Outside there [are] skyscrapers, advertisements, telephones, wireless, airplanes, movies, motors, and all the rest of the twentieth century; and on the other side of the door something I can’t explain, can’t relate to them. Something as old as the world, as mysterious as life

—Edith Wharton

“It is, in fact, not easy to write a ghost story” noted Edith Wharton in a characteristic bit of understatement shortly before her death in 1937.¹ She had just completed “All Souls” one of her last (and finest) stories, and she was readying a volume of her ghostly tales for publication. It is safe to say that few of her contemporaries were in a position to know more about ghost stories than she. “All Souls” culminated her long involvement with this form that had begun over thirty years before with the publication of “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” in the collection entitled The Descent of Man. She understood the special hazards of the form and knew thoroughly its history and tradition. She even contributed some theories of her own about how to write ghost stories in The Writing of Fiction (1925) and in the Preface to Ghosts (1937). Yet when compared to her popular novels—The House of Mirth (1905), Ethan Frome (1911), and The Age of Innocence (1920)—this body of work remains relatively unknown today.

Her stories capped the growing popularity of the ghostly tale since the middle of the nineteenth century in America and Great Britain. Public interest in spiritual phenomena had spread ever since the famous “Hydesville rappings” in New York in 1848 and the later exploits of the medium Daniel Douglas Home in Great Britain.² Groups like the British National Association of Spiritualists and the American Society for Psychical Research were formed, and swarms of investigators canvassed every kind of paranormal activity. But there was much that was inconclusive in these findings; spiritual manifestations seemed remarkably devoid of pattern and motivation. Nonetheless, writers like J. Sheridan LeFanu and Mrs. J. H. Riddell made a specialty in their fiction of ghosting that brought them great popularity. These ghosts had definite aims. A typical fictional ghost, according to E. F. Bleiler, attempted several things: “It must reveal information, confess to a crime, tell where the will or the love letters are hidden, undo some hurt it has done, or reveal the murderer of its body.”³ Edith Wharton, along with her friend Henry James, added her own finely honed knowledge of psychology and an acute satiric vision that brought the form to its apogee. Although she never lost sight of the basic fact that the ghost story should send “a cold shiver down one’s spine,” she sounded other, more profound depths.⁴ By blurring the boundaries between the living and the dead, she demonstrated that there was much that was real in the ghostly and much that was ghostly in the real. The two worlds were so interwoven that they seemed at times scarcely distinguishable from each other. Moreover, our understanding of one led to an increased understanding of the other. Only Henry James could rival her in this res-
pect. A passage from *The Return*, by Walter de la Mare (Mrs. Wharton’s own favorite contemporary “ghost evoker”) is especially pertinent here: “And yet mystery and loneliness alike were only really appreciable with one’s legs, as it were, dangling down over into the grave.”

Edith Wharton began her own “dangling” shortly after her birth in 1862 to an old New York family. Like so many of her contemporaries—including William and Henry James and William Dean Howells—she began to suffer a series of strange psychic disturbances. She was to recall late in life that as a child she had felt a “dark undefinable menace forever dogging my steps, lurking and threatening,” a “choking agony of terror.” Throughout the sporadic education and the extensive traveling of her adolescence, the nervous attacks and prolonged depressions continued. They intensified after her marriage in 1885 to Edward Wharton until they would disable her for weeks—even months—at a time. She began to refer to her attacks as an “occult and ungetatable nausea”; and it was not until she began writing in earnest after 1890 that they seemed to lose their grip on her. Before her divorce from Edward in 1913, she had managed to transmute her pains—both real and imagined—into a sharply acute social vision that produced her first great novels and ghostly tales.

According to biographer R. W. B. Lewis and commentators Marilyn French, Blake Nevius, and Edmund Wilson, it is not difficult to grasp the sources for Mrs. Wharton’s nervous attacks. She grew up in a world where the conventions of society—especially those conventions surrounding women—were narrow and constricting. Moreover, her education must have seemed especially inadequate to a person of her fine mind and sharp perceptions. She was expected to learn only the social arts and perhaps a language—but little else. Sex was never discussed—even, as Edith discovered, on the eve of her marriage. And to top everything off her mother was a dominating influence and echoed the prevailing notion that writing was not a proper profession for a lady of society. Nor was the shy, redheaded young lady to find any escape from all this in her marriage to Edward. It was, the biographers agree, a loveless and sexless union that did nothing to fulfill Edith’s growing sensuous awareness.

