Edith Wharton, Quiet Woman

Edith Wharton was an American novelist and short story writer whose career spanned primarily from the turn of the 20th century into the 1930s. A great portion of her writing career took place before women had acquired the right to vote in the United States. This placed her in an interesting position as a woman during a time in which women did not have much of a voice in American society. Despite the cultural climate of her era, Wharton found what one might consider a loophole, a means to express her concerns, in the male-dominated society through which she lived: writing ghost stories.

One of Wharton’s short stories in particular, “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell”, published in 1902, is the narrative of a woman named Hartley who is hired to be the maid of a lady named Mrs. Brympton, only to discover that the Brympton house is haunted by the ghost of the lady’s former maid of twenty years. As the story progresses, Hartley struggles to piece together just why the ghost may exist, as well as what the other characters in the story seem to be hiding. “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” is laden with themes still relevant today that one might overlook if they are too caught up in the primary plot’s proceedings, as I was the first several times I read it. However, by looking at “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” through the eyes of a few literary scholars, one can see that the story acted as a medium through which Edith Wharton could express, though through a strange writing technique, her somewhat provocative perspective on marriage conventions and gender roles.

Much of what scholars discuss regarding Wharton’s writings is how they can be interpreted as critiques of the society of which she was a member—that of upper-class “Old New
York” and its at times challenging, repressive nature. One particularly fascinating facet of this discussion is in regards to how Wharton’s stories convey what can be labelled a somewhat feministic ideology. To be clear, although the term “feminism” has only gained mainstream popularity in recent years, the concept has existed for centuries, and can be understood to mean advocating for women to be treated fairly and equally when compared with men.

Some scholars are not particularly charmed by Wharton’s writing style. Ellen Powers Stengel, for instance, author of an article titled “Edith Wharton Rings ‘The Lady's Maid's Bell’” analyzes the story through a psychological lens. She expressed that, “when Wharton wrote [The Lady’s Maid’s Bell], such mastery [of supernatural stories] was not yet hers” (3). Stengel goes on to argue that the story was weakened by the “naïve” narrative of Hartley, the maid. She seems to be bothered by how clueless Hartley appears at times, taking too long to piece together the implications of what she sees and hears around Brympton Place where she works—things which may in contrast seem obvious to the reader. Of course, part of the reason for this may be due to a thought that many scholarly analyses of “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” make a point to mention—the fact that Hartley’s narration is actually unreliable in a number of ways. Hartley opens the story by explaining that she had been recovering but was still quite weak from a bout of typhoid fever, which could have had a number of negative effects on her overall mental stability.

In addition to this, the nature of a first-person narrative can be unreliable because the narrating character could have any number of undetected biases toward other characters in the story, or could interpret events that occur based on preconceived (and often unreliable) notions, all of which the narrator is imparting on the reader. Overall, Stengel seems to be bothered by the nature of Hartley’s narrative, perhaps because she felt it made the story too ambiguous and foggy overall. The fact that Hartley doesn’t seem to come to any certain conclusions is very apparent
throughout “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell”, and Stengel would perhaps say she is plagued by ignorance. Opinions seem to differ regarding whether or not the uncertainty of what actually happened throughout was a positive attribute, or if it in fact retracted from the story. Stengel might argue that it was a weakness of her writing ability.

On another hand, author Jenni Dyman counters that Wharton utilized the writing technique of using an unreliable narrator brilliantly and intentionally. In her book, *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, Dyman writes about the hidden nature of Wharton’s messages as they present themselves in her work. In her book’s introduction, Dyman’s comments address Wharton’s ghost stories in general, but can reasonably be applied to “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell”, as one of the chapters in the book specifically discusses the story in greater detail. Dyman says, “At first, themes may appear to be submerged and murky, narrative techniques ineffective...” (6) By this she seems to mean that on the surface, many people often come to the same initial conclusions about Wharton’s stories—that they feel vague and unclear, and thus “ineffective” as Dyman puts it—but she goes on to write about what may happen if they were to study the stories more deeply: “Reading the text of Wharton’s feminism in her ghost stories depends on exploring a ‘buried’ feminist text and a female aesthetic made possible by the subversive nature and odd conventions of supernatural fiction” (6). By this she seems to mean that writers in Wharton’s position chose to express their ideas in a veiled way that required more effort than usual to reveal and interpret. Dyman implies that even the choice of the supernatural genre lends itself as a costume with which to mask the true, underlying themes of Wharton’s ghost stories.

