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Mirrors, Sickrooms, and Dead Letters: Wharton's Thwarted Gothic Love Plots

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I thought of all the women's novels that lie scattered, like small pock-marked apples in an orchard, about the second-hand book shops of London.

—Virginia Woolf (74)

Recently, a book missing from Wharton's personal library was returned to The Mount, her old home in Lenox. The local newspaper celebrated the return of the phantom book with the caption: "Edith Wharton's copy of *Jane Eyre* returns to The Mount in Lenox" (Cox, n.p.). The reporter, Claire Cox, unravels the mystery:

Thanks to the generosity of a resident of Lincolnshire, England, and a friend with access to the internet, Edith Wharton's copy of 'Jane Eyre' has come back safely to rest among the books in Wharton's library at The Mount.

Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece—her story of suspense and madness and wild nights on the moors—traveled on a still-unknown route from a trove of works Wharton had collected in The Mount, the home she built in 1902, to the far side of the Atlantic. (Cox)

According to the story, Wharton had bequeathed her library to two sons of wealthy friends, and although some of the nonfiction library she had collected disappeared amid World War II bombings, the fiction part of the library was intact: "The nonfiction treasures were destroyed by German bombs in World War II. That left 2,700 books that were stored in an English castle until they were bought by the Mount in 2005 for \$1.6 million. Somewhere in the literary world, a number of Wharton's books vanished. One of them was *Jane Eyre*." Wharton would have liked the idea that the books were kept in an old castle—it would have added to the Gothic atmosphere, as so many of her ghost stories have secrets buried in castles.¹ But at least one of these protected titles later appeared in a second-hand shop, where the aunt of the Lincolnshire donor of the book had purchased the copy of *Jane Eyre* for her niece. The Lenox news story is somewhat confusing about the book's origins, even with the "authentic" book

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¹Wharton might have also wondered about the Internet and its role in the Gothic return of her missing book, as her last Gothic story, "All Souls" shows her contempt for modern communication—the phone and the radio—as being one of the reasons the ghostly imagination has disappeared. See also Wharton's preface to the Scribner ghost stories about the wireless and the cinema obliterating the existence of ghosts, who necessitate silence.

plate bearing Wharton's name on the inside cover: this reclaimed version of *Jane Eyre* appears to have been published in 1920, at a time when Wharton was living in France. But the missing book seems like a device in Wharton's Gothic short stories, in which missing letters suddenly appear revealing secrets and mysterious connections and human interactions. As I was rereading Wharton's Gothic story "The Letters" (1910), I chanced on this Lenox newspaper article—and the image of Jane Eyre would not leave me. Critics have recognized the influence of Emily Brontë on Wharton's Gothic work (especially on *Ethan Frome*), but no one has looked adequately at Charlotte Brontë's impact on Wharton's Gothic imagination, so I looked for the lost Jane in Wharton's Gothic fiction.²

Late twentieth-century feminist critics, of course, have noted the influence of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* on subsequent Gothic images of womanhood in life and literature (although not specifically on Wharton). Elaine Showalter sees Brontë's most innovative characteristic in *Jane Eyre* as "the division of the Victorian female psyche into its extreme components of mind and body" in the characters of the orphan Helen and the madwoman Bertha: Jane needs to negotiate between the two representations to integrate "spirit and body" (113). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar show the trajectory of criticism on the nature of Jane (albeit not as an influence on Wharton): Victorian critics were stunned by Jane's anger and pride (Gilbert and Gubar 338); male critics, like Richard Chase, felt that *Jane Eyre* was a type of manual for the "betterment of governesses and equal rights for women," but he also noted the psychological dilemma emerging from Jane's encounter with male sexuality (Gilbert and Gubar 358); late twentieth-century critics saw the "moral Gothic" of *Jane Eyre* with its "archetypal scenario for all those mildly thrilling romantic encounters between a scowling Byronic hero . . . and a trembling heroine . . . " (Gilbert and Gubar 337). Gilbert and Gubar offered their own interpretation, which still resonates with feminist critics today: the main confrontation for Jane is with Bertha, not Rochester, and that "mad woman in the attic," as "her dark double" (360), represents her confrontation with "hunger, rebellion, and rage" (339, 360). It is only after the "symbolic castration" of Rochester (368) that there can be an "egalitarian relationship"—a happy ending with the "meeting of true minds" (369, 370). Obviously indebted to Gilbert and Gubar, Priscilla Walton's illuminating study of another famous Gothic governess in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* shows that there

²See the extended discussion by Jean Blackall Frantz on Emily Brontë and Wharton. Jane Beer and Avril Horner read "Miss Mary Pask" as a parody of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Kathy A. Fedorko looks at both *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* in passing, but the latter mainly in the context (and only briefly) in relationship to Wharton's *Summer*. Jenni Dyman alludes to Emily Brontë in passing in relationship to two of Wharton's ghost stories. Emily Orlando notices some similarities between *Jane Eyre* and Wharton's "Mr. Jones" in a note (223).

Although John Seelye does not discuss *Jane Eyre* in the context of Wharton, he does show how nineteenth and early-twentieth century adolescent novels by such authors as Alcott, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Kate Douglas Wiggin, Lucy Maud Montgomery, and Eleanor H. Porter appropriated "coming of age" themes from *Jane Eyre*.

are few options for women, suggesting that within the Victorian feminine triptych of the “good mother,” the “whore,” and the “lunatic,” James’s governess is obviously the latter. Elisabeth Bronfen reiterates the position of Victorian woman as either the demonic outcast woman, the saintly “angel of the house,” or the fallen but penitent woman. In her Lacanian analysis of *Jane Eyre*, Bronfen focuses on the two dead (absent) women, Jane’s friend—the orphan Helen Burns, representing masochistic impulses, and Rochester’s “vampire” wife Bertha, representing sadistic impulses.³ Jane must negotiate between the two; finding herself in a position of “social liminality,” Jane confronts “her two ‘Others’” and is forced to deal with “aspects of the death drive within herself” (Bronfen 220). Helen and Bertha represent two ends of the feminine spectrum: Helen is the “innocent, passive, fading woman” and acts “as signifier for the desired Otherness of the sublime” while Bertha is “the powerful self-assertive woman” who signifies “the threatening otherness of the body, of nature, of sexuality” (Bronfen 223). Diane Hoeveler has found *Jane Eyre* to be the culmination of a female Gothic tradition, wherein the passive-aggressive female protagonist wins over a wounded and “rehumanized” male (221–22).

Wharton dispels the myth of the Victorian model of Gothic womanhood in her ghost stories, which span the period between 1891 and 1937 and thus bridge the gaps between late Victorian, Realistic, and Modernist depictions of the Gothic heroine. There is no vestige of sentimentality left in Wharton’s heroine by the end of her typical Gothic narrative: she is forced to encounter the rational within herself to decipher the madness around her, or she is made to look like a fool by the servant class. There are no lovesick heroes or heroines, who can find completion in the other’s sexuality, wealth, or fantasies, or at least not ultimately, in Wharton’s world view.⁴ Wharton recognized that the love plot in *Jane Eyre* was not realistic, but even so, she preferred Brontë’s book to the moralistic pap of other Victorian women writers: “The novels of Charlotte Brontë, which now seem in some respects so romantically unreal, were denounced for sensuality and immorality; and for a time English fiction was in danger of dwindling to the pale parables of Miss Mulock and Miss Yonge” (Wharton, *Writing of Fiction* 48–49). In Wharton’s own work, the Gothic mind moves from Victorian narcissism and self-centeredness to Modernist solipsism, loneliness, and alienation.

