Ghostly Writing: Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and Issues of Visibility

Erin Barclay Nemiroff

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Ghostly Writing
Nineteenth-century American Women Writers and Issues of Visibility

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines three nineteenth-century female authors’ use of the ghost story to articulate and illustrate the anxiety and restriction they suffered under the ideals of True Womanhood. It discusses how Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, and Mary Wilkins Freeman were compelled to use this unorthodox method of expression because its innate characteristics granted them the creative liberty necessary for authentic female expression and an evolution into New Womanhood and turn-of-the-century feminism. It reveals how the ghost story allowed them to be taken seriously by their male counterparts, yet still provided them with the degree of camouflage necessary to prevent societal stigmatization. This thesis explains how their use of the supernatural allows their characterization of the female form to shine forth beyond male-centered classifications of women and the traditional roles imposed upon them.

Chapter 1 explores Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” and her narrator’s use of journaling to break free from the mental and physical constraints of nineteenth-century American culture. Her journal chronicles her investigation of the yellow wallpaper decorating her bedroom and becomes a ghostly tale in which madness is revealed to be a worthy alternative to remaining under the suffocating captivity of her husband and nineteenth-century society.

Chapter 2 examines Wharton’s use of servant and employer characters in her ghostly tale “Luella Miller” to illustrate the ways in which ideals of True Womanhood render women into ghostlike creatures, driving them to a slow and selfless death. Wharton’s characters expose how nineteenth-century American women must aid and support one another in the struggle to successfully destroy the patterns of repression keeping them prisoner in the home.

Chapter 3 investigates how Freeman’s supernatural text “Pomegranate Seed” casts a man as an outsider to knowledge and forces him and readers to face the male gender’s abuse of power and female victimization. Through her female characters, Freeman confronts the ultimate Gothic fear – that in addition to challenging male oppression, women must also face their own femaleness, exposing the detrimental effects of idealized womanhood and the necessity to alter their submissive stance.

This thesis concludes that the ghost story, though an unconventional genre for the time, was a venue that provided women with a voice outside of the domestic sphere and encouraged their thinking beyond its confines into the realm of New Womanhood and feminism. The writings of Gilman, Freeman, and Wharton create a space for women in which they can voice their discontent with the restrictive culture present in nineteenth and early twentieth-century America without becoming ghosts themselves.
GHOSTLY WRITING
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND ISSUES OF VISIBILITY

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

by

Erin Barclay Nemiroff
Montclair State University

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Introduction

During the nineteenth century, the Cult of True Womanhood dictated that American women exist for their homes and families, setting aside their own desires for personal exploration in favor of the socially acceptable roles of wife and mother. They were trapped – shifts in politics and education raised their expectations of both themselves and how they should be viewed and treated, but their increased knowledge produced ambitions that did not correlate with the domestic ideology of the time period (Greene 318). Often urged by society to maintain the “ideal of the ‘submissive maiden,’” they were compelled to articulate themselves through either somewhat restrictive, but ladylike, epistolary means or through more covert, and consequently dangerous, measures that utilized unconventional plots and characters (Cogan 3). As a result, female authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, and Mary Wilkins Freeman were often left without a socially acceptable way of expressing their anxiety and adversity, especially any means that encouraged movement beyond their societal placement, and were consequently forced to use unorthodox methods of expression to articulate and illustrate their experiences as females. The ghost story, an unconventional genre for the time period, was a mode of writing that granted female authors the freedom to express their anxiety as women. In particular, they attempted to articulate the horrors that females encountered and endured by speaking “to a female readership and… [drawing] their key concerns from women’s culture” (Carpenter and Kolmar 8). Thus, Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” Wharton’s “Pomegranate Seed,” and Freeman’s
“Luella Miller” exemplify the ways in which the ghost story allowed the nineteenth-century American female author to gain an authentic public voice. The ghost story not only utilized the uncanny female characters and plots necessary to reveal the anxiety women experienced within the Cult of True Womanhood, it also afforded them with the limited visibility that was so crucial to their acceptance by society since “to break with conventions... [was] to risk not being heard at all” (Freedman 372). In essence, previous methods of female articulation had often only succeeded in sustaining the patterns of repression constructed by nineteenth-century ideals and its concept of True Womanhood, while the innate characteristics of ghost stories granted the creative liberty necessary for authentic female expression and her evolution into New Womanhood.