Brigitte Zaugg, author of the journal article “The Art of Irresolution in Edith Wharton’s ‘The Lady’s Maid’s Bell’”, presents an enlightened perspective on possibly why Edith Wharton
chose this “foggy” storytelling technique: “Wharton structures her story on gaps, absences, deferral of meaning, implication and innuendo...” (Zaugg 216) This implies that the very purpose of the story and the reason it “works” is because of this quality of mystery that it holds. “The reader never gets any straightforward answers to the questions raised by Hartley’s statements and comments; instead he is left to conjecture and to work out the subtext for himself...” (Zaugg 227) We can infer from this that if the reader could see the unfolding of the story in a more omniscient way, rather than being left in the dark along with Hartley, then all suspense and mystery would be lost. If we do choose to agree on the idea that Edith Wharton’s ambiguity in her storytelling was, indeed, intentional, what would the purpose have been, aside from the quality of suspense? Why not simply say what she means and be clear about the details for a more straightforward and effective piece? Furthermore, what about her writing style and choice of story content suggests a feminist attitude?

One probable reason for the ambiguity in the case of “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” is because of the somewhat controversial nature of the story’s true subject matter. A one-sentence summary might conjecture that the story is about a maid who finds that a ghost haunts the home in which she has recently begun working. But the real plot clearly resides in the relationships between Mr. & Mrs. Brympton, the wealthy husband and wife who own the house, their nearby neighbor Mr. Ranford who is a suspiciously close companion of Mrs. Brympton’s, and the secrets each of them may be hiding. Obvious is the unhealthy nature of Mr. & Mrs. Brympton’s marriage—because of their vast differences in interests and temperaments they form an exceedingly unhappy match. Additionally, Mrs. Brympton and her neighbor Mr. Ranford are perceived through the eyes of Hartley as simply friendly neighbors who innocently enjoy swapping books with each other—Ranford is someone to keep her company as Mrs. Brympton
is generally all alone in that great big house of hers. Yet underneath all of these simple observations, and though never explicitly stated, “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” faintly whispers of instances of adultery and sexual abuse—likely Mr. Brympton the abuser, and his wife and Mr. Ranford the adulterers. Yet instead of Hartley bringing these suggested themes to life through her narrative, she instead brushes them aside and does not them a second thought, forcing the reader to speculate beyond the limited information she provides offhandedly.

In the preface of *Lurking Feminism* Jenni Dyman introduces the implications of Wharton including these exceedingly significant subplots: “Indeed [Wharton] uses the ghost story to explore the status of women and men in society: their gender roles, relationships, marriages, communication patterns, creativity, and sexuality” (xii-xiii). It seems that simply because the fact that “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” is labelled a ghost story, a layer of unreality is added to it which enables Wharton to “get away with” including potentially provocative sub-content.

Of course, the underlying themes that Dyman identifies in Wharton’s work (gender, marriage, etc.) certainly had different ideologies attached to them in the society of Wharton’s day than they do now; in the United States of 2016 we are undoubtedly in the midst of movement on topics like sexual identity, feminism, and gender roles, and previously shamed ideas on these subjects are now becoming more widely accepted. Americans seem to seek authenticity and transparency more than they ever have before, whereas Americans of the early twentieth century likely more highly valued their reputations and social standing. This undoubtedly led to a great deal of repressive behavior when it came to dealing with unhappy circumstances like marriages gone awry, for example. Rather than filing for divorce which was not particularly socially acceptable at the time, most couples simply endured their unhappy marriages. Although some of those cultural standards would be progressing and changing soon (Chambers 25), this is likely
the type of real issue that influenced Wharton when she depicted issues like poorly-matched marriages in her writings, especially considering the fact that Edith Wharton herself became divorced about a decade after “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” was published.