Out of all this Edith Wharton literally “made” and fashioned her own life. Torn between the conflicting demands of society and her inner sense of individuality, she learned to express in her writing her concerns about the restrictions society all too often places upon women. Far from being the rather pallid, detached observer of fashion that some commentators claim even today, she forged a powerful literary weapon against such injustices. And in her ghost stories, especially, she was able, as R. W. B. Lewis notes, to release “a more direct acknowledgment of sexual experience than we normally find in the dramas of manners and the social life.”

It was Edmund Wilson who first observed that Edith Wharton was “a brilliant example of the writer who relieves an emotional strain by denouncing [her] generation.” And so it is that for every vampire (“Bewitched”), vengeful ghost (“Afterward” and “Mr. Jones”), murderous beast (“Kerfol”), and witch cult (“All Souls’”), Wharton’s ghost stories presented many more societal problems—stifling marriages, battered women, sexual repression and frustration, and moral depravity, to name only a few. Indeed, the real ghosts are the very conventions and habits that people cannot discard but are instead haunted by throughout their lives. As the character of Mrs. Lidcote comments in one of Wharton’s finest stories, “Autre Temps,” those
“traditions that have lost their meaning are the hardest of all to destroy.” And Wharton understood all too well that, surrounded by such wraiths, people become ghosts themselves, drained of their substance and robbed of their individuality.

The clinging, haunting tenacity of social rituals is examined in three stories—“After Holbein” “The Eyes,” and “The Looking Glass.” The characters of these stories C Anson Warley and Evalina Jaspar, Andrew Culwin, and Mrs. Clingsland, respectively—are specimens of a vanished society, trapped now behind display cases and between the pages of old scrapbooks. Although they walk among the world of the living, we expect them momentarily to fade suddenly into the thin air. Warley, the aging bachelor in “After Holbein,” for example, is described as “a small poor creature, chattering with cold inside, in spite of his agreeable and even distinguished exterior” By accident, he wanders one evening into a ghostly dinner party hosted by Evalina Jaspar, formerly New York society’s “leading hostels,” who has continued to send out invitations (which are never delivered), order terrapin, champagne and orchids, and come down every evening “to her great shrouded drawing rooms, with her tiara askew on her purple wig, to receive a stream of imaginary guests.” When the two sit down to dinner, newspapers stuffed into a bowl become to their eyes a bunch of beautiful orchids, the mashed potatoes become oysters, and a bottle of Apollinaris becomes a bottle of “PerrierJouet, ‘95.”

Conversations are carried on with invisible guests as the weird dinner lurches to its close. When Mr. Warley exits the building, finally, we realize that he is dead already because, as Wharton informs us in the last line, his feet don’t even meet the pavement. In “The Eyes” we see in the person of Andrew Culwin that kind of social parasite Wharton and James understood so well. James’ The Beast in the Jungle remains a definitive treatment of the subject). He is “essentially a spectator, a humorous detached observer of the immense muddled variety show of life,” who regards all men as “superfluous and women necessary only because someone had to do the cooking.” He is a social vampire who “feeds” upon the vitality and zest of young people moving through society. We learn from his long monologue that he has misused these proteges over the years and, subsequently, has been subject to “visions,” visitations by a pair of huge, ghastly eyes “which had grown hideous gradually, which had built up their baseness coralwise, bit by bit, out of a series of small turpitudes slowly accumulated through the industrious years.”

His description of the apparition is, as it turns out, really of himself. In the third story, “The Looking Glass,” we meet Mrs. Clingsland, a wealthy, once beautiful society matron who cannot accept her advancing age. She is the ultimate product of the society in which Wharton was raised; she is merely a decorative ornament, a product of wigs and paints who “couldn’t do without...the gaze of men struck dumb by her beauty.” Now an old woman, she acutely feels the loss of male adoration. As a sympathetic gesture, her masseuse C and we recall that after 1899 Mrs. Wharton frequently employed a masseuse—delivers to her a series of love letters supposedly from the ghost of a former lover who went down with the Titanic. The situation becomes complicated when the masseuse begins to believe that the young man whose services she has enlisted as an accomplice might be the “real thing” after all. There are, perhaps, two ghosts here—Mrs. Clingsland, whose rouged splendor is described as “looking like a ghost” and the young man whose letters so strangely capture the eloquence of Mrs. Clingsland’s deceased lover.
I have already suggested that Mrs. Wharton’s twenty-eight year marriage had a considerable impact upon her creative expression. Few American writers have so consistently (and savagely) dealt with marital topics in their work. (It was small wonder that George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* was one of her favorite novels.) Wasted lives, misguided loyalties and sacrifices, and female subservience were all too often the products of marriage, she felt, and she harshly delineated them in works as various as *Ethan Frome* and *The Custom of the Country*. The same themes came under fire in the ghost stories, “Afterward” “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” “Kerfol” “Bewitched” “Mr. Jones” and “Pomegranate Seed.” The characters find themselves trapped in relationships that are vicious and victimizing. Their marriages become like haunted houses in which they are condemned to live.