Although many readers and writers found women’s letters and journals subversively successful at challenging patriarchy, some felt that such correspondence could not fully embrace the harsh reality of female life at this time since it did not allow a woman to “examine the possibilities and limitations of her... role as the angel in the house” (Dickerson 8). “Nineteenth-century masculinist culture dictated that women’s sphere was that of the private, the domestic, and the immobile” and denied women’s need to exist beyond their home and family (Muellner 37). A woman could not be a hero or adventurer, for only in keeping submissively to her realm could she act respectably (Muellner 38). This pure and innocent female, dependent on some male who controls her financial and social power, is classified as the True Woman or representative of the Cult of True Womanhood (Dickerson 133). She is characterized by “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” and is the “guardian of morality” (Cutter 384). Despite other talents she may possess, she must devote all of her abilities and energy into her
household and community. She is required to be the epitome of utter selflessness and aspire to what society considers the highest roles for women – those of nurturing mother, dutiful wife, and social moral pillar (Brown 759). Thus the “real Gothic horror” that True Woman embodies and that Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman all reveal through their texts is that females are compelled to carry out “a quiescent, socially acceptable role or... be destroyed” by society’s stigmatization as an outsider and an abnormality (Kahane 342). Women who are devoid of expression, like the “crazy” or “hysterical” female characters present in various ghost stories of the time, do not survive, for the “deprivation of speech...[leads] to a lack of personality and even the lack of will to live” (TuSmith 285). However, the literal deaths of these “madwomen” characters allow female authors to illustrate the metaphorical deaths they themselves experience under True Womanhood. The ghost story therefore permits female authors to express their feelings of abnormality and difference through the characterization of their female protagonists without becoming outsiders themselves.

Nineteenth-century American women writers saw the need for a form of expression that would allow them to be taken seriously by their male counterparts, yet provide them with a certain degree of camouflage. It was necessary that they learn to embrace their female identity with all of its desires and needs, but they had to work within the confines of society’s standards in order to be heard at all. Women’s need for a new venue spurned an explosion of popularity for the domestic novel which, similar to modern-day romance novels, often chronicled “the single woman’s fall from grace and family into the snare of her seducer” (Barnes 157). The plot of the domestic novel seemed benign at first, but at second glance pitted mothers and daughters as rivals – “not
so much for possession of the man as for control of the script of woman’s history” (Barnes 158). The presence alone of the domestic novel forced women in the real world to question themselves and their position, whether they “could be different, could write themselves differently than their mothers did” (Barnes 162). Seemingly supportive of the institution of marriage and perpetuation of family values, the domestic novel called into question nineteenth century principles and ideals and allowed women to confront the unrealistic expectations of their society and their unequal placement in relation to their male counterparts. It revealed America’s uneasiness with issues of male/female authority and fear of shifts within that power structure, but allowed women to work with what was available to them and not overtly threaten men, who had the power to forbid their expression altogether.

Women such as Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman who wrote, read, and supported the ideas put forth in the domestic novel are representative of the New Woman. A New Woman is “independent, both financially and personally” from men and has “deliberately chosen to preserve this independent status and to remain single” (Cutter 389). She is able to see through the dominant stereotypes, even when those within them cannot, and opts to remain outside of the Cult of True Womanhood. A New Woman challenged nearly every ideal held by Victorian society – she was not dependent on a male for survival, she wore what was comfortable and conducive to her means of employment, and she had hobbies and interests that did not perpetuate the myth of women as the domestic angel. She also rejected the idea of her home as her sanctuary, recognizing its stifling effect on her freedom. “One of the common misconceptions about the nineteenth-century ideal woman… is that she could find refuge from the horrors and dangers of the economic
world at home” (Cogan 17). In truth, she was only able to escape trauma by leaving home and able to “survive romance if it... [were] without closure, that is, if it does not lead to marriage” (Doughty 192). Unfortunately, as a result of her rejection of traditional forms of womanhood, a New Woman was often a highly educated female caught in a silent struggle to improve her status in society and was viewed as both unladylike and unacceptable (Brown 760). “Reviewers consistently condemned New Woman authors and characters for their ‘unwomanly’ desire for autonomy and questioned their sanity, as such desire must be unnatural” (Doughty 188). But a New Woman embodied the reality of being an independent woman; she was a female with worldly interests and self-indulgent behaviors, characteristics that readers were previously unexposed to in popular Victorian literature. She exemplified “a more positive and essential way for women to cope with the world around them” by advocating the feminist ideals of intellect, physical strength and health, and self-reliance (Cogan 4).

Nineteenth-century American female writers were forced to question their previous roles as they embraced New Womanhood and feminism and expanded their domestic sphere to include activities they had never dreamt of taking part in. And, despite any initial anxiety over assuming newfound roles in society, women found their new lifestyle allowed them develop “their abilities and create for themselves a sense of purpose, different from family and husband but still within the code of feminine virtue and support” (Brown 769). Thus, by the late nineteenth century, women’s positions in both public and private realms were evolving. Although they did not always have the approval of their male counterparts, New Women had the support of one another; this allowed them to “create their own identities as well as realize some degree of self-
determination” (Brown 764). Their lives had previously been defined by society’s restrictions, but with their newfound independence and knowledge they could detach themselves from the limitations of their immediate environment, creating a private yet significant definition of themselves.