³Bronfen is not as sympathetic as recent critics to Bertha; she sees her not as a maligned displaced Creole, but as a powerful vampirelike and sadistic female figure (221), probably in relationship to Brontë’s actual description of Bertha as a vampire; cf. Jean Rhys’s more sensitive recreation of Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As others have noted, Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses the “Jane” figure in her famous ghost story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” where the wife is ultimately seen as the Bertha figure, who is aware of her husband and some “Jane” locking her up.

⁴Susan Goodman has described the missing love plots in her novels as reflecting Wharton’s own life: “Without ever rejecting the inevitability and the rightness of marriage, her heroines resembled their author. Their wish for a perfect soulmate, coupled with their inability to envision other structures for their lives, necessitate painful compromises” (8).

There are several moments of haunting self-recognition in *Jane Eyre* that Wharton duplicates in her ghost stories. These include the three episodes when Jane feels entombed in a room or witnesses an invalid or dying woman in an eerily enclosed space and is forced to encounter her alter ego. These depictions of spectral encounters and death-in-life situations may have taught Wharton that ghosts who are still alive are often more frightening than ghosts who come back to haunt the living. When she is locked up in the “red-room” for being “bad” to her boy cousin by her aunt, Mrs. Reed, Jane is fraught with all sorts of fears, mainly stemming from the fact that the patriarch uncle had died in the room, and it seemed off limits. Jane recounts that only on Saturdays would the house maid visit the room to dust off the mirrors and furniture, but that Mrs. Reed hid valuable parchments here in a secret drawer. The orphan girl expresses her fear of being imprisoned in this room, for “Mr. Reed had been dead nine years: it was in this chamber he breathed his last; here he lay in state; hence his coffin was borne by the undertaker’s men; and since that day, a sense of dreary consecration had guarded it from frequent intrusion” (11). Jane’s imagination wreaks havoc so that when she looks into the mirror she sees a phantomlike, sprite-like version of herself: “All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving while all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit” (11). This encounter with herself in the looking glass permits her to long for liberty and leave the Reed household. She later feels that the presence of another spirit, perhaps her uncle trying to save her, streak as a light across the mirror. But she finally realizes that there is no patriarchal protective power: she is alone, terrified by herself, and clamors for Bessie the servant to put her back into the nursery. Although Bessie is the most maternal figure in the household, Jane must still find her way by herself. At the orphanage boarding school where she is sent as a form of punishment, she is ostracized again for being naughty and finds one good friend, Helen, who dies the death of a suffering and passive “True Woman,” as she is not bitter about the strictness of the school master that has ultimately done her in and looks forward to happiness in the afterlife. Jane projects her sense of helplessness onto her and falls asleep embracing the dying Helen. Throughout the text she has nightmares about a needy child crying out for her help and clamoring to her for dear life: these could be wish fulfillment dreams as she seeks a missing mother (Kristeva’s sense of the abject mother)—or anxiety dreams about her future role as a mother. Most frightening is Jane’s encounter in Thornfield Hall with the mad woman in the attic, Bertha, just days before her scheduled wedding to Rochester. Jane, who does not yet know the identity of Bertha but who has trespassed on her floor, awakens in her own room to see the monstrous and primitive vampire-like woman reflected in the mirror. Clearly, this is a sign of their merging

identities as raging, helpless, or violated women. Terrified of being revisited by this phantom the next evening before her wedding, Jane escapes to the nursery where she shares a bed with her charge Adèle, who seems the “emblem of her past” (244). All of these episodes mirror back Jane’s own sense of helplessness, desire for a mother,⁵ or fear of her raging but childlike self. And there is a recurrent type of narcissism for Jane: as one critic puts it, *Jane Eyre* explores the relationship “between home and the unheimlich” and “between the individual identity of a beloved, and the gothic entrapment that can result if the two coincide” (120–21). For Brontë’s and Wharton’s female characters, this struggle to disengage with the fabricated alter-ego becomes a dangerous fight for independent life.

It is only through “letters” that Jane can open up communication with the world and find a way back home to herself, not as a passive recipient, but as an active writer. As a thinking woman, she can and must enact change. Thus, for example, as a student and then teacher at Lowood, she feels walled in: “I had had no communication by letter or message with the other world” (72). She craves liberty more than anything, and by almost supernatural means, she discovers the advertisements for governesses lying on her pillowcase, writes application letters, and is overjoyed when she gets one response—which brings her to Thornfield Hall. She is a writer and an artist, often without an audience: she shows her rather surreal paintings to Rochester, who promptly critiques them for not seeming realistic enough. Later, the importance of missed letters come to light: when Mrs. Reed is dying, Jane, who is called back to care for her, discovers that Mrs. Reed has hidden the letter from her that would have set her free—a letter claiming that Jane would be her uncle John Eyre’s heir at the time of his death. But when John Eyre does die, a letter miraculously reaches her through the attorney Mr. Briggs, and thus she becomes financially independent. Still, her heart feels cheated as she yearns for Rochester, and she sends him two letters, but “not a line, not a word” reaches her, and after half a year, she falls into despondency; only a ghostly voice of Rochester in a dream calls her back to Lowood, not the epistle she had awaited. The false fairy tale ending, the happily ever after (“romantically unreal”) solution that Wharton would come to distrust, comes in the shape of Jane’s marriage to Rochester, now blind and thus equal to the erstwhile helpless Jane, though she has since learned to be her own agent for change. But finally, Rochester imprisons Jane by making her first his nurse and then his wife—and the mother to his biological child. Definitely the money Jane inherits from her deceased bachelor uncle would be more appealing to Wharton, who in her own story about “Letters” makes the character’s inheritance her

⁵After Jane is overcome by horror at finding out at the altar about Rochester’s first wife, she gets a supernatural message from the dead mother to flee the premises. There seems to be a connection beyond the grave to the mother as guide, one that in her own life, Wharton was missing.

way to a tentative type of freedom. (Virginia Woolf, who shared Wharton's predilection for a room over a man of one's own, would also have applauded taking an inheritance over a husband.)

Wharton's Modernist sensibility shifts the emphasis to alienation and non-communication: sometimes the letters from the dead (or from the living dead) never make it to the addressee. In "The Letters," Wharton rewrites the Gothic governess plot and makes the final resolution a kind of Jamesian epiphany, as the truth of the desperate situation is recognized. Although it has not been discussed in any extensive way,⁶ "The Letters" serves as a useful starting point for understanding Wharton's Gothic. Published in 1910 in *Century Magazine* and later as the final story in *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (2010), it features a triptych of women, who resemble those in *Jane Eyre* to some degree, and the setting is remarkably like that of *Jane Eyre*—with Lizzie West, the protagonist, a governess type, tutoring Juliet, the daughter of a wealthy passionate melancholy man, whose wife is an invalid, living in a "drug-scented room" (862). The story takes place in Paris, where an expatriate American artist, Mr. Vincent Deering, has tried to establish himself as a writer, but without much success. Similarly, the American expatriate Lizzie has given up her thwarted artistic dreams and becomes a tutor, simply to survive. But her student, Juliet, is difficult and spoiled. Frustrated by her inability to motivate or teach her charge, she has a mini-breakdown of sorts and tells Mr. Deering that she feels ineffective in dealing with his daughter. He sympathizes with Lizzie and tells her that the child is not to blame, that the mother has given her "frivolous" tastes (and we recall Brontë's Rochester also complaining about his foster daughter's frivolous impulses, which he attributes to her French opera-dancer mother's equally careless nature). Deering's ultimate response is to draw Lizzie closer to him and kiss her passionately, telling her that it's nice she's just around for him, as he enjoys her calming presence: "You do *me* good, at any rate—you make the house seem less like a desert" (863, emphasis in original). The governess falls in love.

