her desperate shout for freedom. She tells the story of four different women who share the same tragedy: everyone of them lives in a beautiful house that inevitably is turned into a small and claustrophobic cage by a male character who imposes his control over the weak and helpless woman acting like a dictator. The victim doesn't even try to fight against male dominance and completely surrenders to her dreadful fate. She becomes an artifact, a work of art, a lifeless object to admire. The reason why these women hold their tongue and passively accept their destiny is because they are totally afraid of being independent: fearing their own femininity and sexuality makes them unable to express their desires and to live a free life.

The same fear of self-awareness can be found in Lily Bart, the protagonist of *The House of Mirth* published in 1905. In this realistic novel the Gothic theme of the conflict between genders is placed within Lily herself and Wharton seems to raise the question: are women destined to be forever subjected, required to be beautiful and thus deprived of their human dignity?

### 3.1 The House of the Dead Hand

*Above the doorway, the marble hand reached out like the cry of an imprisoned anguish.*

(Edith Wharton, "The House of the Dead Hand", in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1891-1910*, 543)

*The House of the Dead Hand* was written in 1898 and published in 1904. The external narrator, tells the story from the point of view of one of the characters: Mr. Wyant. He is an Englishman who has been sent to Siena, Italy, at the request of one his closest friend, professor Clyde, an art scholar that asks him to take a close look at a recently recovered Leonardo painting. The owner is Mr. Lombard "a queer old Englishman, a mystic or a madman (if the two are not synonymous), and a devout student of the Italian Renaissance" (520), who firmly refuses permission for anyone to reproduce the painting or to photograph it. His daughter, Sybilla Lombard, is the heroine of the story who has been forced by her father to buy the painting using her inheritance from her grandmother. She lives with her parents in the so-called "house of the dead hand" whose name comes from a hand of marble placed above the main door: "the hand was a woman's - a dead dropping hand, which hung there convulsed and helpless, as though it had been thrust forth in denunciation of some evil

mystery within the house, and had sunk struggling into death” (522). The hand is thus identified as a woman’s, and this is the first female appearance in the story: the marble emblem stands as an anticipation of the evil mystery within the house.

The reader, through Wyant’s point of view, soon realizes that there’s something puzzling in the physical description of the characters: “Wyant was struck by the contrast between the fierce vitality of the doctor’s age and the inanimateness of his daughter’s youth” (524). The weird contrast becomes even more mysterious within the sunless and “mortal cold” atmosphere that pervades the funereal villa (522). Opposed to Mr. Lombard’s strong and ambiguous personality, the narrator introduces the other female character of the story, Mrs. Lombard, as a dull and vacuous Englishwoman who seems to live in the past and to be unaware of her husband’s cruel behavior. She isn’t capable of protecting Sybilla who lives as an “impassive figure”, slave to her father’s will (525). When they agree to show the painting to Wyant, he follows them through a path made of many secret passages and locked doors, each one opened by Sybilla herself. She is the one who holds the keys of the treasure, of her femininity: the locked doors hide an evident sexual connotation. The metaphor is clear when Mr. Lombard has Wyant place his foot on a pomegranate bud in a rug, a traditional symbol of female fertility, to better appreciate the beauty of the painting. The latter represents Sybilla’s inaccessible and unexpressed sexuality which is constantly under her father’s sadistic control: the central figure of the artwork is a woman “seated in an antique chair of marble” surrounded by religious and sensual elements (525).

“No, young man; nor a photograph of it. Nor a sketch, either; mind that, nothing that can be reproduced. Sybilla” he cried with sudden passion, “swear to me that the picture shall never be reproduced! No photograph, no sketch - now or afterward. Do you hear me?”

“Yes father,” said the girl quietly. (531)

These words show Lombard's view of his daughter as a prophetess, a guardian of the artwork to which she has to devote her whole life: he insists that the painting cannot be reproduced, just as he prevents Sybilla from expressing her own sexuality.

Wyant observes Sybilla mechanically describing the details of the painting with cold detachment and in total absence from the scene: "she seemed to be reciting a lesson" (528). The brilliant colors and the magnificence of the Leonardo represent Sybilla's powerful youth which is being sacrificed just to satisfy her father's will. It's as if something or someone has sucked out her vitality: the same Doctor Lombard describes himself as a sort of a vampire when he says: "Yet here am I who have given my life to the study of the Renaissance; who have violated its tomb, laid open its dead body, and traced the course of every muscle, bone and artery; who have sucked its very soul from the pages of poets and humanists" (529). The old Englishman is so obsessed by the beauty of art that he has turned it into his own pagan religion which also requires human sacrifices. The room where he keeps the painting is defined a chapel while the artwork itself is a sacrament. He feels like a sacred minister who can choose the lucky people allowed to see the Leonardo: "many are called and few are chosen" (524).

When Wyant leaves the house, he thinks about its weird inhabitants and their lives: wondering about the strange relationship between Sybilla and her father, he takes another look at the hand on the door that "seemed to have relaxed into the passiveness of despair" (532). At this point the reader realizes that the hand is a metonym for a woman's body and represents Sybilla's helpless spirit which is slowly sinking into death. The traditional Gothic opposition between a mysterious and threatening past and modern times is highlighted by Wyant when he wonders: "might not the accumulated influences of such a house modify the

lives within it in a manner unguessed by the inmates of a suburban villa with sanitary plumbing and a telephone?" (538).

Wyant plays the traditional role of the outsider male character that potentially could help the woman, but in Wharton's fiction constantly proves ineffectual. He discovers that Sybilla is in love with an Italian Count who asks him to help them in organizing their escape attempt after having secretly sold the painting. Wyant reacts peremptorily refusing to help them and to get involved even when Sybilla directly searches for his support: "She isn't walled in; she can get out if she wants to" he thinks, as if trying to convince himself (543).

Some years later, he goes back to Siena after Mr. Lombard's death and finds out that nothing has changed in "the house of the dead hand". Sybilla still lives with her mother but the Italian Count has lost his hopes and has married another woman. The two inhabitants of the house seem having grown oddly: they look almost withered "as fruits might shrivel in a shelf instead of ripening on the tree" (545). On the contrary the painting has never been so wonderful: "the colors had lost none of their warmth, the outlines none of their pure precision: it seemed to Wyant like some magical flower which had burst suddenly from the mould of darkness and oblivion" (546). This opposition seems to suggest an act of vampirism as if the painting has absorbed Sybilla's whole vitality. But this is not the only hint of the supernatural in the story; Sybilla, in fact, is still under her father's control: "[I tried] to disobey him - to sell the picture. Then I found it was impossible. I tried again and again; but he was always in the room with me" (547). Even after his death he still prevents her from selling the painting to buy her freedom. Apparently Mr. Lombard's ghost haunts "the house of the dead hand" and, for a moment, even Wyant perceives an invisible presence in the room.

In a claustrophobic atmosphere, Sybilla is a prisoner of her inner fear of sexuality and femininity and she blames the ghost of her father for not being brave enough to go beyond

the threshold of her house. At this point of her life she is still not capable of expressing aloud her desires: she is also afraid of thinking about them. The result is one of Wharton's most pathetic and self-destructive female characters, who till the very end refuses to act on her own behalf.

### 3.2 The Duchess at Prayer

*Her face was hidden, and I wondered whether it were grief or gratitude that raised her hands and drew her eyes to the altar, where no living prayer joined her marble invocation.*

(Edith Wharton, "The Duchess at Prayer", in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1891-1910*, 237)

In *The Duchess at Prayer*, published in the collection *Crucial Instances* in 1901, the traditional Gothic theme of the oppressed woman becomes the theme of the unsatisfied wife who seeks for happiness and relief outside the marriage frame. The theme of the unsuccessful marriage is a recurring one in Wharton's fiction and can be linked with the author's personal experience: her troubled marriage with Edward Robbins Wharton, who started suffering acute depression from the late 1880's, ended after 28 years with the divorce in 1913.

This subject will be later revised in other stories like *Kerfol* and *The Lady's Maid's Bell*, which present women characterized by more structured psychological depth and more aware of their restrained condition. The male dictator is mainly absent throughout the stories and manifests his cruelty with coldness and detachment, while the potential "savior" is the typical Whartonian man, always weak and uncertain, unfortunately ineffective.

Writing *The Duchess at Prayer*, Wharton was no doubt influenced by Honoré de Balzac's story *La Grande Bretèche* published in 1831; the tales present many common features in their plots but Wharton marks her emphasis on the spontaneous feminine vitality destroyed by masculine egoism. What distinguishes this story from the others is that it stands out as a short masterpiece of the "unsaid": events flow in a succession of allusions and insinuations and from the first page, the reader starts collecting questions that eventually won't receive any answer.

The first paragraph opens with a question where the narrator wonders about the mysteries hidden within old Italian houses that look "impenetrable as death" (234): "Inside there may be sunshine, the scent of myrtles, and a pulse of life through all the arteries of the huge frame; or a mortal solitude, where bats lodge in the disjointed stones and the keys rusted in unused doors..."(234). Through the gardens the narrator reaches a specific house where he meets an old man who will guide him inside the villa and will tell him the Duchess' story, told to him by his grandmother, once a sewing girl to the Duchess. The atmosphere of ambiguity is then intensified by this kind of embedding narration and by the unreliability of all the voices. The reader relies on the memory of a very old man described by the first narrator as "the oldest man I had ever seen; so sucked back into the past that he seemed more like a memory than a living being" (234). At the same time the old man's description of his grandmother questions again the truthfulness of the events: "she was a very old woman when I was born. When she died she was as black as a miraculous Virgin and her breath whistled like the wind in a keyhole. She told the story when I was a little boy" (238). Additionally, the old man seems doubting about himself when he says: "I tell you what I've heard. What do I know?" (238).

In a space where nothing has changed for two hundred years, where the air is “lifeless” and, in spite of the sunlight, reigns a “mortal solitude”, mysteries come again from an ancient past to drop a veil of uncertainty on modern times (234).

The heroine of the story is introduced through a portrait placed in her bedroom which shows a beautiful smiling lady. Duchess Violante described as a cheerful young lady with an outgoing personality, is “all for music, play-acting and young company” (240). In contrast with her nature, the marble statue that the narrator finds in the chapel of the villa, shows a different side of the woman: “I crossed over and looked into her face - it was a frozen horror. Never have hate, revolt and agony so possessed a human countenance” (237). As the old man clarifies, the expression of the statue has once mysteriously changed: this inexplicable transformation is the fantastic element at the base of the narration.

The Duchess’ misfortunes begin when she gets married to a dour Duke whose portrait shows “a quibbling mouth that would have snapped at verbal errors like a lizard catching flies” (236). The Duke is a scholar, a quiet and intellectual man that spends his time “forever closeted in his library, talking with learned men” (240). In *The Duchess at Prayer*, Wharton depicts the classic theme of the struggle between intellect and sensuality, embodied by the Duke and his wife respectively. This contrast is pretty clear when the chaplain asks the Duchess some money to buy books and she laughs at him replying: “I’ve no money to waste on trifles [...] You should pray to Saint Blandina to open the Duke’s pocket!” (243).

Since the Duke is always leaving his wife alone in the villa for long periods of time, the woman tries in every way to entertain herself and to fight her boredom. Loneliness doesn’t suit the young Duchess who finds companion in Duke’s cousin, Ascanio “a fine young man, beautiful as Saint Sebastian” (241). Ascanio is the outsider potential savior of the oppressed woman and the two are attracted to each other like bees to lavender. The nature of their relationship is never clearly explained: on the one hand the maids seem to act like

supporters in setting up secret encounters; on the other hand, the Duke becomes suspicious and with the help of the chaplain, he seems to understand that keeping his wife isolated in the villa doesn't prevent her from cheating on him. In fact, the Duchess' daily visits to the villa's chapel and the crypt beneath it, which she justifies by having found a fervent religious devotion, are apparently due to her need for companionship, which she satisfies by secretly meeting Ascanio.

Like many Gothic heroines, the woman almost seems to have found her happiness for a moment, even though it is paradoxically located underground in the crypt, a claustrophobic space that contains the sacred relics of Santa Blandina. The crypt becomes location for supposed sexual encounters: the narration doesn't follow the Duchess underneath the chapel and just hints at the possible intermingling between love and death, one of the best known oppositions of traditional Gothic literature.

One day the jealous Duke unexpectedly returns to the villa with a life-size marble of his wife kneeling in prayer and "wrapped in death clothes" (246). When the Duchess sees the artwork in the chapel she stands motionless, ironically "whiter than the marble" (247). The traditional imperious male character who expects chastity and obedience from his woman, replaces her spontaneous life with a beautiful but static work of art. The scene when the Duke wants the statue to be placed on the entrance to the crypt where Ascanio is hidden, is a wonderful example of conversation deprived of real communication: he never accuses her of adultery and she never confesses anything. The crypt has been forever locked up to the Duchess but also to the reader.

The woman, apparently poisoned by her husband, dies while toasting to Ascanio's happy death but her agony survives on the sculpture's face. When one of her maids descends into the chapel to pray after her death she hears "a low moaning, and coming in front of the

statue she saw that its face, the day before so sweet and smiling, had the look on it that you know- and the moaning seemed to come from its lips” (253).