This female evolution is revealed through the ghostly writings of Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman; their manipulation of the domestic novel into a tale of the supernatural and their endorsement of New Womanhood and feminism, although subtle at times, allows their characterization of the female form to shine forth beyond male-centered classifications of women. The domestic novel on its own falls short for the New Woman – its ending is typically the happily ever after type, representing the ideal instead of real life for women of this time. A nineteenth-century American woman “expects to find her ‘end’ and deliverance” in marriage but truly discovers, as these authors’ texts discretely illustrate, that it “consigns her to ancient and inexorable patterns of repetition, biological and social” (Greene 320). In contrast, the ghost story typically ends in death or revelation of some unknown fact or entity, thus pushing and shifting these once immovable patterns. Ghost stories displace men and Victorian ideals of womanhood from the center of women’s lives, leaving a female to play the part of an articulate and independent heroine rather than merely a mass-produced replica of “woman” (Doughty 193). A woman could now direct her life course “by some other star other than ‘being in love’” (Tracey 1).

This displacement of nineteenth-century female expectation was common to the ghost story, and to the broader concept of the Gothic. The two genres overlap, connected most obviously through their shared commerciality and wide appeal. Both types of tales
include elements of the supernatural and aim to frighten readers or, at the least, invoke the sense of the unknown. However, the Gothic does not include an explanation for its supernatural events, or they are explained away, while the ghost story has no rationalization or demystification of its unusual occurrences. Instead, the ghost story "reverts to a world in which imagination can produce physical effects, a world that is potentially within our power to change by the energy of our thoughts" (Briggs 124). It allows for a malleability of language and meaning, without overtly threatening established dogma. In addition, supernatural events in the Gothic occur "in exotic or bizarre settings," while those in ghost stories take place "within the familiar... in a very mundane and often urban context" (Briggs 127). This brings the unknown closer to home, closer to what is held sacred, and invokes a terror that remote locations cannot. Due to this familiarity, the ghost story provides an element of "rebellion against or resistance to existing social form" and gives "imaginative access to some kinds of spiritual power" (Briggs 128). Although the Gothic provided an initial context for dissent, the ghost story truly allowed women to "reclaim a little of the power and freedom that circumstances denied them" (Briggs 129). It gave nineteenth-century females access to expression that incited a process of re-envisioning womanhood – an evolution that allowed them to work through negative experiences and re-situate themselves in relation to them.

Ghost stories became more than just fireside tales, for their plots represented more than just "stories to while away the time"; "they may represent reality, perhaps may even wield the cultural power to change reality" (Tracey 2). Ghost stories are able to reproduce the same tension nineteenth-century American women experienced and place it
upon readers, revealing to women the harsh reality of their lives and revealing to patriarchy the horrific results of its oppressive impulses. They mirror the female experience and allow women to relive womanhood in a positive and self-assuring manner. Only by reproducing the "terms of their victimization and subjugation" in this way can women provide themselves with an acceptable identity (Payne 334). This also forces others, men in particular, to live the female experience, for words can "in their limited way, reproduce the effects they describe" (Briggs 124). The ghost stories of Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman provide women with this form of quasi-psychoanalysis by permitting females to view womanhood through a different lens, a lens that allows them to "explore opportunities for autonomy, to gain a sense of freedom, and to cultivate... [their] sensibilities" (Thomas 115). By working within the structures of nineteenth-century society, these authors successfully generated a dialogue that "analyzes, critiques, and renegotiates the role of middle-class women... and attempts to forward the emancipation of womankind from the social bonds imposed" by that society (Tracey 28).

Writing was in itself a unique act for Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman; it allowed for their clandestine yet public articulation. By utilizing the language of their ghostly characters, they were able "to hide and to reveal their own judgments and thereby avoided the risk of making those judgments aloud" (Giordano 110). They appeared to be obeying the rules of feminine propriety, yet were silently triumphing over a society that attempted to squelch their expression. These authors were, in a sense, mimicking the very ghosts they created, alive but not alive, real and unreal, visible and yet invisible. Their words were taken at face value due to the innately fantastical nature of ghostly
storytelling, yet were still able to push the limitations placed upon nineteenth-century American women. These authors inscribed their message into a text “in conscious antithesis to men’s stories” and, more importantly, without taking full responsibility for their unconventional and deviant actions (Carpenter and Kolmar 10). By relying on their own intellectual resources, they developed “a sense of themselves that did not rely on... [a man’s] confirmation and approval” (Tracey 39). Epistolary writing and the domestic novel openly revealed the intent of women writers, failing to disguise any thoughts or emotions incongruent with the time period and causing them and their works to be “left out, illegible, blank, or altogether absent” (Sweeney 24). Ghost stories, however, allowed them to utilize the unconventional and unprecedented without the fear of being scrutinized and rejected.