All the while, the ailing wife seems insignificant, until we hear a strange confession one day from Mr. Deering, who had taken daughter and wife to the countryside, to visit relatives, while his flirtation continued with Lizzie. When Lizzie arrives at the house to give Juliet her lessons, he answers quite abruptly: "My wife is dead—she died suddenly ten days ago. Didn't you see it in the papers?" (867). Lizzie, who is in the dark about so much, cannot afford newspapers; the rest of the story serves to illuminate her lack of knowledge.

⁶Hermione Lee and Cynthia Griffin Wolf suggest that it was in the period of Wharton's difficult relationship with Mort Fullerton that this story was written; obviously, the idea from an unreciprocated show or passion would fit here, as he was also being devious with another woman in his life, his wife. Jenni Dyman refers back to Lewis's biography and quotes him: "Deering . . . is almost to a detail an ironic though tempered portrait of Morton Fullerton" (63).

After Deering's abrupt (and dispassionate) announcement of his wife's death, we hear that he will be off to America to make good on some of his wife's possessions and then return, but not before he and Lizzie have various assignations, although not in "their usual haunts," for the sake of decorum. He promises to write and tells her he'll anxiously await her letters. He makes arrangements for his daughter to stay with relatives, and she retreats to her sad domicile at the "Mme. Chopin's Pension." There she meets other single women trying to bide their time, waiting for life to happen. Just as Jane tries to find a sisterhood with Helen Burns in the boarding school, so too does Lizzie find solace in another American boarder at the pension, a rather pathetic Southern woman with an active romantic imagination, Andora Macy (a grotesque version of the Southern belle, who seems to belong in a Flannery O'Connor story). Deering sends Lizzie several letters from the train and from the steamer, which she "wore all day in her shabby blouse, and hid all night beneath her pillows" (872). Thriving initially on the "wealth of this hidden life" (872), she is "haunted" (873) by the question of whether her sister boarders would ever know of her exultations. Lizzie writes letters, and her sidekick Andora (described as "pale, faded, immature") enjoys intercepting letters from Deering, but after receiving only two letters from him in New York, Lizzie receives no more and she begins to feel pathetic. Since she never hears back from him, she figures he has lost interest. The Southern belle keeps telling her to persist in writing letters—that he would surely answer back at some point. But Lizzie, to save face, writes a kind letter, refusing to give him an ultimatum: it gives her "spectral satisfaction" to not sound rancorous but to write as if she were a woman of the world (876).

In the meantime, just like Jane Eyre, Lizzie receives a surprise inheritance from a distant relative, and can move out of the rather cramped quarters of the pension to find herself a sense of home. At a social event, three years later, she chances upon Deering, just recently returned from America with the small inheritance from his wife, which did not amount to much, he confesses. At first, he seems to want to avoid her, but when he finds out she has inherited money, he becomes interested and finally sweet-talks her into marrying him—coming up with the lie that he could not answer her many letters because he found that the wife's inheritance left him no more than a pauper and thus felt ashamed. He tells her that her letters meant a lot to him. Soon after this declaration, Lizzie gives up the "spectral claim of Mr. Jackson Beer" (886), one of her suitors and marries Deering instead. In a move typical of Wharton, Lizzie exchanges one enclosure for another. As a single woman coming into money, she was "like the possessor of an old unfinished house, with random furniture and bric-a-brac perpetually pouring in" (886), and now with her husband, the house becomes like a large playpen for her son. The story comes to crisis when one day Lizzie discovers her son playing with a discarded bag that turns out to contain a packet of unopened love letters from Lizzie to

Deering. At this moment she realizes the charade; that her husband had never read the letters he professed to value so much and that he had clearly married her for her money. It is at this moment that she realizes the fraudulent basis of romantic love, but tragedy quickly turns to irony. Although she initially feels like a woman in a Gothic story ["When one's house fell, one fled from the ruins" (894)] who remembers that happiness in novels is "built on a lie' always crumbled" (894), she ultimately disassociates herself from these romantic conventions. In fact, she sees her husband as the more disempowered mate in the marriage: "She had youth, money, energy; all the trumps were on her side," and like an unlikely Gothic heroine, she realizes that her husband's plight is more tenuous: "It was much more difficult to think of what would become of Deering" (894). After coming to a realization of the false foundation of her marriage, Lizzie concludes that "It was horrible to know too much; there was always blood in the foundations Could anyone look in the Medusa's face and live?" (895).

Like Jane, who has faced the monster in *Bertha*, Lizzie must make sense of the grotesque discovery—about herself and her husband. In a moment of epiphany, she realizes all the weaknesses and flaws of her husband. Unlike Jane, who has returned to Rochester to be an equal, although with her mind still intent on romantic love, Lizzie settles for a pedestrian love and utilitarian life, which makes her feel duped but also pragmatic, as she wisely concedes: "The years had not been exactly what she had dreamed; but if they had taken away certain illusions they had left her richer realities in their stead. . . . [Her husband] was not the hero of her dreams, but he was the man she loved, and who had loved her" (897). Her Southern tagalong friend Andora tells her she knows exactly how she feels, but the story ends with Lizzie admonishing her romantically inclined friend, "you don't know anything . . ." (897). This horrific moment of recognition will haunt Wharton's future Gothic heroines, who forfeit the image of an imagined lover when a more lackluster reality impinges on their dreams. The self-knowledge, the unsavory side of independence—of being alone, haunted Lizzie earlier in the story, after she had been abandoned by Deering as her lover. This feeling of petrifying loneliness is uncannily similar to what Wharton's older Gothic heroines will feel in the later works: Lizzie has a terrible "fear of illness and incapacity"—a "horror of being ill and 'dependent'" (876), after Deering had stopped communicating with her, but when he returns and becomes her husband under false pretenses, she is challenged to rethink the love narrative. Wharton's Gothic heroines in her later works are forced to confront themselves alone.

There are no actual ghostly appearances in "The Letters": what haunts the protagonist and the reader are the ghostly letters, vestiges of a past that never really was—the spectral remnants of the governess's erstwhile romantic imagination. The packet of unread letters is more horrifying than the appearance of any ghost—they represent wasted energy and time and the

false foundation of a life. The reader stares in disbelief at the packet of unread letters, as dead as Bartleby's letters: "On errands of life, these letters speed to death" (Melville 45). Like the woman writing in the marketplace, Lizzie has written for a female audience, for the likes of the silly Andora; and the letters to her lover go unread and unheeded, as he is not interested in the romantic prattle or sentimental discourse of the woman writer. Of course, Wharton certainly does not want to be that kind of writer.⁷

Wharton continues to play with the idea of the silenced versus the knowing/writing woman—the woman who can decipher cryptic letters and the woman who is mystified by ghostly letters. For example, in "Pomegranate Seed" (1931), Charlotte Ashby, the second wife of the lawyer Kenneth Ashby, tries to decipher the handwriting on the letter addressed to him and can hardly read it because the writing is so light, almost illegible. But she postulates that "in spite of its masculine curves, the writing was so visibly feminine. Some hands are sexless, some masculine, at first glance, the writing on the gray envelope, for all its strength and assurance, was without doubt a woman's" (679). Carol Singley and Susan Sweeney have looked at the Persephone myth in the context of the repressed woman's story.⁸ But one might also detect shades of *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte, Kenneth's second wife, needs to overcome the ghostly presence of his first wife, Elsie, who still lingers in the household, even with the removal of her portrait from the library, her husband's favorite room, to the children's nursery. It is in the library where Charlotte spies on her husband, finally discovering his reaction to one of these ghostly letters and his illicit affair with a dead woman—when she sees him kissing the letter.⁹ It is curious that the letters from the deceased wife start appearing only after Charlotte's honeymoon with Kenneth in the West Indies. Surely this image of the forgotten wife comes back to haunt Kenneth precisely at that juncture because of the sexual connotations of the West Indies—the home of another forgotten ghostly and voracious wife, Bertha. Charlotte, in contrast to the former wife Elsie, is down-to-earth

⁷Many critics have noted Wharton's desire to not be associated with other contemporary women writers or her American predecessors Jewett and Freeman. See the extended discussion by Deborah Lindsay Williams in her book *Not in Sisterhood*. See also my discussion of Wharton's similarity to the Gothic New England women writers she derides ("Bourgeois Sexuality and the Gothic Plot").