The “unsaid” and the unspeakable find their expression in the art object: the statue comes to life to give voice to Duchess’ “hate, revolt and agony” (237).

### 3.3 The Angel at the Grave

*She felt a desperate longing to escape into the outer air, where people toiled and loved, and living sympathies went hand in hand.*

(Edith Wharton, “The Angel at the Grave”, in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1891-1910*, 264)

*The Angel at the Grave* was published in 1901 in the collection *Crucial Instances*. An external narrator tells the story of Paulina Anson, the granddaughter of the great Orestes Anson, a very famous American philosopher. Just like the previous stories, the events are set in an isolated house, better known as the House, where the capital letter underlines its essential role as if it is another character of the tale: “The House, however faced its public with a difference. For sixty years it had written itself with a capital letter, had self-consciously squared itself in the eye of an admiring nation” (254). The House stands out from the others just like the exceptional mind of the man who has lived there before his death. Orestes Anson has become a sort of celebrity, and his fame draws a lot of visitors from everywhere in the world; they come to the House to worship their idol: “A legend had by this time crystallized about the great Orestes, and it was of more immediate interest to

the public to hear what brand of tea he drank, and whether he took off his boots in the hall [...]” (255).

Paulina Anson is the only one in the family who seems to understand and appreciate her grandfather’s works. Unlike her aunts who present a “congenital incapacity to understand what he had written”, she distinguishes herself by being exceptionally gifted and intelligent and is soon believed to have been “designed to act as the guardian of the family temple” (255-256). Paulina delights in her grandfather’s works and gets “verbal pleasure” from studying his book on free will and intuition (257). What differentiates Paulina from Sybilla and the Duchess, is her capacity of mixing the intellectual sphere with the emotional; she shows a romantic admiration for her grandfather, fed by sensations rather than intuitions: “Paulina was the type of woman who transmutes thoughts into sensation and nurses a theory in her bosom like a child” (258). In the previous Gothic stories, Wharton had portrayed more distinct and separate male and female spheres, whereas Paulina deliberately embodies both gender features when she “feminizes” the intellectual, enjoying it as a sensual experience rather than using it (like the Duke or Mr. Lombard) as means of control: “What could have been more stimulating than to construct the theory of a girlish world out the fragments of this Titanic cosmogony?” (257).

One day a young man called Hewlett Winsloe, “to whom Paulina was primarily a kissable girl”, asks her to leave the House and to follow him in New York (257); as the narrator points out “the young man behaved with the innocent profanity of infants sporting on a tomb” (258). From Paulina’s point of view, leaving the House would have meant ignoring her duties with a great disrespect to her grandfather’s memory. Even though the girl is tempted by her suitor’s proposal, she eventually refuses it: “Did Persephone, snatched from the warm fields of Enna, peer half-consentingly down the abyss that opened at her feet? Paulina, it must be owned, hung a moment over the black gulf of temptation” (259). The

parallel with the Greek goddess Persephone, who spent her life between Earth and Hades, is just one of many links with death symbolism: words like “tomb”, “grave”, “ghost”, “dead duties” and the same title of the story underline how Paulina’s refusal and fear of living and independent sexual life, will turn her into an artifact, an angel at her grandfather’s grave, a willing victim of his intellectual domination (258-259). Wharton depicts another Gothic heroine who, being afraid of her femininity, takes a brief look into the abyss and backs away from it instead of descending into it to embrace complete self-awareness.

The supernatural and the mysterious make their entrance again from the past; the narrator suggests that Paulina’s rejection of her suitor has come from the ghost of Orestes Anson himself, declaring his disapproval through the walls of the House: “but such disapproval as reached her was an emanation from the walls of the House, from the bare desk, the faded portraits, the dozen yellowing tomes that no hand but hers ever lifted from the shelf” (259). The spirit of the dead philosopher is apparently still alive and seems to exercise a dark and mysterious influence on Paulina, through the House itself: “After that the House possessed her. As if conscious of its victor, it imposed a conqueror’s claims.” (259). After the death of her aunts, Paulina remains the only inhabitant of the House, which turns out to be “more and more difficult to her to leave” and like the other female heroines, she lives her days confined as a prisoner (260).

Only after having spent years of work writing her grandfather’s biography, which is rejected by the publishing house, Paulina realizes she has sacrificed her youth because of her blind faith in a man who has slowly been forgotten by the rest of the world: “The change had taken place as slowly and imperceptibly as a natural process” and by the same natural process she has grown old (262). The narrator highlights how “it was not so much her grandfather’s life as her own that she had written” (260). Like Sybilla and the Duchess, Paulina has been replaced with a work of art, which in this case is the biography written by

herself. The discovery that Orestes Anson is really a minor figure compared to other famous writers, comes to her like a ghost; it's as if she's been blind and for the first time she clearly understands: "She sat in the library, among the carefully-tended books and portraits; and it seemed to her that she had been walled alive into a tomb hung with the effigies of dead ideas" (264). It's not a coincidence if the moment of her realization is set in the library: in this room many Wharton's characters experience a revelation, an epiphany essential in their lives.

One day, when Paulina has grown old enough to use a cane, a visitor rings the bell of the House. He is George Corby, a fervent admirer of Orestes Anson's work, who seems almost unreal in his explosive enthusiasm: "Her heart was beating passionately. She kept her eyes fixed on the young man's face, as though it might vanish if she looked away" (266). He informs her that her grandfather had written a pamphlet which stands out among other works as absolutely original and brilliant. Paulina has preserved it from being burned as Orestes had wished before his death, and shows it to the scholar. Since they share the same passion and admiration, the woman feels free to express her grief on having sacrificed her life for her grandfather's idea:

"It ruined my life!" she cried with sudden passion. He looked at her perplexedly.

"I gave up everything," she went on wildly, "to keep *him* alive. I sacrificed myself - others - I nursed his glory in my bosom and it died - and left me - left me here alone." She paused and gathered her courage with a gasp. "Don't make the same mistake!" she warned him. (269)

But George Corby reassures Paulina, pointing out the fact that if it wasn't for her, some of Orestes Anson's ideas might have gone buried forever: she kept him alive. He relights her

intellectual excitement and restores her lost faith. George Corby, unlike Mr. Wyant or Ascanio, manages to save the heroine from her painful condition offering her a new point of view that gives back sense to her meaningless life. Paulina feels like George has been able of turning back time: “She walked to the window and watched his buoyant figure hastening down the elm-shaded street. When she turned back into the empty room she looked as though youth had touched her on the lips” (270). This sensual final image suggests that in the end Paulina finds a way to discover and appreciate her sexuality: she is also an intellectual and a writer but, first of all she is a woman who eventually succeeds in accepting both her feminine and masculine self.

### **3.4 The Lady’s Maid’s Bell**

*I had never been the same since the night my bell had rung. Night after night I used to lie awake, listening for it to ring again, and for the door of the locked room to open stealthily.* (Edith Wharton, “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell”, in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1891-1910*, 513)

Written in 1901, *The Lady’s Maid’s Bell* is considered Edith Wharton’s first ghost story: the author revises the situation of the unsuccessful marriage seen in *The Duchess at Prayer* and sets the events in her contemporary America. The title itself informs the reader that the story is about women: apparently just a lady and her maid; looking carefully, the Saxon genitive in “maid’s” phonetically recalls the plural “maids” suggesting the presence of another maid who turns out to be the ghost and also one of the main characters of the story.

Wharton has the story told by one of the characters, Alice Hartley, with the technique of internal focalization, which according to Tzvetan Todorov, is the one that best suits the fantastic text because the reader can follow the events from a closer point of view.

Alice's language is very simple and sometimes almost raw. When for example she is terrified, she describes her feelings with a physical and very direct imagery: in fact throughout the story can be found expressions like "my hands shook so that I couldn't find the matches", "my heart seemed to be thumping in top of my head" and "at sight of that my heart shriveled up within me, and my knees were water" (509,512,515).

She is a simple and reserved girl of British origins, who after having spent three months in hospital to recover from typhoid fever, finds work as a maid at Brympton Place, a country house near the Hudson river described from the beginning as "not a cheerful place", "big and gloomy" and "a vault" (499). The helpless Gothic heroine is her mistress, Mrs. Brympton, victimized both by her physical frailty and an overbearing brutish husband; her heart disease prevents her from leaving the country estate in which she lives as an inmate just like Sybilla, the Duchess and Paulina Anson. On the other hand, her freedom is also restrained by the "coarse, loud and pleasure-loving" man she has married (505). Mr. Brympton is described as "a big fair bull-necked man, with a red face and little bad-tempered blue eyes: the kind of man a young simpleton might have thought handsome, and would have been like to pay dear for thinking it" (504). Like other male Gothic characters, he is often absent and leaves his wife alone for long periods of time; unlike the other "dictators", he isn't an intellectual and doesn't use his intelligence as a means to control his wife. His power over her is limited to the physical since he takes advantage of her illness which prevents her from running away from him.

Their marriage life is summed up by Hartley as an "unhappy match from the beginning" and, every time Mr. Brympton returns for short periods, he's drunk and leaves

his wife “white, and chill to the touch” (505,504). Even if the reader is not allowed to enter Mrs. Brympton’s bedroom, Hartley’s thoughts are full of allusions which denounce her husband’s sexual abuses: “I met him coming up the stairs in such a state that I turned sick to think of what some ladies have to endure and hold their tongue about” (505).

The third component of the plot is Mrs. Brympton’s lover, Mr. Ranford, who is the typical Gothic hero that traditionally saves the oppressed heroine; since Wharton revises this figure, Mr. Ranford, whose smile is “like the first warm day in spring”, turns out to be overwhelmed by events and thus ineffectual (505). Just as in *The Duchess at Prayer*, the passive heroine finds shelter in her charming lover’s companion, counting on her maids’ support to set up their secret encounters. Help comes also from the supernatural embodied in the ghost of Emma Saxon, the former maid to Mrs. Brympton: Wharton’s first female ghost is not a threatening monster, but a protective and maternal character who tries to rescue her mistress even after her death.

Her first appearance to Hartley takes place the first day that the girl arrives at Brympton Place:

I looked ahead as she spoke, and half-way down the passage I saw a woman standing. She drew back into a doorway as we passed and the house-maid didn’t appear to notice her. She was a thin woman with a white face, and a darkish stuff gown and apron. I took her for the housekeeper and thought it odd that she didn’t speak, but just gave me a long look as she went by. (501)

Her presence is denied by all the inhabitants of the house since they don’t seem to notice her and everyone avoids talking about her; when Alice asks the cook, Mrs. Blinder, information about the woman “down the passage”, the latter changes the subject suggesting

that she clearly knows more than she reveals<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, Mrs. Brympton mysteriously keeps Emma's old room always locked up. Hartley at first tries to give rational explanations for Emma's apparition: "I decided she must have been a friend of the cook's, or of one of the other women-servants; perhaps she had come down from town for a night's visit, and the servants wanted it kept secret" (503). At this point of the story, the reader doesn't have any proof about the existence of the ghost; additionally, Hartley's narration might also be considered unreliable since the girl has declared that she has recently recovered from typhoid fever.

One night the bell rings in Hartley's bedroom, and since she had previously learnt that Mrs. Brympton doesn't ring the bell, the girl stands up frightened: "I was just beginning to huddle on my clothes when I heard another sound. This time it was the door of the locked room opposite mine softly opening and closing" (509). Seemingly, the steps are Emma's who has rung the bell and has rushed down to her mistress room ahead of Hartley; in fact, when the latter reaches the room, Mr. Brympton opening the door says: "how many of you are there, in God's name?" (509). The bell in the title of the story is thus symbolic because it links the three dumb women of the story by allowing them to communicate with one another. Mrs. Brympton accepts in silence the sexual harassments of her bully husband, and Hartley constantly vows to hold her tongue and not ask any question; their silence and their reluctance to speak prevent the women to help one another: "at last the silence began to be more dreadful to me than the most mysterious sounds" (513). The bell breaks this silence and connects all three women in the common drama of female sexuality.

Emma stands out as the keeper of the secret of Brympton Place which obviously cannot be communicated by the ghost. Even when Hartley finds an old photograph of Emma in

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara White affirms that "in her refusal to answer any of the narrator's questions, she suggests Wharton's mother. Mrs. Blinder replies to Hartley as to a child and closes her door before the trouble starts" (*Edith Wharton. A Study of the Short Fiction*, 69)

which she recognizes the woman on the stairs, her sense of powerlessness doesn't change: "She looked at me long and long, and her face was just one dumb prayer to me - but how in the world was I to help her?" (515). Emma represents the secret of female sexuality that Hartley both wants and does not want to know. She's Hartley's aware-self, her dark double who appears at the end of the stairs "peering dreadfully down into the darkness" of the unconscious, of femininity (508). The whole story is full of allusions to repressed desires and fear of sexuality; for example when Hartley describes her first meeting with Mr. Brympton, in her thoughts can be found a hint of disappointment for not having been considered sexual attractive:

He swung about when I came in, and looked me over in a trice. I knew what the look meant, for having experienced it once or twice in my former places. Then he turned his back on me, and went on talking to his wife; and I knew what *that* meant, too. I was not the kind of morsel he was after. The typhoid had served me well enough in one way: it kept that kind of gentleman at arm's-length. (504)

Just as in *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, a sexual repressed woman narrates a supernatural experience that the reader might think of as the fruit of her restrained instincts. As Hartley gets involved in her mistress's sexual drama, Mrs. Brympton mistakes her for Emma, and thus she is forced to play her role and to take a look into the abyss of awareness that Emma represents. Emma has a story to tell, some secrets to reveal but Hartley is too cowardly to ask her any question: "She [Emma] knew what it was; she would tell me if she could; perhaps she would answer if I questioned her. It turned me faint to think of speaking to her." (516). She is so afraid to acknowledge her inner-self that when Emma leads her to Mr. Ranford's house and she gets closer to the truth, she just can't bear the weight of the

revelation and falls in a faint on the ground. Even if she feels true affection for her mistress, she is not brave enough to probe the secrets of Brympton Place.