The ghost story, as a form of feminine writing, thematically privileges orality because it is a type of communal property, more similar to folktales told around the campfire than any academically established literary tradition during the Victorian era. Like the female body, oral tradition shifts and flows. With each retelling, it changes, cycles, and creates “along a continuum... boundaries... are not absolute but fluid” (Carpenter and Kolmar 12). The ghost story was therefore an appropriate venue of expression and exploration since “it was not a literature scrutinized and judged with the same strictness and wariness as were realistic works” (Dickerson 110). Female authors of the supernatural overturn many “assumptions and definitions [concerning rigid boundaries between life and death]” because their stories allow for constant ambiguity in the text, permitting the words and their meaning to change on the page every time they are read (Carpenter and Kolmar 12). This fluctuation of intention allows readers “to
experience... [the author's] changing the story with each telling” and allows authors to claim their cultural status as feminine writers without explicitly defining their position (TuSmith 286-7). Female authors were now able to “project more than one possible plot for heroines... and to challenge cultural norms about women’s lives and women’s work while still moving, indirectly, toward the conventional outcome” (Tracey 42). Each female author was making up the rules as she went, “simultaneously rehearsing and rewriting her own history as a woman coming to authorship” (King 97). In addition, telling a communal story such as the ghost story

...diffuses the problematic ideology of individualism, and allows female writers the opportunity to explore (and potentially to resolve) tensions between group involvement and individual autonomy – tensions that cannot be addressed within a literary tradition glorifying a single protagonist. (Gutierrez-Jones 309)

The ambiguity afforded by the ghost story venue forges pathways, though uncertain, for women to speak from the position of woman as “other” without claiming to speak for her, “claim[ing] authorial power without becoming one of those who victimizes others” (Daly 238). Through the ghost story women can “maintain enough distance so as not to possess or incorporate the other,” leaving “the other intact in all its otherness while still allowing it voice” (Archer 256). Women are able to assume the position of the ghost – an ambiguous, shifting position that refuses to be defined as either a first person or third person perspective. The ghost story permitted Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman to manipulate the terms of their language and authority, sometimes subverting, sometimes maintaining their characters’ points of view – speaking through their characters without
becoming them and reinforcing that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Freedman 369).

Somewhere between the mind of these female authors and the lives of the characters they created lay a space for reinterpretation and revision. Nineteenth century American women writers were compelled to exist between two identities: between their lives as females in a male-dominated world and their desire to take on the guise of masculine power and be recognized as an intellectual authority (Hannon 83). The motifs of the ghost story, particularly the female characters themselves and “the bonds between women, living and dead,” are reproductions or mirror images of these identities and are hence duplicitous, representing not only their human counterparts, but also the divisions within them (Carpenter and Kolmar 10). The terrors and horrors of the female authored ghost story are close to home, creating “uncanny disruptions of the boundaries between inside and outside, reality and delusion, propriety and corruption, materialism and spirituality” (Botting 113). As a result, women writers and their characters experience a continual vacillation between real and supernatural dimensions until it seems as though these realms run parallel to one another, along the same plane. The ghost story’s structure and its openness to interpretation allow the characters, text, and meaning to shift and move along this plane, rendering it fluidlike and feminine. Like the bodies of its female authors, the text shifts, cycles, creates from within itself.

Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman reveal through the creation of ghost stories that strength lies “not in controlling written discourse but in adapting it” and allowing texts to offer the truth, for the right readers (Clarke 269). Language gives them a voice as they give it a voice – a dual pathway where subtle but significant alterations can occur and the
evolution into New Womanhood and feminist thinking can take place. This is perhaps the ghost story’s principal source of power – it has multiple and shifting meanings, yet presents a constant challenge to rationality and reality. Underlying the supernatural fiction written by these three American women writers is the fear that the traditional roles imposed upon them will indeed turn them all into ghostlike creatures, not fully alive, not fully human, with no realm to call home.

**Charlotte Perkins Gilman – “The Yellow Wallpaper”**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman positions the narrator of her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” as the ghostly figure in the household, locked up in the “attic” and labeled as hysterical. During her confinement, the narrator is using journaling, an acceptable venue of female expression, as a form of therapy for what is alluded to be a combination of general discontent in her confining marriage and postpartum depression. Writing becomes a release for her pent up desires, illustrating how she slowly realizes the necessity of breaking free from the mental and physical constraints of nineteenth-century American culture. As an example of marital Gothic, “The Yellow Wallpaper” illustrates how horror can be found within a marriage and, as a result, within oneself. When the marriage a woman thought “would give her voice..., movement..., and not just a room of her own but a house, proves to have none of these attributes” she finds herself “mute, paralyzed, [and] enclosed” (Massé 20). The narrator’s husband John believes that “his wife should be a narcissistic extension of himself,” but she is unable to (and refuses to) merge her identity entirely with his. Both he and nineteenth-century society perpetuate the gender expectations that cause
her “physical and psychological destruction,” and as a result the narrator must withdraw to the only autonomy available to her – the depths of her own mind (Massè 26). Therefore the narrator’s ghostly passivity and eventual madness are, in the end, “the only escape route she has” (Massè 27). The narrator refuses to return to the reality of marital Gothic; the ghost story she creates through her journal demonstrates her newfound awareness of gender expectations, of masculinist authority, and of her wrongful suppression and restriction. Her study and incorporation of the wallpaper comes to represent the ability of all women to resist the patterns society has laid before them and create a world in which their existence must be recognized.

