What Happened to Emma Saxon?

Edith Wharton’s short story “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” recounts the experiences of a woman called Hartley who takes a job as personal maid for an invalid lady named Mrs. Brympton, who lives in a great, gloomy house in the countryside. Not long after arriving, Hartley begins experiencing strange and unsettling things for which no one else in the house is willing to give a clear explanation—for example, the fact that she’s seen a ghost. Hartley begins to connect what she’s seen and experienced since she’s arrived at the house to what she’s learned of Mrs. Brympton’s former maid, who had recently died. Despite the secrecy of all who live and work at Brympton Place, Hartley comes to figure out that the ghost she encountered was indeed the former maid herself, Emma Saxon. Hartley attempts to piece together the mysteries that shroud the Brympton house in the darkness—first and foremost of which being what happened to Emma Saxon. With this in mind, it becomes worthwhile to explore what roles the other three most significant characters—Mr. & Mrs. Brympton and Mr. Ranford—may have played in the maid’s death.

The first thing that is readily obvious in Hartley’s story is how guarded those who live at the house act when Emma Saxon, the late former maid, is brought up in conversation. The most anyone generally does is acknowledge the fact that she died and leave it at that. When Hartley attempts to ask others who work at the house for details about Emma Saxon, like Mrs. Blinder the cook, she often changes the subject almost immediately. Multiple times, Mrs. Blinder can be observed abruptly creating weak excuses about how she must leave to complete some task in the kitchen, in order to avoid answering any of Hartley’s questions. This sort of strange behavior
suggests that if Emma Saxon had died under normal circumstances or of natural causes, then folks would be more inclined to say so and perhaps explain how, rather than leaving her death clouded in mystery. This leads one to wonder what the cause of her death truly was.

People keeping secrets and concealing knowledge from others is a trend that presents itself on many more occasions throughout the story. When Mrs. Brympton requests that Hartley pick up a prescription for her and, as an “afterthought”, deliver a note to the house of her companion Mr. Ranford, Mrs. Brympton requests that Hartley returns “before Mr. Brympton is up” (25). Hartley found it strange the way Mrs. Brympton acted when she asked her to do this, especially after she found, when she picked up the prescription, that it was nothing more than “lime water”. She finds herself wondering, “If there was nothing to conceal about my visit to the chemist’s, was it my other errand that Mrs. Brympton wished me to keep private?” (26) This implies that there is something about delivering the note to Mr. Ranford of which Mr. Brympton would disapprove. This would be a bit curious, considering it is said that the two men get along quite well, although once or twice Mr. Brympton does voice some disapproval toward his wife spending so much of her time with Mr. Ranford (22). At any rate, it is never revealed what the note from Mrs. Brympton actually says, but it stands out as activity that links Mrs. Brympton to Mr. Ranford in a suspicious way.

The purpose of the husband, Mr. Brympton, in the story is somewhat challenging to clearly identify. He is absent from home quite often, and when he is home, the house seems to have a more hostile atmosphere than when he is not there. He is also not particularly kind and occasionally displays some alcoholic tendencies (19). Hartley seems to question his character at times, cryptically hinting that he seems like the type of man that does not treat women well (18). However, his actions don’t seem malicious throughout the story; Mr. Brympton’s most
identifiable fault is neglecting his wife and his home life, constantly leaving to travel and do what no one is quite sure about when he’s away. But if his role wasn’t significant in some way, then Mrs. Brympton would probably not feel that she must actively attempt to hide things from him, as she did with the note.

Another key moment of the story that warrants a closer look at the role of Mr. Brympton is the climax. Late at night, Hartley makes her way to Mrs. Brympton’s rooms because she believes she is being summoned. Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Brympton falls to the floor and faints right in front of her. Mr. Brympton, who it seems had just returned from travelling, enters the room then, seeming to not be bothered by the fact that his wife is lying unconscious on the floor. It is then that the ghost of Emma Saxon appears standing before the remaining two conscious people in the room, Hartley and Mr. Brympton. For just a brief moment after Mrs. Brympton had already fainted, she manages to look up one last time before she strangely dies—but she doesn’t look at the ghost of her loyal former maid nor at Hartley, but at her seemingly distant husband. Though it was simply a look at his face, the fact that this is the mistress’s very last action places extra significance on it. We are left to wonder why she didn’t simply die when she initially fainted (although why she passed away is something of a mystery in itself) and what might have been important enough about Mr. Brympton that he received his wife’s attention in her final moment.