The final scene recalls that of *The Duchess at Prayer* when the discovery of a possible adultery is prevented by the help of the maids, in this case Emma and Hartley. Unlike Ascanio, Mr. Ranford manages to escape whereas Mrs. Brympton dies frightened by the arrival of her husband.

The three women of *The Lady's Maid's Bell* are destroyed by their silence: their fear of the unspeakable and their reticence have turned them all into ghosts.

### 3.5 The House of Mirth<sup>6</sup>

*She rose, and walking across the floor stood gazing at herself for a long time in the brightly-lit mirror above the mantelpiece. The lines in her face came out terribly - she looked old; and when a girl looks old to herself, how does she look to other people?*  
(Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 179)

Edith Wharton's use of the Gothic as a means to explore women's sexuality extends from her ghost stories to her realistic novels which often present some Gothic-marked elements. The first of the two novels analyzed in this dissertation is *The House of Mirth* published in 1905. The book places itself within a long-standing literary tradition of the novel of manners, a form that portrays the customs and the way of thinking of a determinate

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<sup>6</sup> The title is taken from Eccles. 7:3-4 and suggests that the novel intends a savage critic of the shallow world that it depicts: "Sorrow is better than laughter: for by sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. / The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth". Two earlier working titles for the novel in manuscript, *A Moment's Ornament* and *The Year of The Rose*, reveal a more exclusive focus on the heroine and her annihilation.

social class: “with this novel, Edith Wharton emerged as an historian of the American society of her time<sup>7</sup>”. *The House of Mirth*, in particular, is a brilliant satire upon Wharton’s contemporary New York society. At the end of nineteenth century, a “new New York” elite gradually began to merge. The “old New York” upper classes, old Dutch families and Americans of English descent, had dominated the city until the mid-nineteenth century: it had been a time when family ties and responsibilities were values held sacred. Not interested in intellectual pursuits, the newcomers had a great deal of money made in the railroads, in the stock market or in banking and found the way to assert their social status, wasting vast amounts of money on visible and useless material goods.

Within this society, gender roles were clearly defined: husbands expended their energy in the business world accumulating as much money as possible, and wives, in turn, bought all goods, like clothes or jewelry, necessary to earn “upper-class” status. Women were not allowed to have an active role in business life and their only way to fit into society was to get married to a wealthy man. All women’s efforts were supposed to be spent on their own appearance since there was an exaggerated worship of physical beauty: “Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop - and if we can’t keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership”, says Lily Bart, a twenty-nine years old beautiful woman immersed in this snobbish and cruel world (12).

Like the heroine of *The Duchess at Prayer* and *The House of the Dead Hand*, Lily has been replaced with an artifact by a dominant figure who, in this case, is her mother:

“Only one thought consoled her, and that was the contemplation of Lily’s beauty. She studied it with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for

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<sup>7</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*, 174.

her vengeance. [...] She watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian.” (34)

Mrs. Bart breeds her to be a beautiful object and Lily grows up thinking that her beauty is the most precious and the only thing she possesses and that she can use it to secure herself a place in the “upper-class”: “She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste” (35). Holding firm to this constant belief, Lily becomes obsessed by the idea of turning herself into a perfect work of art. Her objectification of herself and her willingness to be objectified by others places the traditional Gothic conflict between genders within Lily herself: in this sense, she becomes her own villain.

For this reason, Lily Bart can be seen as an alter ego for Edith Wharton: she shares Wharton’s profound aesthetic sensibility and her desire to create beauty and thus, just like the author, she shows both genders’ features in her personality. *The House of Mirth* presents in the character of Lily Bart one of the issues that had had oppressed Wharton from her earliest years as a writer: matching her desire to be an artist with her womanhood. Moreover, Lily Bart, like the young Edith, demonstrates an instable and insecure sense of her own identity; Lily can only define herself through the perception of the others and constantly shows a compulsive need to find a mirror in which her beautiful self can be reassuringly reflected back: “As she sat before the mirror brushing her hair, her face looked hollow and pale, and she was frightened by two little lines near her mouth, faint flaws in the smooth curve of the cheek” (28). This ghostly image underlines Lily’s anxiety that without her physical beauty she would be lost. Like the Gothic heroines scared in the dark haunted houses, Lily sees the ghostly “white oval of her face” in the mirror and refuses to accept that image and thus her true self (28).

Her being afraid of her femininity and of her sexuality, prevents her from accepting proposals from different suitors throughout the novel because she dreads the consequences of becoming a man's possession. When Gus Trenor, a wealthy man who has helped her financially, tries to take advantage of Lily's vulnerability and attempts to rape her, the woman is forced to look directly into the abyss of her sexuality that she has tried to deny. The encounter with Gus Trenor recalls the sexual drama of *The Lady's Maid's Bell* and Mr. Brympton's aggressiveness imposed by his physical control over his wife. Just like Mrs. Brympton, Lily after the incident is devastated. The beautiful artifact she thought herself to be, turns out to be a human woman. She reacts by refusing her femininity and expresses all her anger by feeling hatred and disgust about herself rather than blaming Gus Trenor. The only things she perceives are her failure and her ugliness:

Can you imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement - some hideous change that has come to you while you slept? Well, I seem to myself like that - I can't bear to see myself in my own thoughts - I hate ugliness, you know - I've always turned from it - but I can't explain to you - you wouldn't understand. (164)

The critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes that "Lily's nature yearns for something better, but her moral strength is too weak, too incompletely formed perhaps, to invent some more authentic and meaningful form of existence<sup>8</sup>". Moreover, Lily's estimate of her "self" as it is perceived by others is ironically quite accurate: without clothes, jewelry and money she has no value in New York society. Furthermore, unlike most Gothic heroines she unfortunately has no support from anyone. Only Lawrence Selden at the beginning seems to be different

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<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Introduction, *The House of Mirth*, by Edith Wharton, xxiii.

from the others. His evocation of a “republic of spirit” seems to imply a moral sensibility that the other members of the society lack:

[Selden] “My idea of success,” he said, “is personal freedom.”

[Lily] “Freedom? Freedom of worries?”

“From everything - from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit - that’s what I call success.” (68)

But as Lily observes, he is an “amphibious creature”: he spends a lot of time in the company of people whose standards he professes to condemn (70). As a matter of fact, Selden just like the others, looks at Lily as a beautiful piece of art, something beautiful to be stared at: “It was one of the days when she was so handsome that to be handsome was enough, and all the rest - her grace, her quickness, her social felicities - seemed the overflow of a bounteous nature” (215). When Lily proudly plays her role in the *tableaux vivants*, Selden perceives her as having revealed her “real” self, diminishing her womanhood. His behavior places him in the restrained Gothic role of the man that traditionally replaces the woman with an artifact.

What distinguishes Lily from the earlier female protagonists, is that, unlike Paulina Anson or Alice Hartley who are tempted to look into their dark self-awareness but are too afraid to do it, she eventually manages to accept her inner truth. Her coming-to-awareness process starts in Selden’s library. Once again, it is in a library that the moment of revelation takes place. The insecure and confused Lily seems gone, and the new Lily speaks spontaneously: “In her strange state of extra lucidity, which gave her the sense of being already at the heart of the situation, it seemed incredible that any one should think it necessary to linger in the conventional outskirts of word-play and evasion” (306). She is no

longer a slave of the rules of society. It's as if she can clearly understand and finally accept who she really is, the woman she has become; what she finds miserable at this point, is not her poverty, but "the clutch of solitude at her heart", her loneliness (319). Just like Emma Saxon "peering dreadfully down into the darkness" (*Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1891-1910*, 518), Lily Looks "into the dim abysses of unconsciousness" (*The House of Mirth*, 322). In the end Lily finds her relief in the chloral that makes her death peaceful and "delicious" (322).

With Lily Bart's death the conviction that a woman must necessarily be passive to be "feminine" was banished from Wharton's life: she had become convinced that one could create art and still be womanly. As we will see in the next chapters, this change of mind will be reflected also in her new female characters.

## IV

### Fearing the Abyss

In 1907 Edith Wharton met a friend of Henry James' named Morton Fullerton and fell deeply in love with him. They had a two- or three-year-long affair, and, for the first time, Wharton experienced a full measure of sexual and emotional fulfillment at the age of forty-six. In one of her letters to her lover dated August 26<sup>th</sup> 1908, she underlines how this relationship has made her aware of the dominance of intellect and repression in her life: "You woke me from a long lethargy, a dull acquiescence in conventional restrictions, a needless self-effacement. If I was awkward & inarticulate it was because, literally, all one side of me was asleep" (*The Letters of Edith Wharton*). This revealing and frightening awakening triggered an inner conflict between the two sides of her personality: on the one hand, her masculine self that searched for self-control and rationality; on the other, her feminine self that reclaimed passion, emotions and sexual freedom.

These two personal aspects emerged prominently for her during this time of erotic discovery and, since her adultery was also a cause for moral questioning, Wharton used her pen to deal with her worries: in the Gothic stories analyzed in this chapter *The Eyes*, *The*

*Triumph of the Night* and *Kerfol*, written during the 1910's, she focused her attention on the limits of the intellect and on the fear of supernatural experiences. These stories reflect the complexity of looking directly into the abyss to accept the inner truth of the self; unlike the earlier heroines who were unable to catch the meaning beyond the nonrational, the three characters of these stories are totally aware of the ghost in front of them but their rationality and fear prevent them from facing it directly and induce them to hide from it.

## 4.1 The Eyes

*The bliss of escaping at one stroke from the eyes [...] gave my freedom an extraordinary zest; and the longer I savoured it the better I liked its taste.*

(Edith Wharton, "The Eyes", in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1891-1910*, 819)

*The Eyes*, published in 1910, focuses its attention on the inner conflict of its male protagonist that recalls Wharton's psychological split: once again the author exorcises her fears by writing about them. In this story she creates a ghostly alter ego of the protagonist, whose denied meaning eventually comes to light.

The anonymous narrator is part of a group of people who have gathered around the fire in Andrew Culwin's dark library to smoke their cigars and tell ghost stories. The typical Gothic context clearly recalls many tales of the same genre and in particular *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James. The narration moves toward the host's description: Andrew Culwin, like Mr. Lombard and Lawrence Selden<sup>9</sup>, is an intellectual who lives his life as "a spectator,

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<sup>9</sup> The critic Cynthia Griffith Wolf observes that "this story is a systematic flaying of the kind of man that Selden had represented, a man who is aloof and judgmental and who - without even allowing himself to be

a humorous detached observer of the immense muddled variety show of life” (810). His physical description introduces the main theme of the eyes: Culwin has changed during the years from ”a charming little man with nice eyes” to a “phosphorescent log” with “the red blink of the eyes” (811). He has been spending his life cultivating his intelligence and a few habits such as surrounding himself with people who appreciate his ideas and increase his self-confidence with their admiration. His scrupulous study of the human race has led him to the “conclusion that all men were superfluous, and women necessary only because someone had to do the cooking” (811). In spite of this cynical point of view, he enjoys the companionship of young men whom he likes to introduce to his selected circle as raw recruits to raise with patience. The new acquisition of the group is the young Phil Frenham, whose “nature was like the pure paste under a fine glaze” (812). The first clues of Culwin’s real self, come when one member of the group points out that “he liked ‘em juicy”, a cannibalistic metaphor that the narrator refuses and defines as “ogreish” (811).

The ambiguous description of the man insinuates doubts and suspicions in the reader that will find confirmation when Culwin starts his narration. The host gradually shows his true self in a slow process that will lead in the end to the discovery of his dark side<sup>10</sup>.

When Phil asks Culwin to tell them about his ghost encounter, the host declares that he has actually seen not just one, but two ghosts; they were two eyes in particular, and appeared to him more than once. The first episode happened after Culwin had proposed to his cousin Alice Nowell, even though he was well aware that he did not really care about her: “She was neither beautiful nor intelligent - poor Alice Nowell - but it interested me to see any woman content to be so uninteresting, and I wanted to find out the secret of her

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aware of his own behavior - uses people, and in using them, destroys them” (*A Feast of Words: the Triumph of Edith Wharton*, 156).