The narrator’s initial journal entries are unsuccessful at freeing her because they are based in the reality nineteenth-century American society has created for her. Despite her realization that something is amiss with the power structure between men and women, the narrator feels as if she sadly falls short of fulfilling the role of a True Woman. She believes that her illness leaves her incomplete, since she is no longer able to be the ideal wife and mother and, more importantly, remain happy that way. She concludes that her husband’s sister Jennie is the epitome of a True Woman, since she is “a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper” and is both content with and unquestioning of her position (Massè 29). But Jennie serves as nothing more than a conjugal enforcer, demonstrating to the narrator what is expected of her and what she is doing wrong, and revealing that both males and females are complicit in creating haunted and isolated prisons disguised as bedrooms for the “ill.” Consequently, the narrator hides her journal and “has to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” from her husband and sister-in-law (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 2).
The narrator faces great difficulty in expressing herself openly, for marriage silences her and makes decisions for her, rendering her invisible, a ghostly female. She “is pretty much silenced once she marries... she remains pent up as long as she stays with her husband... [and] the female artist is lost” (Doughty 190). Because she is treated like a silly “little girl” and has been designed to inhabit such a narrow role in life, she is initially unable to even take responsibility for her own thoughts (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 8). Gilman manipulates the language of her narrator to demonstrate her difficulty in speaking from a position of authority. In the first line the narrator introduces herself and her husband as “John and myself - an awkward wording that keeps her below par with... [men] like John” (Golden 195). In addition, she uses the pronoun “one” to describe her actions several times - this “disguises her autonomy” and creates “a haunting echo of anonymity throughout... the entire story” (King and Morris 28). This obscurity also alludes to Gilman’s own thoughts as the author, creating ambiguity as to who is actually speaking and conjuring further images of the ghostly unknown.

Yet other women in the story, such as the sister-in-law and nanny, are named because they represent “the spiritual and maternal perfection which the narrator so conspicuously lacks” (G. Johnson 526). The narrator does not fit anywhere in the domestic pattern, and thus remains a nameless, faceless ghost haunting the bedroom upstairs. “To her physician-husband John, she is 'darling,' 'little goose,' and 'little girl'; to herself she is an "I" articulated only with difficulty” (Massè 29). In addition, the isolation that John prescribes as the narrator’s remedy keeps her from all means of expressing herself and “limits her identity to a functional aspect” of her husband’s
and the male gender's in general (Massè 33). Gilman demonstrates that as a result of
the pressures of conforming to True Womanhood, the narrator has become a ghostly
creature - nameless, expressionless, and nearly invisible.

Gilman accordingly constructs her ghostly narrator's environment, both the
room that serves as her prison and the society that keeps her mind prisoner, in a
manner that reveals its uncanny resemblance to a haunted house. It is described as
having "hedges and walls and gates that lock ...lots of separate little houses for the
gardeners and people," and all sorts of objects designed for containment ("The
Yellow Wallpaper" 2). The bedroom is isolated from the rest of the house and "may
have been a nursery or asylum" (Massè 32), for "the windows are barred for little
children, and there are rings and things in the walls" ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 3).
This description serves to demonstrate how nineteenth-century American women
were infantilized and stripped of their independence and individuality. John, of
course, prefers this room for his wife and rejects the idea of giving her a room
downstairs that opens onto the piazza and, symbolically, the rest of world.

Every detail of the narrator's prison is meant to ensnare and entrap the
narrator, down to the very walls themselves. The wallpaper, through its texture,
color, and even smell, becomes oppressive and prison-like. Its yellow countenance
alludes to inferiority, strangeness, cowardliness, and ugliness and, in Gilman's
cultural era, symbolized the "other." For the narrator it represents her own repressed
"other" - her suppressed self. The woman trapped in the wallpaper and the narrator's
imprisonment within the upstairs bedroom are physical representations of nineteenth-
century American women's struggle to forge a middle ground between the confines of True Womanhood and the stifled feminine self.

This struggle is demonstrated by how the narrator retains a sense of propriety in front of her family yet questions her stance as a woman behind closed doors. Her initial journal entries uphold the nineteenth-century American domestic ideology, confirming her husband and brother's points of view and diagnoses of her condition because she is unable to see beyond the patterns imposed upon her. As a result, when she first attempts to speak for herself, she does so clandestinely, acting in a ghostly manner so as to not be caught in the midst of her impropriety. This is exemplified by the fact that she describes her initial attempts at covert expression as "creeping" - a term that suggests the movements of an inhuman creature, a monstrous being that cannot be viewed in the daylight alongside those who represent "civilized" society.