Mrs. Brympton, in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” is a semiinvalid who, it is suggested, is occasionally subjected to sexual abuse at the hands of her husband. Her passivity enrages him while his protracted absences exacerbate her loneliness. Her only friend and confidante is her maid, Emma Saxon. Emma aids her in pursuing a (platonic?) relationship with a young bachelor living nearby. Emma’s loyalty and persistence in shielding her mistress from her husband are so strong that, even after her death, she continues to answer the servant’s bell. This is an enclosed world wherein everyone is a victim of one kind or another. Mr. Brympton has grown impatient with his wife’s coldness; Mrs. Brympton has turned to another man to assuage her loneliness; Emma Saxon is enslaved to the ringing of her lady’s bell; and, at the end, we find that the new maid is assuming Emma’s duties: “You’ve got to go the way that other woman has gone,” she tells herself as she hurries to answer her lady’s bell. It is a self-perpetuating system that entraps the new maid in its coils at the end.

In “Afterward” it is only after Mary and Ned Boyne have left America to settle in a lovely old country house in England that we learn of a growing coldness in their marriage. They look at each other, as Wharton notes at one point, “like adversaries watching for an advantage.” Hints of a mysterious scandal in Ned Boyne’s American business dealings catalyze their growing mutual distrust, and Mary begins to question the nature of their relationship:

Theoretically, she deprecated the American wife’s detachment from her husband’s professional interests, but in practice she had always found it difficult to fix her attention on ... his varied interests.... Now, for the first time, it startled her a little to find how little she knew of the material foundation on which her happiness was built.

Matters come to a head when Ned disappears (apparently “spirited away” by the ghost of a former business partner he had wronged) and Mary is left alone in the house. The country life she had always dreamed of has turned into a quietly terrible nightmare—Wharton’s view of the darker side of a housewife’s domestic role. Referring to the breach in their marriage and Ned’s disappearance, she now sees herself “domesticated with the Horror, accepting its perpetual presence as one of the fixed conditions of life.” It could almost be an allegory of divorce and separation, of a woman left alone, paralyzed, and bereft of any purpose in her life, feeling almost “like the furniture of the room in which she sat, an insensate object to be dusted and pushed about with the chairs and tables. And this deepening apathy held her fast.” The ghost we ultimately are concerned with is not that of Ned’s business partner, but the creature Mary is turning into.

Men and women are prisoners of each

©1983, 2004 John C. Tibbetts
other and of their marriages in “Kerfol,” “Mr. Jones” “Bewitched,” and “Pomegranate Seed.” Husbands behave like jailors in the first two stories. In “Kerfol” it is Yves de Cornault who virtually imprisons his new young bride, Anne: “It was true that he had never struck or threatened her; but he kept her like a prisoner at Kerfol, and when he rode away ... he set so close a watch on her that she could not pick a flower in the garden without having a waiting woman at her heels.” Yves answers Anne’s protests by saying that “a man who has a treasure does not leave the key in the lock when he goes out.” Citing the tradition that a dog at the feet of a woman is emblematic of her fidelity, he proceeds to kill, one by one, every dog that Anne endeavors to keep during the long days of her husband’s absence. As in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” the unhappy wife attempts to form a relationship with another man. They are both subsequently called to the witness stand when Yves de Cornault is found one night, his lifeless body slashed to ribbons. Who was the murderer C Anne, the young man, or the ghosts of the slain dogs? This dismal situation is repeated in another story, “Mr. Jones” in which the Viscountess of Thudeney is married to an unscrupulous man who keeps her a prisoner at his estate. His reasons are not those of a tyrannical husband plagued by jealousy; he has a secret to protect. He has married her solely for her wealth, and the fact that she is deaf and dumb is convenient to his purposes of keeping this a secret. In one letter to her husband, the Viscountess entreats that it is a terrible thing to “sit in this great house alone, day after day, month after month, deprived of your company, and debarred also from any intercourse but that of the servants you have chosen to put about me.” So complete is the Viscount’s subjugation of her that the ghost of his retainer, Mr. Jones, is to remain in the house for a hundred years to prevent future occupants from learning anything about it. The ghost terrorizes the elderly maid and, when the Viscountess’ letters are found by the new house owner, kills her. The new owner, a headstrong young “modern” woman, in turn succumbs to the subservient atmosphere bred by the house: “For already, in that first hour of arrival, she had decided to give up everything else.... Her previous plans and ambitions—except such as might fit in with living here—had fallen from her like a discarded garment, and things she had hardly thought about, or had shrugged away with the hasty subversiveness of youth, were already laying quiet hands on her.”