<sup>10</sup> Kathy Fedorko points out that “we enter in a person’s consciousness as haunted as any house” (*Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton*, 58).

content” (814). As the first narrator has earlier pointed out, Culwin “belonged to the stout Positivist tradition” and thus, just like a scientist, he delights in experimenting with the feelings of people over whom he has power (810). Alice was an object to be studied just like Phil Frenham, who is the last of his “good subject for experimentation” (812).

Holding firm to the belief that proposing to his cousin had been the first good action he had ever committed, when he went to bed that same night, he saw two awful red eyes in his room:

The orbits were sunk, and the thick red-lined lids hung over the eyeballs like blinds of which the cords are broken. One lid dropped a little lower than the other, with the effect of a crooked leer; and between these folds of flesh, with their scant bristle of lashes, the eyes themselves, small glassy disks with an agate-like rim, looked like sea-pebbles in the grip of a star-fish. (816)

Wharton seems to highlight the intellect’s limitations when Culwin remembers having not been able to find any link between his action, which was aimed at “promot[ing] the moral order of the world”, and the apparition of those eyes that “seemed to belong to a man who had done a lot of harm in his life, but had always kept just inside the danger lines” (816-817). Reason and scientific principles couldn’t help Culwin in confronting his dark double and his “inner consciousness”, as he defines it (817). He refused to accept the frightening truth of his nature: first, his arrogance prevented him from admitting his own flaws, then, fearfulness of self-awareness suggested that he should pack his bags and escape from danger: “Well, I simply couldn’t face them; and instead of going back to my aunt’s I bundled a few things into a trunk and jumped aboard the first steamer for England” (819).

After having left Alice without any explanation, Culwin moved to Europe and, three years later, the eyes would visit him again. In Rome he met Alice's cousin, Gilbert Noyes, a young aspiring writer whom he describes as "beautiful", "charming" and "enchanted" revealing a passionate physical attraction that lacked any intellectual esteem: "his stupidity was a natural grace - it was as beautiful, really, as his eyelashes" (820-821). He put him "under the microscope" like an insect and decided to lie about the quality of his writings and to promote his ambitions in order not to ruin his enthusiasm; as a matter of fact he just wanted to enjoy his companionship: "I shall have him for life" he says (823). At this point the eyes re-appeared, this time more frightening than before, with an expression of "tacit complicity" that proved incomprehensible to the observer: "they reminded me of vampires with a taste for young flesh, they seemed so to gloat over the taste of a good conscience" (824). The metaphor reveals to the reader that the eyes, with their preference for "young flesh", are a synecdoche for Culwin himself and that they haunt him every time he cruelly toys with other people's feelings. Additionally, Culwin's transformation during the years, highlighted by the first narrator at the beginning of the story, connects him to the eyes that "had grown hideous gradually, which had built up their baseness coral-wise, bit by bit, out of a series of small turpitudes slowly accumulated through the industrious years" (824). Once again, Culwin's rational mind refused to look over "the edge of the abyss" and dismissed the apparition as an "insane irrelevance" (818,823). The eyes disappeared as soon as Gilbert had finally realized his lack of talent and thus had decided to go back to America.

At the end of the story-telling, Culwin confesses that he has never understood the meaning of that supernatural apparition and urges his friends to give their interpretation: "Put two and two together if you can. For my part, I haven't found the link" (828). Meanwhile he notices Frenham's silence and immobility and, after having met his eyes in a long look, he looks at his pupil turning his back and hiding his face from him. At this point,

once again, the moment of revelation takes place in a library: in fact Frenham has recognized the eyes of the story in Culwin's face and has realized he is his next victim. Culwin, in turn, tries to reassure his friend that the eyes haven't been seen for years and in doing so, catches a reflection of his face in a mirror: "as he looked his expression gradually changed, and for an appreciable pace of time he and the image in the glass confronted each other with a glare of slowly gathering hate" (829).

Like Lily Bart who refuses to recognize herself in the ghostly face of the ageing woman in the mirror, Andre Culwin holds to the image of his ideal self and denies his dark but real double. Even his victim's surnames, No-well and No-yes, underline the tension between the two sides of his personality which are antithetical but complementary. His sexual orientation also seems to be split in two: first, he proposes to Alice and then, he is attracted by Gilbert but in the end, he always prefers himself over the others.

In the mirror he finds out he has been haunted by his own "vicious security" and narcissism (817).

## **4.2 The Triumph of the Night**

*As Rainer's face lit up, the face behind his uncle's chair seemed to gather into its look all the fierce weariness of old unsatisfied hates.*

(Edith Wharton, "The Triumph of the Night", in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1911-1937*, 155)

In *The Triumph of the Night*, written in 1910 and published in 1914, the economic aspect is the cornerstone of the plot<sup>11</sup>. The story portrays the dangerous effects on a fragile person of staring directly at the mysterious, which is embodied once again by a ghostly alter ego.

The events are told by an external narrator from the point of view of George Faxon, a young man from Boston who has been hired as a secretary by a rich woman that lives in New Hampshire. When he arrives by train in a small town close to his working place, it's already night and he notices that no one is there waiting for him; he finds himself alone in a "frozen silence" while the cold wind is "sharpening its edge against the same bitter black-and-white landscape. Dark, searching and swordlike, it alternately muffled and harried its victim, like a bull-fighter now whirling his cloak and now planting his darts" (141). Silence and threatening weather, here described with gory and ferocious images, are traditional features of Gothic fiction that Wharton uses to welcome the foreigner as a premonition of the sacrifice that he will witness.

George Faxon, like Alice Hartley in *The Lady's Maid's Bell*, is too vulnerable and too cowardly to stand up against the evil forces that he will encounter on his path: the reader is informed that his "temperament hung on lightly quivering nerves", and later will learn of his "rootless life", his physical frailty and eventually of his near "bad breakdown" (142,159,163). At the station he meets a "very fair and very young man", Frank Rainer, who invites him to spend the night at his uncle's house (142); Faxon immediately observes that "his face, though full of a morning freshness, was a trifle too thin and fine-drawn [...] with a strain of physical weakness"(142). The young man, in fact, is weakened from tuberculosis but, in spite of his physical condition, presents a childish vitality, a contagious enthusiasm

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<sup>11</sup> Analyzing the story, the critic Candace Waid talks about "business Gothic, in which the concealed forces of greed lead to unsettling realization" (Introduction, *The Muse's Tragedy and Other Stories*, by Edith Wharton, 18).

and “a smile of such sweetness that Faxon felt, as never before, what nature can achieve when she designs to match the face with the mind” (144). Faxon focuses his attention on Rainer’s “dying hands” which are “so long, so colorless, so wasted” that they recall the marble emblem placed above the main door of Sybilla Lombard’s house (145).

Just like the heroine of *The House of the Dead Hand*, Frank Rainer is a passive victim overwhelmed by the powerful dominance of a member of the family, who in this case is his uncle Mr. Lavington. The latter also happens to share many features with Sybilla’s father: both of them consciously destroy their victim’s lives hiding their egoistic interests behind a mask of affection. These two aspects of Lavington’s personality are clearly reflected in his own house full of beautiful flowers that at first receives its guest with a “violent impression of warmth and light”, but later will be described as a labyrinth “oddly cold and unwelcoming” (146-147). Faxon also observes that “Mr. Lavington’s intense personality - intensely negative, but intense all the same - must, in some occult way, have penetrated every corner of his dwelling” (147). The motif of the house representing the true “self” is not the only one that Wharton borrows from the tradition: in fact as in *The Eyes*, the threatening side of Mr. Lavington, materializes itself in the apparition of a dark double.

When George Faxon sees the alter ego for the first time, he is stricken by his resemblance to Mr. Lavington but then, he notices a great difference in their expressions: Mr. Lavington “continued to fasten on him [on Rainer] a look of half-amused affection; while the man behind the chair, so oddly reduplicating the lines of his features and figure, turned on the boy a face of pale hostility” (150). This happens while the young Rainer is signing his will which is legalized with a stamp provided by Faxon himself: he unconsciously supports Mr. Lavington’s plan and, right after that, he feels “a strange weight of fatigue on all limbs” (150). Just like Alice Hartley who faints when she gets closer to the revelation of the mysterious, George Faxon can’t bear the weight of the truth and feels

weakened by its sight. Later, during the dinner, Mr. Lavington's double reappears to him and this time Faxon realizes he is the only one able to see him; in his "mortal isolation" and increasing fear, he desperately tries to look away and to focus his attention on concrete objects but the apparition proves both frightening and attractive:

[...] some fatal attraction, at war in him with an overwhelming physical resistance, held his eyes upon the spot they feared.

The figure was still standing, more distinctly, and therefore more resembling, at Mr. Lavington's back; and while the latter continued to gaze affectionately at his nephew, his counterpart, as before, fixed young Rainer with eyes of deadly menace. (155)

The evil eyes with which the double stares at Rainer, recall those in *The Eyes* and, just like them, represent the dark soul of Mr. Lavington; the spectator fails to understand this revelation and, being too overwhelmed by fear, rushes out of the house to find comfort in "the purifying night" (158). The subsequent violent imagery in the description of the snowstorm in the street, is connected to the vicious dominance imposed by Mr. Lavington on his nephew: "The same ice seemed to be driving a million blades into his throat and lungs [...] now and then he stopped, gasping, as if an invisible hand had tightened an iron band about his body; then he started again, stiffening himself against the stealthy penetration of the cold" (160). Rainer, on his uncle's advice, chases him outside but his already serious condition gets worse during the endless way back home into the storm and eventually the boy dies overcome by the disease.

In the last section of the story, after an undefined interval of time, Faxon is recovering from a nervous breakdown in Malaysia, because he has "looked too deep down into the abyss" (164). He reads in the newspaper that Mr. Lavington has avoided bankruptcy thanks

to the inheritance from his nephew; at this point he realizes his cowardice and culpability: if he had been stronger he could have saved Reiner from his cruel uncle, but his fear had led him to reject the truth when it was right in front of him. The “weaponless and defenseless spectator” unable to understand the supernatural, flees from the abyss leading Rainer straight toward his death (158).

The motif of the double is enforced by the numerous contrasts throughout the story: the whiteness of the snow opposed to the bloody descriptions of the storm; the ice in the street opposed with the fire in Faxon’s bedroom; the freezing cold in New Hampshire opposed to the warm climate of Malaysia.

The dark double of *The Triumph of the Night* can be seen as the ghost of capitalism: Wharton seems to denounce the corruption at the basis of modern society and its lack of moral values, which lead people to sacrifice affections in the name of money.

### **4.3 Kerfol**

*But the aspect of Kerfol suggested something more - a perspective of stern and cruel memories stretching away, like its own grey avenues, into a blur of darkness.*

(Edith Wharton, “Kerfol”, in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1911-1937*, 90)

*Kerfol* was published in 1916 and is a deliberate revision of *The Duchess at Prayer*. What makes the difference is the way the story is recounted: the language and its structure create a perfect balance between present and past, reality and supernatural, words and silence.

Just as in *The Duchess at Prayer*, the first-person narrator visits an old and suggestive castle and informs the reader about its story; as soon as he arrives at the ruined castle of Kerfol in Brittany, a north region of France, he notices that the place is completely isolated and immersed in silence. He sits patiently on a stone and, waiting for a guardian to come, lights a cigarette: "It might have been the depth of the silence that made me so conscious of my gesture. The squeak of my match sounded as loud as the scraping of a brake, and I almost fancied I heard it fall when I tossed it onto the grass" (90). Kerfol is so imbued with the past that time seems to have stopped and the narrator perceives "a sense of irrelevance" in front of this "long accumulation of history" (90). To a suggestive description of one of the most typically Gothic setting in her stories, Wharton adds a first hint of mystery when the narrator observes that the whole place seems a tomb; "I wanted only to sit there and be penetrated by the weight of its silence" thinks the visitor, but then his thoughts seem uncertain, his sensations are "undefinable", thus he understands that "it was not a question of seeing - but to feel more: feel all the place had to communicate" (90-91). Feeling "the pressure of the invisible" and pushed by an increasing interest in the story of the house, he enters in the court when a little Chinese dog bars his way: "The little animal stood before me, forbidding, almost menacing: there was anger in his large brown eyes. But he made no sound, he came no nearer. Instead, as I advanced, he gradually fell back, and I noticed that another dog, a vague rough brindled thing, had limped up on a lame leg" (91). Soon, he finds himself completely surrounded by a lot of different dogs but none of them produces a sound; their unnatural silence and immobility and the absence of any human being create an enchanted atmosphere in which the solitary voice of the narrator echoes terrifyingly:

The impression they produced was that of having in common one memory so deep and dark that nothing that had happened since was worth either a growl or a wag.

“I say,” I broke out abruptly, addressing myself to the dumb circle, “do you know what you look like, the whole lot of you? You look as if you’d seen a ghost - that’s how you look!”  
(94)

These last words will sound ironic to the reader because later, he will be informed of the fact that once a year Kerfol is haunted by ghosts, and that these ghosts are the same dogs. At this point the narrator starts recounting Kerfol’s story, found out in an old history book and in the account of the trial of Anne de Cornault, the Gothic heroine of *Kerfol*. At first, the narrator doesn’t reveal the cause of the process: he interprets the story inevitably filtering it through his point of view and leading the reader to question about the narration’s reliability.