⁸Singley and Sweeney discuss the anxious power of authorship for women: "In this ghost story, Edith Wharton purloins both the 'letter' and the power it represents; but she also reflects her own ambivalence—and that of the female reader—toward the possession of such power" (24). Candace Waid also sees the woman writer "as like Persephone, speaking as a ghost from the other side" (203). I, however, feel that the wife in "Pomegranate Seed" has a terrific power—as she can rewrite the script of her husband's life/death. She calls him back like a siren.

⁹It is not surprising that the library is a focal point for the woman wanting knowledge in Wharton's ghost stories (especially, in the context of "Pomegranate Seed" and "Afterward"). In Wharton's own life, the library was a special place where she could commune in secret with the great classics of the past in her father's library; her unimaginative mother, however, did not want her to read novels, so those came later.

Though I came up with the idea of "dead letters" in my title by thinking both of Bartleby and of the dead letters in many of Wharton's ghost stories, I later found a reference to "dead letters" in an earlier review of Wharton's *Ghosts*, by William Rose Benet (1937), who preferred the ghost stories about men to "the lady's tales of mere 'fetches' and witches and letters from the dead" (quoted in Dyman 60). Dyman suggests that Benet praised "The Eyes" and "A Bottle of Perrier" because they were "both masculine tales of domination" (60).

and not glamorous, but quite matter-of-fact like Kenneth's mother, with whom Charlotte forms a bond (against the memory of the erstwhile wife). And there are many associations with the "sexualized" other here, in the context of the West Indies, as in several Wharton ghost stories. For example, in "The Lady Maid's Bell" (1902) Mr. Brympton, the brooding sexualized master of the house, storms off for pleasure to the West Indies in the middle of the narrative, when the servant Hartley is trying to fathom the sexual dynamics of the household—and the prior relationship of Brympton to the deceased servant she's replaced, Emma Saxon. If the first wife, Elsie, in "Pomegranate Seed," is triumphant from the supernatural realm, it is because her husband is still enamored of her: the common consensus during their marriage was that "he was more like an unhappy lover than a comfortably contented husband" (682) and that he never had eyes for anyone else. The fact that the dead wife, Elsie, can fetch him back to her suggests that she is quite empowered, and more so than the living wife: in life she had "absolutely dominated" her husband and her letters are quite effective in overpowering him.¹⁰ In her psychoanalytic essay, Virginia Blum distinguishes between living and dead wives in the Wharton canon and suggests that husbands or suitors always prefer the dead to the living women because the living women are too demanding, emotionally and sexually: "The dead are far less terrifying than the living because they exact no commitment" (15). In the context of "Pomegranate Seed," Charlotte, the second wife, was becoming too real, so that the ghostly wife had a tighter grip on his fantasy.

One of the reasons Alice Hartley remains safe from her master's sexual advances in "The Lady Maid's Bell," is that she, like Charlotte, is rather common and unassuming. In some ways, both Hartley and Charlotte have taken on the vulnerable governess or domestic role. (Charlotte obsesses about how good a mother she would make to the children, and Alice Hartley, as an educated servant, is asked to read to the invalid wife.) There is much gossip about the kind of servant who would survive in the Brympton household, as many of Mrs. Brympton's maids have quit after Emma Saxon's twenty-year service ended in death. Mrs. Brympton's aunt, who hires the sickly and pale Alice, alludes to the unhappy marriage and the somber household, in which Mrs. Brympton had lost two children. A former acquaintance of Alice, another maid, meets her off the premises and advises her not to leave, saying "nobody could stay in the house" (507). Alice immediately thinks of Mr. Brympton's animalistic sexuality and feels it might have been an attractive servant, who had been endangered. To her query, "Is she young and handsome," her friend exclaims in the negative, "She's the kind that mothers engage when they've gay young gentlemen at college" (507). But Alice is safe

¹⁰Using French feminist criticism, one could say her letters defy male interpretation—and so they cannot be deciphered. Still, these are strong letters that undo the husband.

as a result of the disfigurement she suffered from typhoid: looking as pale as a ghost, she seems to fit the ghostly household. And Alice recognizes the dismissive look from her boss Mr. Brympton: “[He] looked me over in a trice. I knew what that look meant, from 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, emphasis in original). The story is filled with sexual intrigue: Alice, like her predecessor, acts as a go-between delivering letters from her mistress to her presumed lover Mr. Ranford. The former maid, Emma Saxon, seemed indispensable to both Mr. and Mrs. Brympton: there is some indication that Brympton seduced her, and another suggestion that she was more than just a sister figure to Mrs. Brympton, as her ghost appears to ward off advances from the husband Mr. Brympton. And Alice has a strong desire to see Emma Saxon, because she is intrigued by the perpetual charm and power that she possessed in the Brympton household. She is haunted by a figure crouching over her at night, just as Jane Eyre has been spied on by Bertha: Alice relates her sleepless night, when she heard the former maid’s door to the locked room “open stealthily”:

... the silence began to be more dreadful to me than the most mysterious sounds. I felt that *someone* was cowering there behind the locked door, watching and listening, as I watched and listened, and I could almost have cried out, “Whoever you are, come out and let me see you face to face, but don’t lurk there and spy on me in the darkness.” (513, emphasis in original)

Her sense of security is undermined by the former maid’s presence, but she also feels that Emma’s ghostly appearance (possibly like Jane’s overpowering image of Bertha) serves as a warning.¹¹ Emma’s final presence in Mrs. Brympton’s dressing room frightens off the intrusive callous husband, who rushes off at the sight of Emma’s ghost and the fainting wife with her accusing eyes. Illness has a way of staving off sexual advances, and the brutish husband is run out of the house, half crazed at the sight of Emma’s ghost. Although Alice Hartley does not have a commanding sexual presence, she does have the last word, as she chastises the husband for his insensitivity, and the house is claimed by the servants after the mistress’s death.¹²

Another ghost story that suggests that a woman can find her voice, without a man, also has a problematic ending. “Mr. Jones” (1928) has the

¹¹Kathy Fedorko has focused on the sexual dynamics of the story, with the ringing bell representing woman’s sexuality (28).