Most women do not creep by daylight... It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight! I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 12).

If she is caught reading and writing instead of resting her body and mind, John will infer that she is "creeping about" - tapping into her intellectual and emotional strength, evolving into a new creature. Such action would challenge the sexual repression of women, patriarchal control of motherhood, and women’s anxiety of authorship - issues also explored in Gilman’s "The Giant Wistaria."

Though not as widely known, "The Giant Wistaria" is a ghost story that shares many of the same thematic concerns as "The Yellow Wallpaper" and also utilizes a
fragmented format that depends on a sympathetic female audience for its correct interpretation. Most importantly, Gilman emphasizes the gender division implicitly present in the lives of her characters and the community of her readers. The women in “The Giant Wistaria” are convinced that the house must have “a story, if... [they] could only find it,” and the men only mock and tease them, insisting that the only ghosts present are the ones the women have created themselves (“The Giant Wistaria” 3). But like the mansion in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the old house in “The Giant Wistaria” is a symbol of patriarchal power, for it has been built and controlled by men and is a site of entrapment for women. The wisteria, however, is undoubtedly a feminine symbol, representing women’s rising ability to dismantle patriarchal constructs; the wisteria “creeps” about the house, threatening to tear it in two and bring it down. By the story’s end, it is clear that the women are the house’s most perceptive readers – they are able to begin reconstructing the first woman’s story across years of silence and compel readers to question whether the practices that shaped womanhood and motherhood in the past are still a force in the present. Thus if either the wistaria in “The Giant Wistaria” or the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” are successful in their “creeping,” the male characters’ position of power will be destroyed. In this manner, Gilman demonstrates to her readers how women can use the ghost story to their advantage, shifting the power dynamic in the household but remaining under the guise of propriety.

As the ghost in the household, the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” experiences a duality of being, existing between the world her husband and society have created for her and the one she wishes to inhabit as a woman, and yet is not truly
a part of either. She confesses that her condition would improve if she "had less opposition and more society and stimulus," but John tells her that the very worst thing she can do is to think about it, or anything else for that matter ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 2). Every attempt by the narrator to express herself is quickly squelched, and she is told that she must not "neglect proper self-control" ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 2). Shifting the power dynamic that keeps her in this position is a difficult task, for John not only encourages his wife's subordinate and weak position, he also fosters her lack of identity and power. The narrator sees something awry in the relation between her world and her husband's, but John sees only one of those realms – a realm in which the narrator is expected to conform for the sake of others. He urges her to take care of herself for his sake, and, when she hesitatingly suggests that only her bodily health is improving, he vehemently repudiates any implied mental illness and places her a sorry third in his scheme of values" (Massé 30). John tells her, "...for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind!" ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 15). The narrator observes an inequity between her and her husband, but John does not see or recognize this fact. It never occurs to him that his wife's social position is a disadvantage – women are naturally supposed to occupy a lower status than he for "the duty rests on them to preserve their health for the sake of the happiness of others, and the general well-being of society" (Cogan 34). Consequently, when the narrator protests and insists that there must be something wrong with her, "...John hears only an attempt to question his judgment, and he refuses her. Granting one petition would establish an inappropriate precedent and rebalancing of power" (Massé 33). The
narrator's misery as a woman will be viewed only as a misdirected and self-indulgent neglect of her duty, rather than anxiety symptomatic of the denial of identity and visibility, issues Gilman continually brings to the forefront of her tale.

Although the narrator believes that her illness is her fault initially, her position as ghost in the household, hidden upstairs in solitude and left to “creep” about, allows her to finally comprehend and challenge the mistreatment of nineteenth-century American women. This alludes to Gilbert and Gubar’s notion of the “madwoman in the attic”; nineteenth-century women writers were often categorized as “madwomen” due to their reaction to the restrictive gender categories of the time period. The madwoman character “is usually in some sense that author’s double, an image of her own... [suppressed] anxiety and rage” (Gilbert and Gubar 79). Gilman’s narrator’s need to be heard, particularly by her husband, becomes so intense that she develops an obsession with her own free expression, an fixation that is fueled by her anger at being trapped in patterns of True Womanhood and her fears that her actions may be misconstrued.

I want to astonish him [John]. I’ve got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out and tries to get away, I can tie her... I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try. Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not, I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.

(“The Yellow Wallpaper” 14)
Gilman constructs her narrator’s obsession in order to illustrate the necessity of change in the way women are viewed and treated. Women must get “angry enough to do something desperate” despite any fears of impropriety. The process of change does not stop at merely understanding the plight of nineteenth-century American women.