The situation recalls the one in *The Duchess at Prayer*: Yves de Cornault is a rich and domineering man who forces his young wife, Anne de Barrigan, to live like a prisoner in the castle of Kerfol; just like the Duchess, Anne is described through an artwork recovered by the narrator, where the woman seems “happy enough” (97). Even though her husband showers her with gifts, “she was unhappy, though one servant-woman said she had surprised her crying” (98). The woman suffers her solitude and finds relief in the companionship of a dog, which has been given her by her husband, and in a few secret encounters with a young man, Hervè de Lanrivain. One day she finds on her bed her dead dog apparently killed by her jealous husband, whose blind fury will also lead him to strangle all the other dogs that later Anne will bring home, until one night Yves de Cornault himself will be found dead at the head of the stairs: “He had been dreadfully scratched and gashed about the face and throat, as if with curious pointed weapons” (100). Having been accused of murder, Anne professes her innocence telling the judges that the night of the murder she has heard some dogs’ snarling just before the discovery of her husband’s body: according to her, the dogs

have killed him. In the end the judges don't believe her words and Anne dies many years later confined in Kerfol's tower as a mad-woman.

The reader perceives that just like the judges, the narrator also rejects Anne's "absurd" version of the events (106). Even though he has previously seen the ghostly dogs, he deliberately ignores all the supporting evidence of the cruelty of Yves de Cornault and, sharing the same masculine and rational perspective of the judges, refuses to believe in the supernatural explanation given by Anne. Wharton relies on the reader who, going beyond the limits of reason and given the testimony of the rational narrator who has seen the dogs, accepts Anne's story as true.

Throughout the story reigns silence: Anne communicates just with her dog, "as if it had been a child", and secretly with Hervé de Lanrivain, while Yves de Cornault "there were days when he did not speak at all" (99,102); as for the ghostly dogs, they are presented as oddly silent at the beginning of the story, but eventually the reader understands that they've been the means through which Anne's shout for freedom has finally found its voice.

Anne's character, with her repressed rage and her failed attempt to escape from an oppressive husband, will find resolution in the fearless determination of Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, as we will see in the next chapter.

## V

### Women's Redemption

When her marriage with Edward Robbins Wharton started deteriorating, Edith Wharton in 1910 decided to move permanently to Paris, beginning her new independent life. She sold The Mount, her estate in Massachusetts which had been designed by Wharton herself, and left America for good. During the War, she spent her days organizing institutions to feed, clothe, and shelter the refugees who were pouring into Paris. Her service to France was acknowledged when she was awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honor in 1915, the highest honor that can be given to foreign-born heroes.

The War was an impulse for social and creative accomplishment:

The noting of my impressions at the front had the effect of rousing in me an intense longing to write, at a moment when my mind was burdened with practical responsibilities, and my soul wrung with the anguish of the war. Even had I had the leisure to take up my story-telling I should have had no heart for it; yet I was tormented with a fever of creation. (*A Backward Glance*, 355)

As regards her affair with Morton Fullerton, it ended in 1910, and, after her separation from her husband in 1913, she found another intimate companion in Walter Berry, a man who at the time was the President of the American chamber of commerce in Paris, and whom Wharton would call at his death “the love of my life”.

The Gothic stories written during these years of triumphant independence and sexual freedom, portray women finally able to express their desires and totally at ease with their femininity. In *Miss Mary Pask* and *Bewitched* the two ghost-women<sup>12</sup> of the stories, appear comfortable with and aware of their erotic power to frighten the men who happen to encounter them. In fact, gradually in her fiction, Wharton has been defining the kind of person able to face the darkness within: Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, has confronted her fears and has gained strength from her struggle; she is perfectly conscious of her real self and, furthermore, her experience has taught her how to take control of her own life rather than being controlled by others.

## 5.1 The Age of Innocence

[Newland] *‘I want – I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that – categories like that – won’t exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter.’* She [Ellen] *drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. ‘Oh my dear – where is that country? Have you ever been there?’*

(Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 174)

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<sup>12</sup> The critic Virginia L. Blum defines these ghosts as “erotic ghosts”, because of their freedom in expressing their sexual needs (see “Edith Wharton’s Erotic Other-World”).

The experience of the War had shaken Edith Wharton: when the fighting was over she turned for relief to her past and recreated in *The Age of Innocence* the New York of her childhood, documenting the customs she had observed when she had returned in the city in 1872 at the age of ten, after six years spent travelling around Europe. Nonetheless, the book is not a nostalgic work: it is rather both a tribute to and a satire upon the realm of her childhood.

Published in 1920, *The Age of Innocence*, which would become her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, portrays the frustration of a potential couple of lovers by social or domestic obstruction. Just like Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, the characters of this novel live in a society governed by “unalterable rules” and conventions, and which “dreaded scandal more than disease and placed decency above courage”: as a matter of fact “they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (38, 201, 29). As a result, some of the characters experience a sense of claustrophobia which is not so different from the anguish felt by the earlier Gothic heroines when they are forced to live as inmates in their own houses.

Reading the novel through the lens of Gothic literature, the book stands out as a breakthrough in Wharton’s career because of the way she revises the traditional paradigm of the passive and subjected heroine usually replaced with an artwork, by introducing a new model of independent woman with the character of Ellen Olenska. She is a Europeanized American woman who returns to the United States disturbing the existence of a conservative provincial society. Her unconventionality and her strength gained through experience attract an intelligent man of the community, Newland Archer, who eventually proves to be unable to show the courage to choose her, allowing her to go back to Europe: speaking of which,

the critic Edmund Wilson observes that “there are no first-rate men in Edith Wharton’s novel<sup>13</sup>”.

Ellen Olenska is introduced in the first chapter of the book, when Lawrence Lefferts, a member of the “tribe”, gazes at her through his opera glass, as if she were an object to be studied. Actually, unlike Sybilla or the Duchess, Ellen has already resisted being made into art and being sexually owned by a man: she had escaped from her marriage nightmare with Count Olenski, an “awful brute” who kept her “practically a prisoner”, and had decided to leave for America in order to “wipe out all the past”, get a divorce and live an independent life (26, 69). She has already faced the abyss by looking at the Gorgon<sup>14</sup>, the frightening monster-woman within herself: at first, she has experienced the terrifying loss of self as she had known it, but then she has reached a new understanding and has accepted her maturation. She’s no longer concerned with social approval and doesn’t pay any attention to following the tribe’s rules: she lives as she wishes and her freedom gives her total control over her life. She is totally at ease in expressing her opinions, even when they clash with the common point of view; in this way she avoids becoming a passive slave of society and, when someone suggests she should act according to the parameters of socially acceptable behavior, she cries out that “the real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend” (50).

Unlike Lily Bart who isn’t able to accept her true self without literally dying, Ellen’s inner journey into the abyss has led her to a complete self-possession and a deep awareness of herself: when Newland observes that she has been away for a long time, she seems to describe this journey by saying: “Oh centuries and centuries; so long [...] that I’m sure I’m dead and buried, and this dear old place is Heaven” (12). Additionally, having faced her

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<sup>13</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*, 185.

<sup>14</sup> In Greek mythology, a Gorgon, which means “dreadful” in ancient Greek, was a female creature with monstrous features who was able to turn to stone everyone who dared to look at her.

fundamental being makes Ellen able to be alone: as she says to Newland: “I like this little house, but I suppose what I like is the blessedness of its being here, in my own country and my own town; and then of being alone in it” (47). When she arrives in New York she moves into her aunt Medora’s “shabby” house and, without a lot of money, turns it into something original and amusing (45). According to Wharton’s traditional association of houses with female self, Ellen’s home represents herself and, just like her, disturbs Old New York with its eccentricity. She relishes beauty around herself, in fact; she settles on West Twenty-Third Street because she deliberately chooses to live among artists and painters, although that neighborhood is not considered fashionable at all.

Her eccentric aunt Medora Manson and her majestic grandmother Catherine Mingott, had provided Ellen with an education that has encouraged her to seek for self-reliance and freedom from social-constraint, instead of searching for support in a man: “Beware of monotony; it’s the mother of all the deadly sins” says aunt Medora to her niece (127). All these women, with their female unconventionality and vitality, represent a threat to society, one that, when uncontrollable, must be expelled.

For this reason, as the critic Elisabeth Ammons points out, Ellen Olenska can be seen as an alter ego for Edith Wharton herself: both are women of intellect who like to be surrounded by beauty; both are sexually experienced women who have had an affair in Europe while still married to men unsuitable for them; both ask for divorce and both leave America to go to Paris. Once again Wharton is denouncing the difficulty of being both a woman and a writer: “Wharton’s America is not the land of liberty when it comes to the woman of artistic and intellectual disposition<sup>15</sup>”.

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<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Ammons, “Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art”, 445.

Ellen's strength and self-confidence shock and trouble Newland Archer because she embodies the mystery of the unknown and represents all the world that lies beyond his society's boundaries. She is the impulse, the supernatural experience that forces Newland to start his internal journey into the abyss of self-understanding. For this reason the critic Cynthia Griffin Wolff, defines *The Age of Innocence* as Wharton's most significant bildungsroman<sup>16</sup>.

Newland is presented from the beginning as set apart from the community by education, intellect and feeling; talking about Ellen's situation he argues to Sillerton Jackson that he is "sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots", and that "women ought to be free – as free as we are": these assertions are totally in conflict with the morals of the time (27). Moreover, Ellen's arrival and her troubled story, lead Newland to question the nature of his imminent marriage with May Welland: "with a shiver of foreboding he saw his marriage becoming what most of the other marriages about him were: a dull associations of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other" (29). At this point he starts fearing the consequences of this marriage, such as the social acceptance into the "hieroglyphic world" of New York's elite and thus anonymity and personal insignificance: "a haunting horror of doing the same thing every day at the same hour besieged his brain" (54).

His fiancée, May Welland, always connected with whiteness, purity and innocence, as a matter of fact eventually proves to be very smart in achieving her purposes and handling the forces of New York society where "the individual is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest: people cling to any convention that keeps the family

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<sup>16</sup> See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "*The Age of Innocence* as a Bildungsroman".

together” (71). Even though in the end she succeeds in preventing Newland from choosing Ellen, she isn’t able to control his feelings. At first, May’s beauty and candor clear away the confusion that Ellen is causing Newland, who, like earlier male Gothic characters, looks at his fiancée with a “thrill of possession” as if she were a piece of art (5). But the man will soon realize her artificiality: “He felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses” (30). May has no depth: “she was frank, poor darling, because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against”; Ellen instead, is the embodiment of all that is lacking in his life (29).

Newland’s unescapable sense of duty prevents him from breaking his promise to May, but Wharton metaphorically decorates the marriage scene with death images: a spring wind “full of dust” blows during the ceremony and the scent of the flowers is “almost smothered” by the smell of camphor from old furs; the single Newland Archer is dead and a more tormented man will start searching for authenticity and freedom in his fantasies (109). He pretends his inner world is the real one: “He had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she [Ellen] throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities” (159).

Four months after his marriage, when he finally happens to see Ellen again, he feels “as if he had woken from a dream”: she has taken him beyond the self he used to be; as Newland himself explains to her, the Gorgon “‘opened my eyes too; it’s a delusion to say that she blinds people. What she does is just the contrary – she fastens their eyelids open, so that they’re never again in the blessed darkness” (132,175). But at this point since Newland is paralyzed by the system’s power, Ellen goes back to Europe leaving him feeling like “a prisoner in the center of an armed camp” (201). Even though she truly loves him, she knows

what it means to be a lover, always lying and constantly hiding, and she prefers to leave America rather than live that nightmare again.

The final scene of the book presents Newland twenty-five years later, now a widower, looking at Ellen's window in Paris but deciding not to go up: he's too afraid to upset his memories.

## 5.2 Miss Mary Pask

*'Do you know where I usually sleep? Down below there – in the garden! [...] There's a shady corner down at the bottom where the sun never bothers one. Sometimes I sleep there till the stars come out.'*

(Edith Wharton, "Miss Mary Pask", in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1911-1937*, 317)

Published in 1925, *Miss Mary Pask* is one of the best example of Wharton's Gothic stories where the fantastic proves to be the language of the unspeakable: it gives the author the possibility to express her desires, which have been repressed for years, and bring to light "what is culturally invisible and what is written out as a negation and as death<sup>17</sup>". *Miss Mary Pask* overturns stereotypical gender roles portraying a male character totally different from the domineering and arrogant men seen in the stories of the early production: the first person narrator, in fact, declares from the beginning his weakness and shyness and turns out to be frightened not so much by the supernatural encounter with a supposed female ghost as by her shocking sexual freedom and open femininity.

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<sup>17</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, 69.

The story is set in Brittany, where the anonymous narrator has gone to improve his painting skills; he remembers that one of his closest friend, Grace Bridgeworth, has asked him to pay a visit to her older sister, Mary Pask, if he had ever happened to be there where she lives. He cruelly reminds the old woman with these words: “Mary Pask was like hundreds of other dowdy old maids, cheerful derelict content with their innumerable little substitutes for living”; although he shows no interest in seeing her again, his “sense of duty” overcomes him, and thus he decides to search for her house after sunset (310-311).