Wharton was not interested in vilifying the male gender exclusively. She knew all too well—both from her personal experience with her husband and with her father—that many men were weak and submissive to the dictates of strongwilled women. Indeed, this prompted Edmund Wilson to comment that there are no strong men in Wharton’s work; that all too often they are “usually captured and dominated by women of conventional morals and middleclass ideals.” Her stories “Bewitched” and “Pomegranate Seed” portray dominant women. In “Bewitched” two female rivals contend for Saul Rutledge. One is Prudence Rutledge, a severe New Englander who lives in isolation with Saul and whose age, Wharton dryly notes, “might have been anywhere from thirtyfive to sixty.” Her rival is Saul’s “demon lover” a dead woman who apparently leaves her grave at night to meet him in a ghastly tryst, draining the vitality from his body. The outraged Prudence relentlessly pursues her vengeance, demanding that “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” It is open to debate whether her anger is born out of her own isolation (“It’s a worm in the brain, solitude is”), her jealousy about Saul’s affair with a living woman (the ghostly lover may be the deceased woman’s living sister), or the
genuine terror of a supernatural confrontation. Nonetheless, her triumphant behavior at the end clearly bespeaks her renewed control over her errant husband. This grisly note of humor at the end, in my opinion, provides more terror to the reader than all the demon lovers in Christendom.

Another note of triumph is sounded by Elsie Ashby in “Pomegranate Seed.” Her letters to her exhusband Kenneth threaten to disrupt the harmony of his new marriage with Charlotte. Charlotte especially is threatened, because when she married Kenneth she had heard how Elsie had “absolutely dominated him” Now, as the letters begin to arrive, her once happy marriage changes in tone; she feels herself “excluded, ignored, blotted out of his life.” A struggle of sorts ensues between the two women and, at one point, Charlotte feels that she has reclaimed her husband’s attention. Exultantly, she thinks: “Ah, well, some women knew how to manage men, and some didn’t C and only the fair ... deserve the brave!” But then one day her husband disappears and Charlotte, like Mary Boyne in “afterward,” is left alone. The twist to this C and perhaps by now you have guessed itCis that the letterwriting Elsie Ashby has been dead for several years. Her clinging domination of Kenneth has transcended the grave.

In particularly Jamesian fashion, the story “Miss Mary Pask” is a telling indictment of the sexual repression society imposes upon the people of Mrs. Wharton’s generation. A painter while on tour in Brittany decides to visit the spinster sister of a friend. It is a stormy night before he finally reaches her house—only to find it dark. Then he suddenly remembers: Miss Pask had died some time ago and for some reason he had forgotten all about it. But then, much to his horror, the door opens and there is Miss Pask, looking ghastly and wraithlike in the candlelight. The apparition invites him in. She talks to him of gaining “such a sense of freedom” from her death. And the man has to agree that Miss Pask seems “so much more real to me than ever the living one had been.” Miss Pask talks of her loneliness and beseeches the man not to leave her. The man, bent upon quitting the place, is surprised to hear her entreaty: “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.” Aghast, he finds the door, leaving behind him a pitiful whimper from Miss Pask. He shudders to think that the unuttered loneliness of a lifetime was now welling up in her ghost, expressing “at last what the living woman had always had to keep dumb and hidden.” But this terror is as nothing to what the man later feels when, after suffering a nervous breakdown, he learns that Miss Pask had not really died, but was living quietly in her little house by the sea. For the man, as well as for us, the fact that Miss Pask had had to pretend to be a ghost to express her innermost desires is an irony that is almost unbearable. Even in this little story that seemed at first to be a charming trifle in Wharton’s ghostly oeuvre, there is a terrible social insight that is devastating.