¹²Most critics feel that Hartley is the disempowered servant, but I agree with Cynthia Murillo’s assessment that she does have a certain amount of power, especially in setting things straight with Mr. Brympton—who exits quickly after her chiding him.

present-day Lady Jane Lynke (a veritable link to the past, and our archetypal Jane) inheriting an ancestral mansion and trying to rectify the story of Lady Thudeney, a distant relative, who had been “deaf and dumb” and thus easily married off to a reprobate uncaring “Byronic” lord. Lady Thudeney was under the keep of “Mr. Jones,” a servant who actually took over the everyday functions of the castle. He basically tried to eradicate her story by keeping pertinent letters locked. Lady Jane, however, probes the mystery and reveals the contents of the letters. As a writer and as a modern knowing woman, Lady Jane can find a voice—and she is an interloper to the forbidden blue room and to the muniment room (with the locked-up letters about her namesake Jane).¹³ She also breaks into the desk to rectify the woman’s story. Unfortunately, the caretaker Mr. Jones, who according to the housekeeper Mrs. Clemm, is “more dead than living” (504), has the final say in the house from beyond the grave. Mrs. Clemm, a loyal servant and a vestige of the feudal past, initially attempts to prevent Lady Jane from discovering the hushed Lady Thudeney’s letter, but she dies a dreadful death when the ghost of Mr. Jones strangles her (a literal hushing of woman’s voice) in retribution for not keeping the patriarchal secrets of the house. Lady Jane seems rational and thus powerful in getting out the true story of Lady Thudeney, and it is possible that she has escaped the fate of the hushed woman as a writer. But it is noteworthy that Stramer, the male novelist in the story who accompanies her and could be a love interest, initially tries to prevent her from taking over the blue room, and could co-opt her material in the marketplace—and thus, like Mr. Jones, could nullify the woman’s story. There is hope that Lady Jane will not become like Lady Thudeney because even before her inheritance at the age of thirty-five, “she had led an active, independent, and decided life” (498). Moreover, she was a writer given to the real, not the sentimental: she had “written two or three brisk business-like little books about cities usually dealt with sentimentally” (498). The story begs for a happy ending, with Lady Jane maintaining her independence, even as Mrs. Clemm remains the sacrifice from the past. But Georgiana, the frightened niece of the just deceased Mrs. Clemm, accuses Lady Jane of meddling with the papers (there’s absolutely no sign of sisterhood here)—and in shock, Georgiana falls “in a swoon at Stramer’s feet” (123). And so the story ends with a weak woman fainting at a man’s feet: this certainly does not bode well. Still, it is positive to see Lady Jane writing out a woman’s story instead of becoming merely an amanuensis for male culture. In contrast, “The Angel at the Grave” (1901) and “The House of the Dead Hand” (1904)

¹³For an excellent discussion about the discussion of rooms in Wharton’s “Mr. Jones” and woman’s struggle for autonomy, see Jacqueline Wilson-Jordan’s essay about the story.

each portray an artistic granddaughter or daughter giving up her life to transcribe male culture, in the name of the family patriarch and thus becoming buried in a mausoleum-like house.

If the romantic plot is denied Wharton's thinking women in her female-centered ghost stories, men with similar false romantic expectations are also denied fulfillment in the haunted male stories.¹⁴ There is usually a love triangle involved in these stories, too, and although I am focusing on the ghost stories and not Wharton's Gothic novels, one can surely see the conflict in her most famous New England Gothic, *Ethan Frome* (1911), which tells of Ethan's sexual repression, moment of passion and subsequent guilt—and the eternal punishment of having two invalid women (Zeena, the erstwhile paralyzed mother figure, who ends up taking care of the injured once vibrant Mattie) torture him for the remainder of his life. Virginia Blum also points out that Frome would never have been happy with either Zeena or Mattie as his wife because they both would have reminded him in their maternal or housewifely ways of his own mother, which would have made him lose romantic interest: Mattie would have become too real, like Zeena “a querulous shrew” (Blum 23), which she does. A dead Mattie would have been easier to live with, as Frome has “expectations no living woman can meet” (Blum 23). Blum goes so far as to call Ethan “the vampire of *Ethan Frome*” (23). Clearly, the way out of Ethan's dilemma would have been to leave the women out of the picture—and to focus on the rational, his love of engineering—to escape the barren landscape of Starkfield, or to actually send the good-bye letter he had penned to the shrewish Zeena, although thoughts of her caring for his Gothic mother at the start of the narrative leave him guilt-ridden. But he co-opts his own destiny and chooses death in life, becoming like the deceased Fromes in the ancestral graves he observes early in the novel. His romantic imagination, like Rochester's in *Jane Eyre*, has done him in.

Since its inception, the Gothic mode has exposed the conflicts between the irrational (excessive, sexual, fantastic) and the rational, with the rational and the status quo usually winning the day. Wharton's aristocratic or patriarchal

¹⁴Much criticism of ghost stories dealt with social class issues or the imprisoned woman motif. See essays by Holly Blackford, Monika Elbert (“Transcendental Economy”), Karen J. Jacobsen, and Ann Mattis on the role of the servant class (psychological and social implications of Wharton's capitalist milieu). For the most extensive psychological reading of Wharton's emotional dependence on the servant class (to replace the lifelong feeling of the missing mother), see Gloria Erlich's book-length study. In her essay about Gothic duality in women, Erlich suggests that the absent mother comes back to haunt husbands and daughter figures as a vampirelike mother in such stories as “Bewitched” and in *Ethan Frome*.

Although many of Wharton's ghost stories are male-centered (as in *Tales of Men and Ghosts*), not much critical attention has been given to the male dilemma in Wharton's Gothic, with the exception of Jenni Dyman's comprehensive survey of Wharton's ghost stories, which includes a sympathetic picture of males and females in a changing social arena. Lori Jirousek also shows changing social roles of males in her reading of Wharton's and Freeman's ghost stories, but her sympathies are with the female characters. Jennifer Haytock does discuss some of the male narrators or characters in the ghost stories in her chapter “Accumulation of Men in the Short Stories,” but her conclusion is predictable: “Either the woman writer can co-opt the male voice and its power, or she is merely a puppet in a power structure too overwhelming for her” (99).

Gothic males must be wounded, like Rochester, in order to confront a more accurate image of themselves reflected back by a woman, usually as part of a love triangle. In her depiction of the wounded male, Wharton might be playing off a tradition passed on by Charlotte Brontë. Diane Hoeveler discusses the composite Gothic male in *Jane Eyre*: “The sentimental novel tradition chooses to tame the aristocratic hero by feminizing him, while the female gothic novel chooses to make the hero safe for the middle-class world by ritualistically wounding him” (214). For Wharton, the sensitized male, the apparent survivor of the Gothic triangle, usually has the final word, as the more traditional male dies, and the conventional female ends up dead, hushed, or imprisoned. For example, in “Kerfol” (1916), Anne de Cornault ends up (like Brontë’s Bertha) locked up in “the keep of Kerfol, where she is said to have died many years later, a harmless mad-woman” (111). Rather predictably, the lonely young woman, Anne, imprisoned with her mismatched older husband, falls under the spell of a younger suitor, Hervé de Lanrivain, and receives one day a propositional missive from him, which she burns. That evening a mob of mad ghostly dogs (spirits of the dogs murdered by her husband) maul Yves de Cornault to death, and she is accused of the crime. Her suitor Lanrivain denies any connection to Anne at the court proceeding, which is based on a patriarchal view of condemning miscreant women as witches. The witnesses who try to defend her include “an old herb-gatherer,” “a drunken clerk,” and “a half-witted shepherd” (101), who are seen as suspect as she.