Gilman demonstrates that in order for the woman in the wallpaper - the nineteenth-century American woman - to break free, the narrator must be willing to unite her self, the first person point of view, with the voice of the woman, the third person voice of feminine authority. If they are not united, her inner (ghostly) self will abandon her, leaving her to mindlessly follow the patterns of womanhood set before her. The fusion of her self and the voice of female authority can occur only when the narrator is prepared to kill off her outer self as a component of the larger sphere of True Womanhood. After being told her fears of a mental breakdown were “a false and foolish fancy,” the narrator “lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately” (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 9). Once she begins to question her ability to be a separate entity from her husband and society, she finds herself deceiving others in order to study the wallpaper at length. She becomes determined to be the only one to decipher the pattern; this shift to autonomous behavior illustrates how she separates her image from that of her husband and initiates a positive change in self-representation. She shifts into New Womanhood at the moment when her thoughts and actions have condemned her to madness. Although she must suffer the delusions of insanity as a result, her use of the pronoun “I” conveys “an emerging sense of self and conviction...
[and] a stronger albeit fictionalized self that connotes power... [and] a reversal of the dynamics of power between... [her] and John” (Golden 196). The narrator's point of view as subordinate to her husband shifts to a powerful first person position through which she begins to view and incorporate the changes occurring as a result of her ghostly position in the household.

This shifting point of view allows the narrator to read the wallpaper—something that her husband and sister-in-law cannot experience. She realizes that she is the only member of the household able to see the pattern inscribed upon it, thus causing her to act skeptically at first and doubt herself.

There is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes.

When the sun shoots in through the east window... it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it. That is why I watch it always. (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 9)

Until the narrator has embraced a shifting point of view, becoming both her true self and the woman in the wallpaper, a representative of all women, she cannot decipher the pattern that puzzles her so. She only then becomes aware of “so many of those creeping women” and wonders if “they all come out of that wallpaper” as she did (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 14). By occupying the metaphorical position of the ghost, she is able to eradicate her literal position of ghostliness in society.

Subsequently, the narrator’s sickness, though easily labeled as insanity, is the “result of her alienation from the role society expects her to play” and is truly a duplicity that allows her to disassemble the patterns trapping her ("On Not Reading
Between the Lines” 27). The narrator teeters on the edge of sanity and insanity, reality and unreality, refusing to subscribe to either side of any dichotomy, existing as a duplicitous being of neither this world nor another. Her imprisoned double, trying to shake free from the bars of her prison becomes “a potent metaphor for feminine anger” towards the domestic ideology of the time (Knight 290). Like Jekyll and Hyde, the narrator shifts from the modest and mild-mannered woman her husband sees into the independently thinking and acting woman in the wallpaper. Once free, she finds it “so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around” as she pleases (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 14). She takes charge of her position, refusing to leave the room even if she is asked to (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 14). When the narrator finally slips into “madness” in its entirety, she has completely incorporated the woman in the wallpaper and the inner self she has denied. She tells readers, “I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper” (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 13). She no longer refers to her self or the woman in the wallpaper, and instead articulates through a united “we” that illustrates her transformation into a new being. By tearing the paper, the narrator “assists the double to break free from the forms that confine her” (“On Not Reading Between the Lines” 25). This act can also be viewed as not only freeing her from male repression, but also as eliminating the part of her self that is preventing her from achieving her feminine ideal. In addition, her shift from the sphere of True Womanhood to that of female independence “emphasizes their mutual incompatibility in... [nineteenth-century American society] until... [she] merges them by entering the realm of the yellow wallpaper” (Massé 34). Although the wallpaper paradoxically
limits the narrator to the confines of her room, it provides her with the autonomy and power that the "real" world cannot offer her.

It is key that Gilman frees the narrator through a means that does not require her protagonist to overtake the woman in the wallpaper. Despite the narrator’s claims that she will tie up the woman in the wallpaper to keep her from escaping, in the end she "refuses to possess this woman, to appropriate her" (Archer 257). Gilman utilizes a method of expression that affords her narrator with a voice that does not participate in the further subjugation of women. Thus it is essential that Gilman illustrates the narrator's transformation through the bedroom's wallpaper - it is an entity that everyone can see and experience and, since the wallpaper decorates a bedroom symbolic of entrapment, it becomes illustrative of the unjust power structure present in nineteenth-century American society. Just as a ghost story is a form of oral storytelling, the wallpaper is a form of group representation. The narrator and female readers see not only themselves in the wallpaper, but all powerless individuals.

The front pattern does move - and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one... But nobody could climb through that pattern - it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads. They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white! ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 12)

The wallpaper’s senseless design is the strangling pattern of True Womanhood, a pattern that women suffer under as individuals and as a group. The narrator is skeptical that anyone can break free from it, yet through her continual investigation
begins to unravel the wallpaper's mysterious power: “Behind that outside pattern the
dim shapes get clearer every day. It is always the same shape, only very numerous”
(“The Yellow Wallpaper” 8). Although the outside pattern, the patterns of propriety
she is expected to follow, attempt to deceive the narrator into remaining powerless,
the dim shapes of those individuals suffering under this deception become clearer and
clearer as she reflects upon her position as a nineteenth-century American woman.