Just as in *The Triumph of the Night*, the weather plays a basic role throughout the story<sup>18</sup>: the narrator’s way toward Mary Pask’s house is disoriented by a dense fog which soon immerses him and his driver in “a wet blackness impenetrable to the glimmer of our only lamp” (311). According to his perception of the reality as something threatening and mysterious, which is the cornerstone of the story, when the darkness occasionally lessens “our feeble light would drag out of the night some perfectly common-place object – a white gate, a cow’s staring face, a heap of roadside stones – made portentous and incredible by being thus detached from its setting, capriciously thrust at us, and as suddenly withdrawn” (311). The fog is literal but also a metaphor which, as Gianfranca Balestra points out<sup>19</sup>, represents the cobwebs within the narrator’s head; the man had previously declared he had had some mental issues after the supernatural experience he is recounting: “I could not have spoken of the affair before [...] not till I had been rest-cured and built up again at one of those wonderful Swiss sanatoria when they clean the cobwebs out of you” (309). His direct confrontation with feminine power and the abyss of the unknown that it represents have led him to a nervous collapse; the path which leads to Mary Pask’s house, in the so-called Bay

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<sup>18</sup> The critic Margaret B. McDowell writes that this story reveals Wharton’s ability “to assimilate the very landscape into her art, to make the natural setting as it were an active agent in the unfolding psychic drama” (“Edith Wharton’s Ghost Stories”, 138).

<sup>19</sup> See Gianfranca Balestra, *I Fantasmidi di Edith Wharton*, Chapter 7.

of the Dead, presents all the characteristics of a descent into the abyss: “the darkness grew three times as thick; and the sense I had had for some time of descending a gradual slope now became that of scrambling down a precipice” (311).

Lost in a desert of solitude and left alone by his driver, the narrator keeps on searching for the old woman’s house thinking: “No wonder the place was called Bay of the Dead! But what could have induced the rosy benevolent Mary Pask to come and bury herself there?” (312); the death imagery of these words prepares the reader for a more mysterious and dreadful atmosphere within the house itself. Welcomed by a servant-woman, the man is left in “total darkness” waiting for Mary Pask when, suddenly, the fog in his head vanishes, and he remembers that the old woman had passed away the previous autumn: “at that moment a smothered memory struggled abruptly to the surface of my languid mind. ‘But she’s dead – Mary Pask is dead’ I almost screamed it aloud in my amazement” (313). He decides to go away but, searching for a match in his pocket to find his way back to the door, another light catches his attention. He sees an old woman resembling Mary Pask coming down of the stairs, dressed in white and with a candle in her hand: the apparition looks like a ghost whose “steps on the wooden stairs were soundless” (315). Just like the other male characters of the previous stories, he tries to avoid the nonrational explanation, repeating to himself that the apparition is just the fruit of his imagination.

The reader is conscious of the unreliability of a psychologically disturbed narrator who, as it will turn out later, has decided to tell his story deliberately omitting some information in order to recreate the supernatural effect of the experience. In fact, he will reveal just at the end that, as a matter of fact, Mary Pask had been declared dead by mistake, while instead she had suffered a cataleptic trance: the woman descending the stairs is not a

ghost at all, but a human being<sup>20</sup>. Once again, the ordinary appears frightening and all Mary Pask's words are full of ambiguity and allusions and thus can be interpreted as the words of a ghost. She often refers to her death and its inevitable consequences; she declares her preference for sleeping in the garden by daytime and of staying awake by nighttime; she confesses that she has spent a lot of time without seeing any human being.

The fantastic effect is built upon the literal interpretation of her words by both the narrator and the reader. Furthermore, her physical appearance also seems that of a ghost: her hands, which used to be "round, puffy, pink" as the narrator remembers them, now look "shriveled" and "blue under the yellow nails" (315). The man is hypnotized by the woman who seems almost attractive: "The horrible thing was that she still practiced the same arts, all the childish wiles of a clumsy capering coquetry" (315). But at the same time, he is so frightened that he attempts to leave; at this point Mary bursts out expressing all of her terrible loneliness: "I'm too lonely [...] if you knew how lonely! It was a lie when I told you I wasn't! And now you come, and your face looks friendly...and you say you're going to leave me! No – no – no – you shan't! Or else why did you come? It's cruel..." (318). She tells the narrator that she has dreamt that one day a man would come to save her from her solitude: "Suddenly she flung herself toward me. 'Oh, stay with me, stay with me...just tonight...It's so sweet and quiet here...No one need know... no one will ever come and trouble us'" (318-319). At this moment a gust of wind fiercely blows into the room turning off the candles and leaving the two in the darkness: "The light went out, and I stood there – we stood there – lost to each other in the roaring coaling darkness. My heart seemed to stop beating; I had to fetch up my breath with great heaves that covered me with sweat" (319). In this sensual description Wharton hides the sexual intercourse that the narrator rejects when he rushes out

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<sup>20</sup> Given the final rational explanation of the events, the story belongs to the "uncanny" according to Todorov's categorization (see Chapter I for further information).

of the house and leaves behind Mary Pask who has dared to express so frankly her desire just like the sea “whose hungry voice I heard asking and asking” (312).

Just like Ellen Olenska, Mary Pask has looked into the abyss and has gained experience: she knows exactly who she is and now is perfectly able to talk openly about her needs. “I’ve got beyond of all that, you know [...] such a comfort, such a sense of freedom” she says to the narrator, explaining that she’s no longer frightened by superstition or social approval: Mary Pask freely embraces her femininity and thus seeks sexual attentions with no fear or guilt. But her passionate longings scare the narrator whose flesh rises in “ridges of fear” at her touch (315). Unable to confront his weakness, his first desire, once out of the danger, is to erase that episode from his memory by going to the Swiss sanatoria: “The happenings of that night had to be overlaid with layer upon layer of time and forgetfulness before I could tolerate any return of them” (309).

After an unspecified interval of time, he recalls the events of that night in Brittany, and meditating on the fact that Mary Pask had come back from death “to cry out to me the unuttered loneliness of a lifetime, to express at last what the living woman had always had to keep dumb and hidden”, he is moved to compassion for her. At the end of the story he will learn that Mary Pask hasn’t died at all, but paradoxically he will seem more frightened than before: “I felt I should never again be interested in Mary Pask or in anything concerning her” (323). “The dead woman is less sinister than her living counterpart simply because the sex she craves is ‘unreal’, requiring no ‘real’ potency from the man<sup>21</sup>”.

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<sup>21</sup> Virginia L. Blum, “Edith Wharton’s Erotic Other-World”, 12.

### 5.3 Bewitched

*Things that the rational mind would reject without a thought seemed no longer so easy to dispose of as one looked at the actual Saul Rutledge and remembered the man he had been a year before.*

(Edith Wharton, "Bewitched", in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1911-1937*, 354)

Written in 1925, *Bewitched*, is a story of dread and destruction of female sexuality recounted by an external narrator with the focalization on a secondary character, Orrin Bosworth. Within a primitive society which still believes in witchcraft and vampirism, the man throughout the story hesitates between his acceptance of the supernatural and his rational explanations, leaving the final interpretation to the reader.

Sylvester Brand, the Deacon Hibben and Orrin Bosworth, "the youngest and most communicative of the three men", have been called for help by Mrs. Rutledge because apparently her husband, Saul Rutledge, is under a spell of a ghost with whom he's also having an affair (347). When they arrive to investigate at the Rutledge's home, the place is desolate, cold and "wore a mournful solitary air", and, as usual in Wharton's Gothic fiction, it resembles its inhabitants. Moreover, the snow, which falls in a "steady unwavering sheet against the window", increases the overwhelming sense of isolation, and seems to envelope all the characters "in a common grave" (355).

As we are told, Bosworth is an imaginative and open-minded man who, unlike the other two with him, lives in direct "contact with the modern world" which had gone beyond "old wives' tales" and superstitions; nonetheless "the roots of the old life were still in him" (358). As a result, Mr. Rutledge's case, makes him reflect upon "things below the surface

of his thoughts, things which stole up anew, making him feel that all the old people he had known, and who believed in these things, might after all be right” (359). Among his childhood memories, he recalls a visit to his crazy great-aunt Cressidora Cheney, “shut up for years in a cold clean room with iron bars at the windows”, who was kept imprisoned “like a canary bird”; to relieve her loneliness, the child brought her a canary, but when the bird had begun to flutter “aunt Cressidora’s calm face suddenly became a coil of twitching features. ‘You she-devil, you!’ she cried in a high squealing voice; and thrusting her hand into the cage she dragged out the terrified bird and wrung its neck” (359). This terrifying scene is linked to other events “below the surface of his thoughts”, like the supposed witch who had been burned alive at North Ashmore: all these stories of crazy, aggressive and imprisoned women from the past, intrigue him and become a key to interpret the present (359).

Mr. Rutledge is apparently possessed by the ghost of Ora Brand, Sylvester’s dead daughter, and asserts he frequently meets the girl at an “abandoned house by the pond”; he appears almost hypnotized, unable to stare directly into his friends’ eyes as if his mind is totally absent (356). Even his appearance has totally changed: “from the straight muscular fellow he had been a year before” he has turned into a “haggard wretch”, and when he enters the scene he looks “so sucked inward as consumed by an inner fever” (353-354). As the deacon points out, “something’s sucking the life out of him” and according to Mrs. Rutledge, who has also seen the ghostly-girl, the only possible cure for her husband would be to drive a stake through Ora’s breast: “thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” she says (362,358). It seems, indeed, that Mr. Rutledge is the victim of a vampire and that “they were all at that moment really standing on the edge of some forbidden mystery” (354).

That the “forbidden mystery” is actually the mystery of femininity becomes clear to the reader when Saul recalls his love for Ora obstructed by her father, who in order to prevent

their union at the time, had sent the girl away; back in town after three years, Ora got seriously sick and, before her death, promised Saul that she would come back for him one day. And so she did, according to the Rutledges, often attracting Saul into the house by the pond; but none of the three men dare to ask what really happens there. As usual, Wharton communicates the unspeakable to the reader through silence and allusions: “[Mr.Rutledge]’She...just drew me...’ There was a long pause. Bosworth felt, on himself and the other two men, the oppressive weight of the next question to be asked. Mrs. Rutledge opened and closed her narrow lips once or twice, like some beached shell-fish gasping for the tide” (357). Furthermore, the deacon periodically reminds them that “these are forbidden things”: the nature of the encounters is clearly sexual and thus censored by the common sense of decency and fear (357).

Having faced the abyss through the experience of death, Ora returns as a vampire, finally free to express her repressed desires, while Mr. Rutledge, as a bewitched victim, feels no guilt in following his instincts. As in *Miss Mary Pask*, a dead woman’s erotic power seduces and terrifies, attracts and destroys the man, who, in this case, appears completely subjected to her will: “[deacon Hibben] ‘Haven’t you the strength to keep away from the place?’ [...] ‘Ain’t any use. She follers after me...’” answers Mr. Rutledge (357).

In this context, Sylvester Brand is clearly the Gothic villain of the story; his description, the “bull neck” and his “rough bullying power”, recalls the earlier male dictators (365,354). Bosworth notices “something animal and primitive about him” and “a little foam beading the corners of that heavy purplish under lip”: his thoughts make the reader wonder if Brand’s brutality might be the cause for his wife’s having “pined away and died”, Ora’s having “sickened and died”, and his other daughter Venny’s “running wild on the slopes of the lonetop” and eventually dying all of a sudden attack of pneumonia (354,360). Bosworth’s

flashes in his mind suggest his awareness that “the forbidden mystery” is connected with the story of women’s lives and their femininity restrained by male dominance.

When they all go out to search for the vampire-Ora near the house by the pond, Bosworth, still incredulous, seeks for some reasonable explanations: Mr. Rutledge might be affected by “a bad case of ague”, or by “a ague of the mind”, or rather the vampire-girl could be just his invention (362). Mrs Rutledge’s religious dogmatism and frozen emotions reveal a frigid woman who fears her sexuality and thus is unable to satisfy her husband: the most reasonable explanation, which can be read between the lines, could be that Mr. Rutledge’s lover is actually Venny Brand, instead of her dead sister, and that the man has made up the frightening story just to justify his adultery.

When the three men arrive by the pond, “the air was as soundless and empty as an unswung bell”: silence once again is the predictor of the supernatural. In fact, the men, having found some woman’s footsteps in the snow, follow them to the house where the villain Brand, “moving on as if to an assault”, opens the door and shoots “into total blackness”: Bosworth “seemed to see something white and wraith-like surge up out of the darkest corner of the hut, and then heard a revolver shot at his elbow, and a cry” (363,365).

After three days Venny Brand is buried and her coffin is lowered into her sister’s grave. Even though the cause of their death remains unclear, eventually the sisters find the same fate, their femininity restrained and their lives controlled, maybe also ended, by her dictatorial father. Officially, Venny dies sickened by pneumonia and no one in the story dares to connect her death to the gunshot. The members of the community hypocritically prefer to believe in the supernatural rather than destroy family values.