The older story of Anne is told by a contemporary frame narrator who wishes to purchase the castle because of a desire to experience ghosts—to feel their presence, not simply to see them: “I was beginning to want to know more; not to *see* more—I was by now so sure it was not a question of seeing—but to feel more: feel all the place had to communicate” (91, emphasis in original). This is another ghost story that seeks to tell the silenced woman’s story (cf. “Mr. Jones”) but ends up focusing on men’s desires. The story starts with male bonding: Lanrivain’s descendant is trying to get his friend (the frame narrator) to buy the Kerfol castle and gives him a copy of the history of the family that includes Anne’s trial. Like the original Lanrivain who finally disavowed his love for Anne, the narrator leaves the woman’s story behind: he finally becomes more intrigued by Lanrivain and finds himself “envying his fate” (111). Lanrivain had joined the order of Port Royal, a Jansenist abbey outside Paris, but the narrator believes that Lanrivain enjoyed a romantic as well as a thinking/spiritual life: “in the course of his life two great things had happened to him: he had lived romantically, and he must have talked with Pascal” (111). Significantly, the story ends on the word “Pascal,” the great thinker who merged faith with reason. His famous adage: “Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point” suggests the emotional

triumph over rationality that the narrator seeks. In her ghost stories of romance, Wharton privileges the mind—or more specifically, introspection based on intuition—for both sexes. “Valuing intuition without sacrificing reason,” Pascal “allowed Wharton to shift authority from the outer world to the inner, even if that meant defying convention” (Singley 56).

In several ghost stories, Wharton defies convention in a different manner and complicates the traditional love story by focusing on homosexual love or attraction, but she still favors a pragmatic approach to love. One can apply Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s idea of the triangulated homoerotic relationship to several of these stories.¹⁵ “His Father’s Son” (1909) tells about the gift a proud father has bequeathed his son—the appreciation of the beautiful and lovely. Even though the very awkward Mason Grew has had artistic aspirations and longings for a beautiful woman, he has resigned himself to the mediocre in life by working for a buckle manufacturer, even though “he moved in an enchanted world peopled with all the figures of romance” (716). After being jilted, he settles for a pedestrian marriage to Addie Wicks, but puts all his hopes for the beautiful into his artistically gifted son, who goes to Harvard Law School, secures a good job in New York, and then finds a stunning beauty as his fiancée: Mason recalls seeing her in the social column, and with it, “its ghostly double: the vision of his young self bending above such a shoulder and such shining hair” (720). He regrets that his wife has been so common, and now that she is deceased, he lives vicariously through the romanticized image of his son.

The ironic twist of the story is that the son Ronald feels that he is the illegitimate child of a famous European pianist, Dolbrowski, whom Mr. Grew and his wife had heard in New York. Mrs. Grew, who had never appreciated the arts, was strangely moved by the performance and told her husband she would like to write Dolbrowski a letter explaining her feelings. But she has no style or no sense of aesthetics, so her husband pens the musician letters and she copies them—the exchange of phantom letters continues for six months. In these letters Mr. Grew bares his own soul to the pianist, using his wife as his amanuensis. The pianist returns to New York, and although Mr. Grew’s wife is too “lazy” to accompany him to the concerts (728), Mr. Grew sees him another few times. His fervor and devotion continue, and the wife continues writing letters. His son, who is embarrassed by his very ordinary businessman father, feels more connected to the pianist and seems dismayed when he finds out the true identity of his father. Ronald, who has inherited what he thinks are the love letters sent to his mother, has even gone so far as to tell his fiancée Daisy about the phantom father, but the too real father enlightens

¹⁵For a discussion of triangulated homoerotic relationships, see my earlier readings in “A Bottle of Perrier” (“Wharton’s Modernist Gothic”) and in “Bewitched” (“Wharton’s Hybridization”). See also Richard Kaye’s discussion of homosexual themes in “Afterward” and “Pomegranate Seed.”

him about his parentage and about the author of the phantom letters addressed to the pianist. Mr. Grew bursts the son's bubble by mocking his romantic temperament, which he's inherited from the father: "it's just the kind of fool nonsense I used to feel at your age" (730). Although the story is more interested in making a comical statement about the Gothic sins of the fathers, the undercurrent clearly shows that the pianist has been the great love of Mr. Grew's life; in fact, the picture the pianist sent back to Mrs. Grew is still hanging on the wall. Mr. Grew has written aesthetically pleasing letters, and that has been the high point of his imaginative life—and his heart and soul have been given to another man, who has touched him in a way his wife could not. In using a woman's voice to get to the pianist, he has explored his gentler feminine side. Moreover, this story shows that men, too, can be ghost writers. But the end of the story suggests that the father's narcissism has simply given way to the son's, and that the father delights in the fact that he can live vicariously through the son's conquests—as he imagines the son more a duplicate of himself than of his now-deceased wife.

The element of narcissism in the triangulated love plot that Mr. Grew enjoys is replicated in "The Eyes" (1910), a story that shows the horrors of placing oneself at the apex of the triangle. The male protagonist, Andrew Culwin, enamored of his image as a pseudo-intellectual—is haunted by a pair of phantomlike eyes when he abuses those he feels are beneath him. He first toys with the girl Alice Noyes who has acted dutifully in his aunt's "Gothic library" as his secretary, and then with Alice's cousin Gilbert Noyes, the aspiring writer with whom Culwin has a dalliance in Rome. Jenni Dyman has suggested that "Culwin's relationship with Gilbert Noyes suggests that his flight from Alice resulted from homosexual panic at the thought of an impending liaison with a woman" (52). Many readings of "The Eyes" center on homosexual attraction and Wharton's critique of those bachelor men around her, like Morton Fullerton, who could not satisfy her need for love. However, I see the protagonist Culwin as too self-centered to love either male or female companions. At one point, he tries to deceive himself: "I shall have him [Gilbert] for life," but then he quickly corrects himself: "I'd never yet seen any one, man or woman, whom I was quite sure of wanting on these terms" (823), and he hastily returns to Gilbert. The haunting eyes bother him only when he does not tell the truth—that he cannot love either Alice or Gilbert. There is something strange about this, as the phantom eyes do not torment him when he is being cruelly or unnecessarily honest—when he disappears from Alice's life or when he tells Gilbert he is a second-rate artist. The real horror comes from within when he realizes, in the manner of Dorian Gray, that the monstrous eyes he detects in the mirror are his own and he cannot escape himself. These eyes also finally haunt both the young

protégé (Frenham) listening to his story and the male framing narrator who are horrified by the cruelty of the eyes. As one critic theorizes in another context about a different love plot, the question here, too, might be which mirror wins: “the self-reflecting mirror of narcissism (both male and female) or the other-reflecting mirror of mimeticism,” which oftentimes returns to the idea of self-love (Schor xviii).¹⁶ For Wharton’s characters, this mirror, more haunted, reflects an image of self-hatred; the vacuous soul of Culwin, the male dilettante, is more horrifying than the ghost story he attempts to tell.¹⁷

“The Moving Finger” (1901), a Poe-like ghost story, pays tribute to a beautiful woman who has died but been memorialized on the canvas of a narcissistic male painter, enamored with the image he has created of the dead woman. In this story, the males who fall in love with the image seem more bonded to each other than to the woman, who remains, especially after her death, just an image of the beautiful, as Poe would have it (in “The Philosophy of Composition” and in “The Oval Portrait”).¹⁸ As Blum states about Wharton’s Gothic in general, the male protagonists prefer the dead wives to the living because they are easier to manage. Ralph Grancey had been married to a narcissistic woman, who had almost usurped all of his energy. When “her death released him,” his friends wonder “how much of the man she had carried with her” (307). The male friends cannot figure out why he would remarry, but when they see the new Mrs. Grancy, they know: “She was the most beautiful and the most complete of explanations” (308); they even feel that his marriage to her will be the big event of his life. Grancy hires Claydon, the portrait-painter, to immortalize her: male friends come regularly to visit and gaze at the lovely portrait in the library; Claydon is even accused of having fallen in love with the image he created. Within three years of the portrait sitting, the new Mrs. Grancy is dead, and Mr. Grancy faces the aging process, alone. He feels alienated as his wife stays beautiful, but he continues aging, so he asks Claydon to make her look weary and aging as well. Claydon does so against his will. Finally, the deceased wife’s portrait has a knowing look on it that Grancy will die shortly, and he does. The painter Claydon inherits the portrait—and feels victorious over his rival. This story does not have the homoerotic dimension of “His Father’s Son,” but it does

¹⁶Naomi Schor discusses the romantic plot of George Sand’s *Indiana* here, with its “lure of narcissism, the impossibility of escaping the prison of self-reflection characteristic of the romantic ego and replacing it with a mimesis that strives to accommodate the other’s otherness, but which more than not is simply a more perfect model of the primary mirror of narcissism” (xviii).