This last point brings us to a central idea hovering about all these stories. Wharton’s world—and the title of one of her short story collections confirms this—is one of men and ghosts. The problem is in telling the differences between them. In a world so choked and cluttered with the tatters and remnants of irrelevant traditions and repressive attitudes, “between being dead and alive there seemed after all to be so little difference.” The narrator says this about Miss Pask, but as much could be said about virtually every other character in the other stories as well. We recall Anson Warley, “chattering with cold inside” in “After Holbein”; and both maids in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell”; and the ghostly eyes haunting Andrew Culwin that are really his...
own. In “Afterward” there is a revealing moment when Mary Boyne sees a figure walking down a lane that she takes to be a ghost; but it is only her husband and she tells him: “Why, I actually took you for [the ghost], my dear, in my mad determination to spot it!” In “The Triumph of the Night” C a story hitherto not discussed in these pages—we are introduced to young Frank Rainer who, before his death at the end of the story, seems a ghost already (he is described as “too thin and finedrawn,” “waxed,” and “emaciated”). And by the time “Bewitched” has come to an end we are not really sure whether or not Saul Rutledge has been making love to a ghost or to a living woman. But then, maybe it makes no difference, ultimately, as Mrs. Rutledge stonily comments: “We was all walking right in the Shadow of Death.” A similar observation comes from the housekeeper Mrs. Clemm in “Mr. Jones” when she says “death is everywhere” and that in the little village “there was more dead than living.” Other walking ghosts come to mind—Mrs. Clingsland in her ghastly makeup “looking like a ghost” and the “modern” housewives Mrs. Brympton (“Afterward”), Charlotte Ashby (“Pomegranate Seed”), and the fiercely independent new owner of the estate in “Mr. Jones.” They all end up pale phantoms imprisoned within their own houses.

This idea is given a good workout in Wharton’s last story, “All Souls’” in which Sara, like Mrs. Brympton, Charlotte Ashby, and Lady Jane, reflects Wharton’s lifelong passion for old houses. This had been the subject of one of Wharton’s earliest books, The Decoration of Houses (1897). Edmund Wilson reminds us that she had been obsessed with “the miscellaneous material objects with which Americans were surrounding themselves” The passion for accumulation and decoration, as she well knew, could so pursue people that it could ultimately crush them “by their accumulation.” Accordingly, when Sara Clayburn loses her husband, she returns to the family home and lives on, surrounded by her beloved modern appliances, central heating, and electricity. One morning she awakes to find herself completely and utterly alone. All the appliances and power sources have been disconnected. The servants have disappeared. And all that she can do is hobble painfully about the house in bewilderment.

In most ghost stories, people have died and eventually return as wraiths; here, it is the house that has died, leaving Sara to stand guard over the ruins. She realizes at last that she might die here, “alone and untended,” and that “it was not the idea of noises that frightened her, but that inexorable and hostile silence.” For a brief moment at least, Wharton conveys to the reader the awful solitude of ghosts.

—John C. Tibbetts
Notes


7. Wharton grew up in a society that held certain expectations before the woman writer. Describing the situation, Sara Payton Willis (“Fanny Fern”) wrote: “When we take up a woman’s book, we expect to find gentleness, timidity, and that lovely reliance on the patronage of... [the male] sex which constitutes a woman’s greatest charm.” Instead of subjects like politics, sexual mores, and sensational melodrama, women like Sara Clarke (“Grace Greenwood”), Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Mrs. A.D.T. Whitney wrote children’s literature, books on child care and household management, and “works of sensibility” steeped in nonsectarian religious fervor. There were exceptions, of course. Both Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Mrs. J.H. Riddell were quite successful with, respectively, their melodramas and ghost stories. Louisa May Alcott, however, labored in secret at her more sensational fiction. For more information on this subject, see Joanne Hamlin, “The Private and Published Louisa May Alcott,” *Helicon Nine*, No. 4 (Spring 1981), 8490; and Ann D. Wood, “The Scribbling Women and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. XXIII, No. 1 (Spring 1971), 324.

8. R.W. B. Lewis, ed., from the Preface to *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, Vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), xvii. Lewis continues: Mrs. Wharton was in the Victorian habit of “distancing,” of expressing “the most intense and private sexual feelings by projecting them in the various forms of fantasy.”

9. Edmund Wilson, “Justice to Edith Wharton,” in *The Wound and the Bow* (New York, 1970), 160. Contrast these opinions of Lewis and Wilson with that of Brooks Atkinson: “[Edith Wharton] lacked humor and gusto, and her knowledge of life was restricted. She missed all that was significant of America in her lifetime” (*Tuesday and Fridays*, New York, 1963, 210). Until relatively recently, too much of Wharton’s work was thus consigned to oblivion and neglect.