At the funeral Mrs. Rutledge advances triumphantly “with deliberate step”; Bosworth notices her whiteness, her bloodless and bony hands, which recall to him those of his crazy great-aunt, and her “marble eye-balls”: “looks as if the stone-mason had carved her to put

atop of Venny's grave" he ironically thinks to himself (367). The woman has become a sort of funeral monument, which, according to the critic Virginia L. Blum, offers two versions of femininity: "Mrs. Rutledge is the prototypical shrew, the epitome of womanly virtue carried to her inevitable frigid conclusion, while the "loose" passionate woman, Ora, the hungry prostitute, is presented as the vampire men always feared she was<sup>22</sup>".

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<sup>22</sup> Virginia L. Blum, "Edith Wharton's Erotic Other-World", 17.

## VI

### Beyond the Threshold

Starting from 1916 Edith Wharton had to experience many deaths of intimate friends; additionally, during her late years of production, her own aging and her failing health led her to transfer her attention from the sexual sphere to issues connected with old age, physical decline and obviously death. As she explains in “A First Word”, the preface of her autobiography *A Backward Glance*, the last ten years of her life were a time of both fulfillment and sadness: “There’s no such thing as old age; there is only sorrow”. But later she says: “In spite of illness, in spite even of the arch-enemy sorrow, one *can* remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration is one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways” (vii).

These are words of a mature writer who had been living a full and successful life which had bridged two continents, but also of a desolate and sad woman who had survived the death of many dear friends: among them, Henry James died in 1916, Walter Berry in 1927 and Teddy Wharton in 1928. Furthermore, the author had an attack of grippe in 1934 followed by a mild stroke in 1935. It’s not a coincidence if the unifying theme of the stories

of this last period is death: just like sexuality, death is a frightening dark power needing to be faced and understood. Gothic fiction allows Wharton to explore this invisible region: death is perceived as silence, loneliness and absence, and the ghost stands out as the quintessential representation of this absence.

In *A Bottle of Perrier*, *Pomegranate Seed* and *All Souls*, the boundaries between life and death appear so blurred and unclear that the characters of these stories are forced to cross the limits of reason.

## 6.1 A Bottle of Perrier<sup>23</sup>

*Everywhere stretched away the mystery of the sands, all golden with promise, all livid with menace, as the sun alternately touched or abandoned them.*

(Edith Wharton, "A Bottle of Perrier", in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1911-1937*, 448)

In *A Bottle of Perrier* there are no apparitions of ghosts, nonetheless Wharton decided to insert the story in the collection *Ghosts* in 1937. The critic Carol J. Singley defines it "an intricately crafted ghostly thriller about murder and deception<sup>24</sup>"; although there are just hints of the supernatural in *A Bottle of Perrier*, the reader follows the events assimilating the same anxious uncertainty as the protagonist, which derives not from a confrontation with the nonrational, but from the anguish of waiting and tension of absence.

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<sup>23</sup> The story was published for the first time in 1926 in the *Saturday Evening Post* with the title "A Bottle of Evian" because of some issues connected to the commercialization in America of Perrier. The original title "A Bottle of Perrier" would be replaced in subsequent publications.

<sup>24</sup> Carol J. Singley, "Gothic Borrowings and Innovations in Edith Wharton's *A Bottle of Perrier*", 271.

An external narrator recounts the story from the point of view of Medford, a young archaeologist who decides to accept the invitation of his English friend Henry Almodham, “a scholar and a misogynist”, to his dwelling in the middle of the North-African desert (448). Once he gets to the house, he finds just Almodham’s “quick cosmopolitan man-servant”, Goslin, who tells him that his master is away for an archaeological exploration and that he would be back at least the following day (448).

Medford makes himself at home and, at first, enjoys the dreamlike atmosphere around him: “the silence, the remoteness, the illimitable air” of a place where “all seemed, in that clear mocking air, born of the delusion of some desert wayfarer” (449,451). In this exotic “land full of spells”, “in this place of postponements and enchantments”, even time seems to have stopped: “There were no time measures in a place like this. The silly face of his watch told its daily tale to emptiness. [...] Life had the light monotonous smoothness of eternity” (458, 462, 454).

But after two days, the inactivity of the wait and the quietness of the isolation slowly turn into anxiety and suspicion; the desert becomes “lonely, inhospitable, dangerous” and also the water starts stinking and deteriorating: “Something sick and viscous, half smell, half substance, seemed to have clung to his skin since his morning bath, and the idea of having to drink that water again was nauseating” (468,466). The mineral water, the bottle of Perrier, which was supposed to be brought by the caravans of supply, becomes a mirage and eventually never arrives: waiting in vain for the absent host and the absent water, Medford feels overwhelmed by “a sense of otherwhereness” and by “the uncanniness of the place” (454, 469). He detects that there’s something mysterious behind the prolonged absence of Almodham but the desert almost seems to have cast a spell on him: “Through the spell of inertia laid on him by the drowsy place and its easeful comforts his instinct of alertness was struggling back” (458). The same dark magic transforms objects and people in Medford’s

mind, thus Goslin is “turned by the moonlight to a white spectral figure, the unquiet ghost of a patient butler” (456).

Medford, together with the reader, senses that Goslin knows more than he reveals: the servant avoids conversations about his master’s absence, barely contains his anger fiercely poured out against the other servants, proves to be seriously concerned about something that makes him secretly cry alone and seems to be “on the edge of a breakdown”(469). Goslin reveals Medford that he has been working for twelve years for Almodham and that the latter, has never given him the possibility to take even a single day of holiday. Given this revelation, Almodham resembles the domineering male characters of the earlier stories: he prevents Goslin from leaving the isolated house forcing him to live as a prisoner. The servant might be hiding the truth and, even though Medford is eager to unfold the mystery, “it was everywhere impenetrable” (464).

Among his rational suppositions, Medford wonders if his eccentric host might be hiding somewhere in the house, waiting there for his unwanted guest to go away: “he could almost feel Almodham reaching long ghostly arms from somewhere above him in the darkness” (469). When Medford asks Goslin for confirmation of this supposition, the servant appears terrified at the idea that Medford could have actually seen his master around: he finally confesses to having killed Almodham by pushing him into the well.

The ghost is thus just imagined by the murderer and plays its role as a projection of his guilt. The dead body is never described in the story but actually is always present: from the beginning death pervades the paradise-like place permeating the air, contaminating the water, infecting Medford’s thoughts and almost leading Goslin to madness. Medford thinks about the possibility that his friend could be dead even before Goslin’s confession, but refuses to express his dreadful hypothesis openly: “He wondered whether Almodham

himself were not a little mad – if, indeed, Almodham were still in a world where such a fate is possible” (462).

The leading role in *A Bottle of Perrier* is thus played by death itself, which Wharton manages to portray as absolute absence.

## 6.2 Pomegranate Seed

*‘I can’t stand it! I can’t stand it another day!’ She exclaimed aloud, as she put her key in the lock. She turned the key and went in; and there, on the table, lay the latter.*

(Edith Wharton, “Pomegranate Seed”, in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1911-1937*, 684)

In *Pomegranate Seed* Edith Wharton considerably revises the scheme of the Gothic stories of the early production; published in 1931, the story is recounted in the third person from the point of view of Charlotte Ashby, a woman of the New York upper-class who has married the widower Kenneth Ashby. The focalization on Charlotte allows the reader to follow her hesitations in front of the mystery, her attempted rational explanations and eventually her acceptance of the uncanny.

Since her marriage, the woman has always been very satisfied with her life: her husband “had always been as tender and loverlike” as during the first weeks of their engagement (682). But then, just after their honeymoon, an event occurs which gradually starts to threaten their life as couple: Kenneth begins receiving letters that clearly make him uncomfortable and whose sender and content he keeps to himself.

The story begins in medias res with Charlotte hesitating to walk into her house and fearing to find another mysterious letter on the hall table. During her first months of marriage

life, her house had been like a “veiled sanctuary”, a shelter where she could find relief from the chaos of the city, but now “she always wavered on the doorstep and had to force herself to enter” (678). This fear on the threshold recalls Wharton’s own “agony of terror<sup>25</sup>” in front of her house’s closed door during her childhood, and just like the author, Charlotte is terrified by the unknown, which in this case is inside her house and represented by the letters: “‘Outside there’ she thought, ‘skyscrapers, advertisements, telephones, wireless, aeroplanes, movies, motors, and all the rest of the twentieth century; and on the other side of the door something I can’t explain, I can’t relate to them. Something as old as the world, as mysterious as life...’” (683). The outer and modern world has become reassuring in its predictability, while beyond the door of her house reigns the incomprehensible, uncertainty and thus the frightening. The threshold separates the known from the unknown, life and death, rational and irrational. At the end of the story, in fact, Charlotte finds out that the letters are sent by Kenneth’s dead wife, Elsie Ashby, never really forgotten by the man, who is trying to take him back to her.

When Charlotte and Kenneth got married, she accepted the prospect of living in the same house where he used to live with Elsie “in which, since the death of Kenneth’s first wife, neither furniture nor hangings had been changed” (678). According to Wharton’s recurring motif of the house representing the inner self of its inhabitants, it seems as if Charlotte agreed to exchange her personality with Elsie’s. This supposition is confirmed by Charlotte herself when recalling the only time she had visited Elsie, she says that “she had looked about her with and innocent envy, feeling it to be exactly the drawing-room she would have liked for herself” (678). But then, once in the house, Elsie “followed her with guarded eyes” from her portrait in the library, and Charlotte remembers her relief when Kenneth

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<sup>25</sup> Edith Wharton, *Life and I*, 1080.

decided to move it into the nursery: “She had to confess that she felt more at home in her house, more at ease and in confidence with her husband” (683). The triangle wife-husband-ghost, already seen in *Bewitched*, is now proposed again in the modern city of New York where there should be no room for superstition, therefore the gradual discovery of the supernatural proves even more frightful.

Trying to shake off her worries, Charlotte opens the door and finds a letter, but the only thing she can do is analyze the envelope: “The address was always written as though there were not enough ink in the pen, or the writer’s wrist were too weak to bear upon it. Another curious thing was that, in spite of its masculine curves, the writing was so visibly feminine” (679). The handwriting<sup>26</sup>, both feminine and masculine, reflects Elsie’s personality: she is described as a “self-centered woman” who, during her marriage, used to control and supervise every aspect of her husband’s life: “Elsie Ashby absolutely dominated him” (678,681). Even after her death, the woman still has a great influence on Kenneth, who, every time reads one of her letter “reappeared looking years older, emptied of life and courage, and hardly conscious of her [Charlotte’s] presence” (680).

Reversing the gender roles of the earlier Gothic stories, Wharton creates a domineering female character who imposes her intellectual control over a passive and helpless man. Kenneth seems weakened also by Charlotte: at first, as a lawyer he submits to her questioning about the letter writer’s identity “with a sort of contemptuous composure, as though he were humoring an unreasonable child”, but then his self-confidence turns into “terror and distress” when his wife declares to have seen him kissing the letter (687). Pressured with questions and feeling overwhelmed by the situation, Kenneth prefers not to answer and “covered his

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<sup>26</sup> Gianfranca Balestra observes that within the letters is hidden Wharton’s concern with her role as both woman and writer: Elsie, as a female writer, seems able to express her desire through words just after her death; her masculine and feminine handwriting apparently reveals the necessity to dress up her words as manly as if to make them socially acceptable. (For further information see *I Fantasmisti di Edith Wharton*, Chapter 7).

face with his hands. From the shaking of his shoulders, Charlotte saw that he was weeping” (695). Charlotte finds herself “completely in the dark”, unable to “penetrate the mystery”, and “groping in the fog”, gradually understanding that something beyond the rational is the cause of her husband’s pain: “She was frightened now; she felt that her husband was being dragged away from her into some mysterious bondage, and that she must use up her last atom of strength in the struggle for his freedom, and for hers” (697, 686, 698, 695).

Just when she thinks she has succeeded in convincing Kenneth to take a holiday together leaving all their problems behind, he disappears. Wharton ironically makes Charlotte enjoying her temporary and illusive moment of victory with some unconsciously prophetic words: “she had faced the phantom and dispelled it!” (698). When her anxiety overwhelms her, Charlotte asks for help from Kenneth’s mother, Mrs. Ashby, a rational and calm lady who plays the role of the wise older woman: she conceals “the depths of the unknown” within her mind and Charlotte perceives that she knows more than she reveals (702). When Charlotte finds another letter, she decides to open it together with Mrs. Ashby who recognizes Elsie’s handwriting and appears significantly shocked by this discovery:

Mrs. Ashby stood up abruptly. Her face was even paler than before. She advanced to the table and, resting her two hands on it, drew a deep breath. ‘Let me see’ she said, as if forcing herself to a hateful effort.

Charlotte felt the contagion of her whiteness. ‘She knows,’ she thought (706).