Dyman continues thinking along these lines and explaining Wharton’s motivations:

“Functioning within the male literary tradition to produce her texts, relying on the extensive symbolism and figuration of the supernatural tradition which offered her a rich idiom for subtextual expression of her feminist concerns, working from her observations as a woman and a writer in a patrician class, she sought to reveal society’s restrictions, both external and internalized, on the individual” (Dyman xiii). Here Dyman highlights the fact that supernatural-themed writing was generally dominated by male writers at Wharton’s time, and that this was likely another contributing factor to Wharton’s reasoning for choosing her “symbolic” style of writing. To what restrictions was Dyman referring when she laid out her reasoning? I venture to say that Edith Wharton must have felt trapped by society’s expectations for how to be a respectable woman, wife, sexual being, and writer.

Thus, working within the confines of the repressive nature of her male-dominated culture, Wharton found a way of bringing to light issues she had with the state of American society—those questions of why wives are treated the way that they are, and why men and women lead often restricting lives. But the question still lingers: why did Wharton feel the need to be so “cautious” about the contents of her stories? Why not boldly take a stand against the prevailing ideas regarding marriage and sexuality that she found restricting?

It is likely that audiences at the time that “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” was published would have rejected the story entirely if they explicitly depicted scenes of women cheating on their husbands, and husbands sexually abusing their wives. After all, what sort of message would that
send? That these things actually happen in real life too? Jacqueline S. Wilson-Jordan articulates this concept beautifully in her article, “Telling the Story That Can't Be Told”. She explains, “In Wharton’s time, after all, stories of spousal abuse ‘can’t be told,’ at least in the conventional sense, because, indeed, they are more frightening to most readers than stories about ghosts” (13). She then returns us to the previously highlighted aspect of the story that is the function of the unreliable first-person narrative: “And so tropes of disability and a strategy of narrative reticence serve Hartley (and Wharton) by potentially diverting the reader’s interest away from what is unsayable because it is taboo.” (Wilson 13) She is asserting that the purpose of Harley’s silence or lack-of-telling about the events that take place in the story is designed such a way for a specific reason; what she could have stated outright would have been “too much” for the United States in 1902. Depictions of domestic or sexual abuse, especially between a husband and wife, would have been nearly unacceptable at the time. Thus, the reader of “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” must use their skills of inference to discover true meaning from the story. If the reader does not do this, all of the small details sprinkled throughout the story which hint at these troubling behind-closed-doors events are pointless and irrelevant.

I believe that, both now and in Wharton’s time, many people, especially men, have not been interested in acknowledging that things like husbands abusing their wives actually happen; there is too much dignity and pride at stake, which no one is willing to give up in exchange for the truth. Another issue that Wharton seemed to be attempting to expose is the idea that wives only exist for how they can contribute to the pleasure of their husbands, and should not themselves believe otherwise, lest they begin acting “out of line”. I think this is a reality best depicted by what Hartley observes about the husband of Mrs. Brympton in the story itself:
As for Mr. Brympton, he came and went, never staying more than a day or two, cursing the dullness and the solitude, grumbling at everything, and (as I soon found out) drinking a deal more than was good for him. . . and once, as I was leaving my mistress’ room rather later than usual, I met him coming up the stairs in such a state that I turned sick to think of what some ladies have to endure and hold their tongues about. (Wharton 19)

This is about as straightforward as Hartley (and by extension Wharton) gets throughout the entire story. Women like Mrs. Brympton are subject to the whims of their husbands and aren’t left with much choice but to endure it, unless they want to live an even more desolate life on their own. Hartley says many times she feels that the ghost who haunts Brympton Place, Emma Saxon, is trying to communicate something to her, but she is unable to speak a word. Hartley herself is the woman who constantly asks, “Why is everyone acting like they don’t see what’s going on here?” Each of the main female characters in the story represent a different aspect of the real issue: in the end, “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” is a story about secrets, lack of acknowledgement, and above all, silence. Edith Wharton wanted everyone to understand the various ways women feel pressured to keep quiet, lest they face the consequences of speaking. It’s quite likely that she had herself in mind when she created the character of Mrs. Brympton; for just as Mrs. Brympton seeks out alternatives to speaking out clearly about her unhappy circumstances, so does Edith Wharton.
Works Cited