¹⁷Charles L. Crow recently has read “The Eyes” as Wharton’s “complex response to the dilemma of a woman’s writing within gender-coded literary conventions” (167). I disagree that the Gothic woman librarian, Alice Nowell, is the victor here; she is easily written off the pages and male narcissism again wins the day in this Gothic tale.

¹⁸In most of the stories by Wharton I discuss here, there is an odd resemblance to Poe’s telltale sign of the Gothic: The death of a beautiful woman—only they are not always beautiful, as they are wives, not lovers. Every Wharton story but one I discuss here includes the death of at least one wife, if not two. And there seems to be a male clubhouse (as in “Fall of the House of Usher”) for men to get together to talk aesthetics, brought about by the death of a beautiful woman.

indicate male bonding over the death of a beautiful woman. In fact, her true personality is written out of the text; she becomes an art object to be claimed or co-opted by the male onlookers.

In contradistinction to the woman who could be formulated to the males' desires, as on the second Mrs. Grancy of "The Moving Finger" or the female librarian type in "The Eyes," there is the horrifying appearance of the woman with a voracious sexual appetite. The governess figure (in Wharton and in Brontë) seems malleable, but the Bertha figure is frightening, as it threatens a male's sense of his own power. In Wharton's "Miss Mary Pask," an American painter in France interrupts his work to visit a New England friend's sister in Brittany: Mary Pask, the "older and unmarried sister" of Grace Bridgeworth (309). The first-person narrator arrives at Miss Pask's house toward evening, and an older servant lets him in. To his horror, while the absent-minded artist is sitting in the dark, he realizes that he had been at Grace's house when she received news from the American Consul that the sister was dead. So the image he sees, he takes to be a ghost of Miss Pask. He contrasts her eerily wrinkled fingers and shriveled hand with the youthful but grotesque hand he had seen in her youth: it had been like "a caricature of herself; round, puffy, pink, yet prematurely old and useless" (315). He tries to escape her presence, but to no avail—her ghostlike being encompasses him and begs him to stay in a plaintive but coquettish way. She shares with him her fantasy in a crackling voice: ". . . sometimes I sit here and think: 'If a man came along some day and took a fancy to you?'" and continues even more directly, ". . . such things have happened, you know, even after youth's gone . . . a man who'd had his troubles too. But no one came till to-night . . . and now you say you are going" (318). Horrified more at being cornered by an old coquettish spinster than by a ghost, he runs out of the house and has a small nervous breakdown. He wonders whether desperate women like Mary might find a voice in death: "Supposing something survived of Mary Pask—enough 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" (319). Such thinking prompts him to believe she is akin to the "medieval vampire" (320). Later he finds out from the sister Grace that Mary Pask never died—but rather had suffered a cataleptic fit. With many apologies, she explains, "I thought I *had* written . . . You know I'm always lazy about letters" (322, emphasis in original; another case of phantom letters). As is the case of many of Wharton's Gothic tales, letters that do not reach the proper person may cause more of a horror than the actual event. But even more so, the living who are not fully alive are often more frightening than the actual dead.¹⁹

¹⁹See Virginia Blum's study, which focuses more on the male's Gothic desire for the dead woman who is less demanding; these dangerously deluded males become vampirelike in their desire for the beautiful ideal. But I contend here that the female characters come to the realization that the idealized Gothic lover is in fact a delusion, and their life becomes difficult in their entrapment to a grotesque image of their previously idealized mate.

In two of Wharton's later ghost stories, the idea of isolation and narcissism comes into play, although with a new twist. As Jane Eyre was stuck in the red room (associated with the patriarchal dead body) trying to decipher her youthful face in the mirror, and Wharton's Lady Jane in "Mr. Jones" had to find her voice in the blue room (previously off limits to women), so too do the later Wharton female protagonists need to come to terms with an equally frightening experience for women: aging. "The Looking-Glass" (1933) and "All Souls" (1937) are among Wharton's most terrifying ghost stories, as they force the protagonists to see themselves clearly in the mirror. These late stories characterize Wharton's own Angst about the aging process (with "All Souls" published posthumously), when many of her friends and beloved servants had died. These quintessentially modernist Gothic stories seem rather Prufrockian. Both female protagonists in these stories are self-centered and, like Prufrock, privileged in their narcissism—with middle- to upper-class sensibilities. A profound sense of loneliness, alienation, and detachment marks the Modernist Gothic, but the wealthy or middle-class Gothic heroine may try to stave off despair, at least temporarily, through the power of money.

In "The Looking-Glass," Mrs. Clingsland is suffering from empty-nest syndrome and a lackluster marriage: "She was friendly to her husband, and friendly to her children, but they meant less and less to her" (770). She has fed off the compliments of others, but they become fewer as she ages, as "the lines began to come about her eyes" (769), and she becomes the sexless invalid and grotesque aging woman of so many modern Gothic stories. She gets love letters from a foreign Duke, and even when she realizes he is after her money, she still keeps one of the letters. Cora, the rational servant figure and narrator of the story, observes:

What she wanted was a looking-glass to stare into; and when her own people took enough notice of her to serve as looking-glasses, which wasn't often, she didn't much fancy what she saw there. I think this was about the worst time of her life. She lost a tooth; she began to dye her hair; she went into retirement to have her face lifted, and then got frightened, and came out again looking like a ghost, with a pouch under one eye, where they'd begun the treatment. (770–71)

Ever more ghostlike, Mrs. Clingsland allows the servant/governess figure, the masseuse Cora Attlee, to deceive her by coming up with apocryphal letters from a lover, who was pretty much a product of Clingsland's imagination (based on a fleeting encounter years ago with a younger man, who died on the *Titanic*). Attlee, a member of the working class, has dabbled in the clairvoyant arts, and she knows that others will take advantage of Mrs. Clingsland's need, so Attlee "speaks" to the dead for Clingsland: she carries romantic message from a dying patient in (unromantic) New Jersey, a young man she's enlisted to write the letters and help deceive Mrs. Clingsland into a happy ignorance.

After writing a series of letters as a ghost writer, the young man is about to die, but he still writes one final ghostly love letter which Cora transcribes, and it is so moving that Mrs. Clingsland has had enough to sustain her. This ghost-writing episode clearly shows Wharton's critique of melodramatic Gothic love intrigues. Wharton's Gothic plot here also entails an attack on the supercilious privileged class who feed off the imaginations of the underclass. The wise servant figure, Cora, knows that about the hypochondria of the wealthy, though: "I didn't more than half believe in the illness; I've been about too long among the rich not to be pretty well used to their scares and fusses" (779). The rational Cora also realizes that she and those of her class would not be haunted by the specter of aging, because they are not valued for their looks at all.