Mrs. Ashby’s facial transformation betrays her awareness and Charlotte begs her to reveal what she’s clearly hiding: “‘Mother! What do you know? Tell me! You must!’” (704). This agonized request recalls Wharton’s request of her mother to tell her what she knows about sexuality:

... a few days before my marriage, I was seized with such a dread of the whole dark mystery, that I summoned up courage to appeal to my mother, & begged her, with a heart beating to suffocation, to tell me “what being married was like”. Her handsome face at once took on the look of icy disapproval which I most dreaded. “I never heard such a ridiculous question!” she said impatiently; & I felt at once how vulgar she thought me.

But in the extremity of my need I persisted “I’m afraid Mamma – I want to know what will happen to me!”

The coldness of her expression deepened to disgust. She was silent for a dreadful moment; then she said with an effort: “You’ve seen enough pictures & statues in your life. Haven’t you noticed that men are – made differently from women?”

“Yes” I faltered blankly.

“Well then - ?”

[...] The dreadful moment was over, & the only result was that I had been convicted of stupidity for not knowing what I had been expressly forbidden to ask about, or even think of! (*Life and I*, 1099).

Just like Wharton, Charlotte seeks for answers about a dark mystery, but both of them are left uninformed since the older women, source of knowledge, refuse to share their wisdom.

The only words that Charlotte seems to catch in the incomprehensible letter, are “mine” and “come” which are clearly words of desire: having faced the abyss through the experience of death, Elsie’s femininity is not mute or constrained and thus she feels no guilt in expressing her sexuality. Even though Mrs. Ashby refuses to believe in the irrational explanation of the situation, her worried look unconsciously goes up to the “blank wall” where Elsie’s portrait used to be (*Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1911-1937*, 707). The

ghost is absence, is a “blank” and empty space on the wall and a sheet full of undecipherable words. Mrs. Ashby and Kenneth refuse to pronounce Elsie’s name and also Charlotte refers to the ghost as “her”: Elsie’s presence is constantly perceived from the beginning of the story just through her absence.

Charlotte understands that Kenneth will never come back since he has decided somehow to join his first wife: the only place where he and Elsie can meet is the emptiness of death, and he has determined to jump into this “precipice” (696).

The title of the story refers once again to the Greek myth of Persephone: when the goddess left the under-world of death to visit her mother Demeter, her husband Hades, had her eat the pomegranate seed, because he knew that in this way Persephone would come back to him. Apparently, Kenneth plays the role of Persephone, and the passionate letters, sent by Elsie-Hades, are the pomegranate seed, which traditionally is a symbol of feminine fertility and sexuality, that separates him from Charlotte-Demeter. Given the many possible interpretations of the title and the final almost inconclusive scene, the story is a small masterpiece of ambiguity; as the critics Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney observe, the allusion to the myth of Persephone increases the mystery. The goddess is an ambivalent character both dead and alive, present and absent, real and unreal. The result is a perfect intermingling of Gothic story and ancient myth<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> See Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, “Forbidden Reading and Ghostly Writing: Anxious Power in Wharton’s *Pomegranate Seed*”.

### 6.3 All Souls

*Silence – more silence! It seemed to be piling itself up like the snow on the roof and in the gutters. Silence. How many people that she knew had any idea what silence was – and how loud it sounded when you really listened to it?*

(Edith Wharton, “All Souls”, in *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1911-1937*, 805)

Written in 1937, *All Souls* was the last piece of fiction completed by Edith Wharton before her death. As the nameless narrator of unidentified gender points out, “this isn’t exactly a ghost-story”: *All Souls* is rather the recount of a journey into the dark inner self experienced by the protagonist Sara Clayburn (799).

The narrator, Sara’s cousin, declares in the opening paragraph his-her intention to record the woman’s experience in the clearest way possible, rewriting the events openly reorganizing her “confused and fragmentary words”; the narrating voice takes on the complete responsibility of the narration, of its order and of the words used to recount it, but, at the same time, it questions its very reliability: “If the thing happened at all – and I must leave you to judge of that – I think it must have happened in this way...” (800). Even though the narrator’s gender is not explicitly specified throughout the story, he-she will show some protective and almost maternal attentions with Sara, which lead the reader to think of him-her more likely as a woman. In this beginning section the narrating voice also defends the survival of ghosts and of the Gothic genre underlying how an uncanny experience proves even more frightening when set in the modern world and lived by a “calm and matter-of-fact” person:

As between turreted castles patrolled by headless victims with clanking chains, and the comfortable suburban house with a refrigerator and central heating where you feel, as soon as you're in it, *that there's something wrong*, give me the latter for sending a chill down the spine! (798).

Sara Clayburn is a widow, described as a “muscular”, “healthy and active” woman by the “quick imperious nature”, who “seldom did what other people expected” and who appears more than capable of taking care of herself (799, 803, 801, 799). Once again in Wharton’s fiction, Sara’s house, Whitegates, is just like her: “open, airy, high-ceilinged, with electricity, central heating and all the modern appliances” (799). Although Whitegates has nothing in common with the traditional and gloomy Gothic castles haunted by ghosts, it can actually appear familiar to Wharton’s affectionate readers: its isolated location, which “would have certainly have seemed remote and lonely to modern servants” like Brympton Place or Kerfol, and the fact that it is set “on a height” like the houses in *The Triumph of the Night* and *Bewitched*, make it the classic example of dwelling in Wharton’s Gothic fiction. Additionally, even in *All Souls*, the weather, in particular a snowstorm, becomes a threatening element which increases the sense of isolation and thus of solitude of the protagonist, just like the fog in *Miss Mary Pask* or the storm in *The Triumph of the Night* (799).

The narrator’s focalization focuses on Sara and on the events occurred some years before on All Soul’s night, which, according to some superstitious believes, “is the night when the dead can walk” (820). On that day, Mrs. Clayburn on her way home bumps into a strange middle-aged woman, who, speaking with a foreign accent, says that she is going to Whitegates to see one of the servant-girls. Just half an hour later “something happened which put the stranger entirely out of her mind”: Sara falls on a frozen puddle, breaks her ankle and

thus is forced by the doctor to rest in bed in order not to make her condition worse (801). Meanwhile, outside it begins to snow and the doctor says: "This is a pretty lonely place when the snow begins", but Sara laughs, denying the possibility of feeling alone since she can always count on her servants to keep her company (802). But her immobility and inability to leave her own house suggest an imprisonment which recalls the one lived by other women in earlier stories: the Duchess, Sybilla, Anne de Barrigan and in particular Mrs. Brympton, who just like Sara is victimized by her physical condition.

Looked after by the careful Agnes, Sara gets ready for the night but her pain and her feeling "feverish" trouble her rest: "Sleep, once it had gone, would not return, and the long black hours moved more and more slowly. How late the dawn came in November!" (802-803). She starts waiting patiently for Agnes' arrival but no one answers her call; soon she realizes that the electric current is off, the telephone is not working and that the radiators are cold: "It was nine o'clock before she admitted to herself that something uncommonly strange must have happened in the house" (804). Although the doctor has told her not to move, Sara decides to get up and figure out what is going on. She barely manages to walk with the help of a cane, but the pain slows her movements down; the house is immersed in an unusual and terrifying silence, and the snow "was still falling, with a business-like regularity, muffling the outer world in layers on layers of thick white velvet, and intensifying the silence within" (805).

Aching and tired, Sara starts exploring each room of the house, always pausing a moment in front of every door, fearing what there might be beyond: in this story Wharton presents the recurring motif of the terror on the threshold in the more effective way possible. Beyond the doors there may be a stranger, a murderer, a dead body or worse there might be no one, emptiness and absence; Sara's sense of loneliness gradually grows every single step that she takes. Soon the silence becomes "cold" and "unanswering", "inexorable and

hostile”, “an impenetrable substance made out of the world-wide cessation of all life and all movement” (808).

Her experience recalls Lily Bart’s last hours in *The House of Mirth* when “the terrible silence and emptiness seemed to symbolize her future – she felt as though the house, the street, the world were all empty, and she alone left sentient in a lifeless universe” (*The House of Mirth*, 321). For Sara too, “that was what laid a chill on her: the feeling that there was no limit to this silence, no outer margin, nothing beyond it” (*Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1911-1937*, 808). Their inner journey is so similar since they are both experiencing what death is like: Lily totally surrenders and embraces the end, while Sara is stronger, “she must find out – she must face whatever lay in wait” (809). But every room is “cold, orderly – and empty. She would find nothing, she would find no one. She no longer felt any dread of ordinary human dangers lurking in those dumb spaces ahead of her. She knew she was utterly alone under her own roof” (809).

Sara is sure of being alone given the absolute silence that she perceives as an actual presence, an aggressor ready to attack her if she only tried to escape. Instinctively, Sara searches for “the clue to the mystery” in the kitchen, which is quintessentially the welcoming and female room of the house: approaching the door she hears a “low but emphatic” male voice which dreadfully breaks the silence (810-811). It’s the voice of a stranger, who speaks a foreign language, and whose tone is “passionately earnest almost threatening” (811). Sara again hesitates in opening the door because she is frightened by the thought of a sexual violence but the man’s voice is both attractive and dreadful: the critic Annette Zilversmit writes that “she lets herself be drawn irresistibly. Like most of Wharton’s women who believe that their precarious self-esteem can be rescued by the desire of a man, this lonely,

aging widow braves the encounter and flings open the door<sup>28</sup>. But also the kitchen is empty and the voice is a bodiless one which comes from the radio, an object of modern technology. Sara manages to go back to her room and decides to lock herself in: her fear is not gone but has just turned into a new one, “that she might lie there alone and untended till she died of cold, and of terror of her solitude” (812).

The following day everything goes back to normality; Agnes the servant declares that she never went away: she suggests that maybe the pain and the fever have made Mrs. Clayburn a little confused. Sara is absolutely certain “that something strange had happened in her house”, nonetheless she decides not to re-open the question anymore and to hold her tongue like Alice Hartley in *The Lady's Maid's Bell* (815). She wants to ignore and forget what she has learned about her own empty life and her intense fear of death: “she evidently preferred to put the whole matter out of her mind, as far as she could” (815).

A year later on the same day of All Souls, Sara again meets the stranger woman and, recalling the terrible event of the previous year, she decides to leave Whitegates for good, seeking comfort in New York at her cousin's. The latter concludes the narration by giving his own interpretation of the story: according to him, the strange woman could be a witch, come to Whitegates to invite all the servants to take part in a coven in the forest<sup>29</sup>. In spite of the final personal conjecture of the narrator, the reader is left in ambiguity and the final interpretation is left in his hands.

The sense of solitude and death that pervades *All Souls* leads one to interpret the story as autobiographical; having recently lost many dear friends, Wharton describes the dread of being left alone in the moment she needs companionship the most: old age. Wharton is “face-

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<sup>28</sup> Annette Zilversmit, “*All Souls*: Wharton's Last Haunted House and Future Directions for Criticism”, in Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit, *Edith Wharton. New Critical Essays*, 323.

<sup>29</sup> Gianfranca Balestra's research proves that this last section with the narrator's interpretation was added at a later moment by the author (see *I Fantasmii di Edith Wharton*, Chapter 8).

to-face with the ultimate loneliness, the ultimate separation; and the tale, in its lively imaginative way, makes light of the terror in Mrs. Wharton's soul, which she cannot altogether bring into full consciousness<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Leon Edel, "The Nature of Literary Psychology", *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, Vol.29, 2, 1981, 462.

## Conclusions

The variety of themes that Edith Wharton's short stories present, which go beyond the mere analysis of the relations between sexes, make them a very interesting and precious literary treasure which must be analyzed from different points of view in order to be fully understood.

This dissertation has presented a selection of Edith Wharton's gothic-marked short stories, from which there clearly emerges her ability to handle a literary genre that is structurally ambiguous, having its basis on the opposition between the real and unreal, light and shadow, the rational and irrational. It is Wharton's realistic trait, her talent in portraying with such visual precision a landscape or a house's interior, her capacity of describing so pragmatically a daily conversation that paradoxically contributes in creating so efficiently the fantastic and thus the frightening effect.

The thin thread that connects all these stories is the mechanism of the fantastic: uncovering the unconscious, the supernatural allows the release of dangerous and repressed desires which, when acknowledged, lead the characters to a complete understanding of their self, and to the acceptance of both their feminine and masculine sides.

In the texts of the early production, women repress and fear their femininity and, as a result, become passive prisoners of male intellectual and rational control. Gradually, in the later stories, women finally receive the ability to speak and thus are able to improve their condition and gain control of their life: they accept their female sensual power but also prove to be determined, strong and capable of taking care of themselves.

Just like her characters, Edith Wharton too experienced her own coming-to-awareness process: as she grew into adulthood she finally found her peace in embracing both her womanhood and her artistic nature as a successful writer. When eventually her old age, threshold of death, became the unquestionable proof of the flowing of time, Wharton didn't look at her wrinkles always as synonymous of sorrow; as she explained in the epilogue of *A Backward Glance*:

In our individual lives, though the years are sad, the days have a way of being jubilant. Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death; yet there are always new countries to see, new books to read (and, I hope, to write), a thousand little daily wonders to marvel at and rejoice in [...] The visible world is a daily miracle for those who have eyes and ears; and I still warm my hand thankfully at the old fire, though every year it is fed with the dry wood of more old memories. (379).

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