Even more curious is the relationship between Mrs. Brympton and Mr. Ranford. For most of the story Mr. Ranford is portrayed as a friendly gentleman who keeps Mrs. Brympton company in an otherwise lonely area to live. All the household workers hold him in high regard. However, he is tied to some of the more “suspicious”, as Hartley puts it, events in the story. It becomes apparent that he is quite close to Mrs. Brympton when she requests that Hartley hand-
deliver the aforementioned note to his home. There are moments one can’t help but wonder if there was something romantic going on between the two characters even in Mrs. Brympton’s physically weak state, given that they spend quite a bit of time alone together and Mr. Brympton is rarely at home.

Another especially unsettling event that places Mr. Ranford into suspicious territory is the day that Hartley follows the ghost of Emma Saxon to where she leads, which evidently ends up being to the seemingly harmless Mr. Ranford’s estate. Hartley thinks, “I knew well enough that she hadn’t led me there for nothing” (31). But the ghost of Emma Saxon then vanishes from the scene when Mr. Ranford walks outside. Hartley never gets the chance to ask Emma about the mysteries that plague Brympton Place, like how she happened to die, other than the clue that this location may be significant. After all of this takes place, Hartley thinks, “I had never thought harm of my mistress and Mr. Ranford, but I was sure now that, from one cause or another, some dreadful thing hung over them. [Emma] knew what it was” (32). If the narration of Hartley can be trusted, then this heavily implies that there is more to the friendship of Mrs. Brympton and Mr. Ranford than taking innocent walks together and reading to each other in the library—Hartley hints at something darker, though she is unable to figure out what the two may be hiding.

The last appearance of Mr. Ranford worth mentioning is at the very end of the story, at Mrs. Brympton’s funeral. It is said that he is “among the last to come” (35). Hartley notices that when he does show up, he seems to be using some sort of cane or walking stick to support himself, an odd detail considering the man was supposedly around thirty years old and it was never mentioned that he had any health problems. This suggests some sort of fairly recent ailment and we are left to speculate about the possible significance. Hartley also mentions that by the time the ceremony had concluded and the people had gone out to the graveyard to see Mrs.
Brympton be buried, Mr. Ranford had already disappeared. Considering the fact that he seemed to be close to the Brymptons, why he wouldn’t want to see her burial through to the end like everyone else is strange.

Any attempts at uncovering the mysteries of a story first and foremost about a ghost would be incomplete without examining the nature of the haunting itself. Ghosts are not generally the best at communicating effectively, which can pose frustrations for the living who desire to appease them; this can certainly be seen in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell”. Throughout the story, Emma Saxon never speaks. However, when considering what reasons a ghost might have for coming into existence, a common notion that many agree on is that ghosts often haunt the living because they have unfinished business or something they want to be resolved. One telling example of this is when Emma appears in the doorway of Hartley’s bedroom. About this event Hartley says, “… at the time it wasn’t fear I felt, but something deeper and quieter” (30). At this point, she is genuinely more inquisitive than anything else. She goes on to say, “… but how in the world was I to help her?” This introduces the concept that Emma Saxon didn’t seem to have any intention of hurting someone; she simply desired to communicate some sort of message to Hartley, though what it was one cannot say for certain.

With all of this in mind, the fact that “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” does not identify an antagonist very clearly is one of the most unsettling things about the story. Someone viewing from the outside cannot be sure whose side they are meant to take (excluding Hartley since she is essentially an observer) and who they’re meant to be against. One could argue that the ghost of Emma Saxon is the antagonist because she haunts the house and occasionally makes the inhabitants feel uncomfortable, but she is never portrayed acting in any way violent toward the other characters—only a bit disruptive at times, and the same could be said for Mr. Brympton, if
in a different way. One could even deduce that Emma Saxon is in one way the victim of the story, even though she has died before Hartley’s narrative even begins.

The question is: who has done wrong in this story? Or, more notably, what wrong has been done? Did Emma Saxon perhaps die not of natural causes, but rather in some more malevolent way? She was described to have “worshiped the ground [Mrs. Brympton] walked on” (13), and had served her for twenty years of her life. This is not the description of someone toward which many people would feel any sort of ill will. Surrounding the three main characters examined here are both mysterious activity, as well as details that make one feel that they are innocent. Mr. Brympton seems too absent to be genuinely wicked, and Mrs. Brympton and Mr. Ranford are both generally portrayed as kind and considerate yet seem to tie themselves to odd situations.

Thus, Hartley and the reader alike are left not with answers, but with a complicated web of relationships and secrets. The closer one looks at the details, the more difficult it becomes to see an explanation for every unsettling event that unfolds. Though it may not be clear who is overall responsible for the fact that a ghost roams the halls of Brympton Place, one thing can surely be agreed upon: something is not right here.