In a parallel story that does not allow the protagonist to live upon the lies proffered by the servant class, Mrs. Sara Clayburn in "All Souls" is forced to rethink her narcissism and become aware of her position—alone in life. An aging woman, who has inherited the mansion Whitegates from her deceased husband, Jim Clayburn, Sara seems to have participated in a litany of the "sins of the fathers" that plagued characters of classic Gothic who seize property not rightfully theirs (cf. Walpole's Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto*). Her husband's family had farmed the land "not without profit" (800), and she too has picked up the capitalistic, acquisitive spirit. She chooses to stay at Whitegates after her husband's death so that her husband's next-of-kin, the "stupid fat Presley boy" (199), would not inherit the place. And she gloats when she outlives the boy: she "attended his funeral a few years ago, in correct mourning, with a faint smile under her veil" (799). Although she believes she has a close relationship with her Scottish maid Agnes, whom she "inherited" from her mother-in-law, she finds out after her fall and temporary lameness from the twisted ankle that she has no one to help her. After the attending doctor leaves, the servants are nowhere to be found, and she finds that they have abandoned her, for what she later thinks is a coven, as she recalls the "fetch" (with an unusual accent) who had greeted her right before her fall. Curiously, like the underclass Cora in the previous ghost story, the "fetch" and Agnes are both associated with black magic or supernatural powers—as emblematic of perhaps their superhuman powers to survive, but also of their ability to dupe the non-thinking, unfeeling oppressive upper class. The coven is also associated with unbridled passion, "for those who have once taken part in a Coven will move heaven and earth to take part again" (820). Joining such a sisterhood would be impossible for Sara, who seems rigid and patriarchal in her attitude towards the household and ownership.²⁰ Since Sara's

²⁰ I disagree with Kathy Fedorko here that Sara becomes one of the more evolved characters in Wharton's work (as her last female protagonist) by combining male and female traits. I think Sara has definitely forfeited much of her womanhood. I believe the servant class represents that aspect of feeling and knowing that Wharton tries to promote in her ghost stories: in her preface to her collection of ghost stories, Wharton called for the sensitive reader who could feel the presence of a ghost and not ask for ocular proof. The winning combination of intuition with common sense typifies the servants (in the latter stories), who act as mediums or join covens.

Allan Gardner Smith contends that in Wharton's ghost stories, "the horror of what is, of the suppressed

beloved maid Agnes has left her extra food, tea, and even brandy to get her through the night, Sara begins to feel suspicious and thinks that the servants' absence from the house has been planned.

Abandoned by her servants, her only network of communication, Sara is overcome by an intense feeling of loneliness: "suddenly the conviction entered into her that, as she found the drawing room, so would she find the rest of the house: cold, orderly—and empty. . . . She knew she was utterly alone under her own roof" (809). But the worst fear that makes her pass out is the eerie voice of the radio, coming from the kitchen. Before she had felt the terror of "a ghostly emanation of the surrounding silence" (811); now she is left with the horrors of modern life: no electricity, her phone lines down, and a disembodied voice coming from the radio. After seeing the "fetch" come again the following "All Souls" evening, she has a mini breakdown. Her aristocratic haughtiness has been her undoing: she orders the intrusive foreign woman to leave, but the woman merely laughs. Sara "couldn't get it out of her head" that the woman had entered the premises before her, so she quickly packs her bags, as the clever Agnes's demeanor seems to taunt her. In joining her cousin in New York, Sara has opted for yet another life of dependence. Sara's sense of entitlement allows the servants (almost in retribution) to take over her house, but she is left little more than an invalid woman in her cousin's household. Sarah Clayburn has known the horrors of an unexamined life, but ultimately, she knows the numbing paralysis caused by isolation is even worse. With their inertia as convalescents in the sick-room, Clingsland and Clayburn have the makings of a perfect modernist Gothic heroine.²¹

Although the trajectory of Wharton's ghost stories usually forces the Gothic hero to confront him- or herself alone, the latter part of her writing career suggests that this kind of independence is illusory or confining. In "Autres Temps" (1911), when the main character Mrs. Lidcote needs to deal with the indiscretions of the past which come back to haunt her, she astutely observes, "We're all imprisoned, of course—all of us middling people, who don't carry our freedom in our brains" (86). In saying something universal about the human condition, Wharton extends the feminine Gothic in new directions. Like Charlotte Brontë, she writes about longings for a love plot

'natural,' is greater than the horror of what is not, of the conventionally 'supernatural'" (97). In this context, he sees Sara's fears of a witch's coven and servants as emanating from her fear of sexuality and from her anxiety about ruling the household once the patriarch husband has died.

²¹For other critics who discuss Wharton as a modernist author, see Jennifer Haytock, who believes that although Wharton did not see herself as a Modernist, her works partake of Modernist themes, and she concerns herself "with the ideas of modernism: The break from Victorianism, the impact of World War I on the individual and society, the isolated self, the possibilities and limitations of language, and the nature of the artist and the artist's role in society" (1). See also my earlier study on Wharton and T.S. Eliot—on Wharton's Gothic modernism: The inertia and malaise that characterize Wharton's ghostly characters also characterize the lost individual or wasteland settings that Eliot evokes. Judith Sensibar does not describe the plight of Wharton's Gothic males, but she does discuss the inadequacy of Wharton's Modernist bachelor type in *The Children* (1928).

that is simply not tenable for either gender—but she also writes about limitations placed on all humanity. The key symbols in her Gothic stories—invalid and dying women, estranged or widowed husbands, and ghostly messages that do not arrive on time—show the sense of the ordinary hauntings impinging on the reader's expectations for the extraordinary. Like the servants in Wharton's Gothic, we are asked to see beyond the charades and posturings and to use our common sense to deal with our personal ghosts. In this way, the rational Jane of Brontë's and Wharton's is victorious.²² In her important study of women's writing, Virginia Woolf conjures an image of Charlotte Brontë's rage at her limitations as a woman writer—and reveals how that anger was imposed on her character, Jane (68–78). If feminist Gothic attempts to reveal the untold story of women's experiences, then Wharton undoes the curse in releasing the hushed woman. But Wharton is not content dwelling on the female ghost of the past. In evoking the male protagonist's vulnerability in her ghost stories, Wharton succeeds in expanding a woman's tradition to encompass universal suffering and rage. And in her male-centered ghost stories, she is able to connect to a male tradition with which she so wanted to be associated, as did Woolf. (Both Wharton and Woolf wanted to lay the ghost of the romantic Jane to rest.) We have moved in Wharton's Gothic oeuvre from a woman's unread letters in one of Wharton's early ghost stories "The Letters" to a retrieval of women's ghostly writing by Lady Jane in one of her later ghost stories "Mr. Jones." The irony, of course, is that her Lady Jane is still eclipsed by the title character of that story, "Mr. Jones," the patriarchal ghost who is able to fetch helpless female protagonists and send them to their death, metaphorically or literally. Nonetheless, the predicament of aging protagonists (male and female) of Wharton's later ghost stories shows that illness, like death, is a great equalizer and obviates the need for arbitrary categories based on gender differences; perhaps for that reason, the gender of her last narrator (Sara's cousin) in "All Souls" remains a mystery.

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²²Especially in these later ghost stories, Wharton celebrates the insight and survival instinct of the servant. Thus, she differs from Brontë, who makes the servants in *Jane Eyre* overwhelmingly superstitious. Also, compare the governess in James's *The Turn of the Screw*, where the governess's mind is poisoned by romantic plots of Gothic novels. See also George Sand's *Indiana*, where Indiana, caught in a love plot, finds herself obsessed with reading novels that captured the typical lady's maid's imaginations.

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