By the end of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator has finally gained space
and power for herself and Gilman has articulated her own difficulties as an author
without fear of rejection. The narrator is able to see through the coddling of her
husband and sister-in-law and realize the true implications of their oppressive and
repressive actions. She then reproduces the tone used to victimize her, forcing the
man of the house to do the work. He must follow her directions and submit to her
wishes: “And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so
often that he had to go and see” (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 15). She pulls herself free
of the outer pattern and immerses herself in the inner, telling her husband, “I've got
out at last ... in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you
can't put me back!” (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 15). She incorporates the identity of
the woman trapped behind the wallpaper and sets her self free. In addition, by
naming herself from the third person perspective she further depicts the conflict
between her selves and reveals her resentment towards her forced role in society as
wife and mother. And, when her husband faints away at her actions, signaling his
feminization, she steps over him, usurping a dominant position and further
symbolizing the shift in power between them.
Although journal writing initially keeps the narrator trapped in the same cycles of self-abuse and denial, it is also “her only opportunity to use her own discourse” (“On Not Reading Between the Lines” 27). The protagonist’s covertly written text is in itself a ghostly tale that forces readers to share in her movement towards understanding the terror she experiences as she confronts her self. She and her audience come to realize that, like other nineteenth-century American women, she is “a prisoner inside the yellow wall-paper, an unsavory social text created and sustained not only by men like John, but by women like Jennie, and, most horribly, herself” (Hume 480). Women take part in perpetuating their story of oppression and must together break it down and transform it. The narrator’s intense study of the wallpaper's patterns allows Gilman’s readers to see what lay behind many nineteenth-century American ghost stories: a trapped woman who must either live with the hand dealt to her by society or embrace freedom through untraditional and often unhealthy means.

Mary Wilkins Freeman – “Luella Miller”

In her ghostly tale “Luella Miller,” Mary Wilkins Freeman uses servant and employer characters to exemplify the ways in which the nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood renders women into ghostlike creatures, driving them to a slow and selfless death. Freeman’s prose demonstrates how ghosts often “dwell amid the reality of evil” by highlighting the “nature of fear itself” and “the ghosts of frustrated ambition, stifled desire and denied love” (Bendixen 241, 246). Her tale embodies the underlying terror inherent in the nineteenth-century domestic sphere and the distortion of all that it should represent – love, safety, and security. It contains housekeepers, spinsters, and “children,”
all of whom are “victims of distorted family relationships” (Bendixen 247). Through these characteristics, Freeman suggests in her tale that “motherhood may require self-sacrifice to the point of sacrifice of self,” for the physical and emotional attention demanded of a woman as mother/wife leads inevitably to a “human sacrifice” in which “a living woman must become a ghost” (Bendixen 249).

“Luella Miller” illustrates how a spinster, Lydia Anderson, is obsessed with her childlike neighbor, Luella Miller, who does nothing but get others to work for her, which eventually kills them all. “Although they hearken from quite different backgrounds, both female characters represent the societal perils of rejecting True Womanhood; Lydia, as an unmarried and childless woman, illustrates the danger of rejecting one’s sisters bound by domesticity, while Luella exemplifies a rejection of adult womanhood altogether, becoming idle and useless to society. Above all, Freeman illustrates two women’s unsuccessful attempts at attaining New Womanhood; these characters’ refusal to aid and support one another prohibits them from gaining an authentic female voice and destroying the patterns of repression that force them to live as ghostly servants in the household.”

Freeman describes her main character, Luella Miller, as being childlike, naïve, and completely unable to care for herself. Luella is tended to by character after character, each of whom exemplifies the characteristics of a True Woman by denying his/her own basic needs and desires in order to mother Luella in every way possible. Luella’s caretakers are unable to survive in this oppressive position; there is something about caring for Luella and living the life of a True Woman that seems “to draw the heart right out of” them (Freeman 93). In addition, the position of domestic servant is so
overwhelming that each time one of Luella's caretakers dies, the household structure collapses. Thus it is suggested that a household cannot exist without a domestic influence to provide the proper atmosphere of order and peace. 'Through her characterization, Freeman demonstrates how nineteenth-century society both outwardly and subversively dictated the role of women in the household by convincing females that they were responsible for the continuation of the morality and virtue of the home, even if it killed them. '

However, Luella Miller is neither a True Woman nor a New Woman; she rejects the constraints of True Womanhood but, through her childlike behavior, never attains New Womanhood either. Because married women before the Civil War were "legally dead" in America, the thought of remaining a "pale, delicate, invalided" child was rather attractive (Cogan 15, 7). Luella realizes that she will inevitably be "...infantilized by society's image of women," causing her to be "intensely, debilitatingly aware of her own vulnerability and need for love and nurture" as well as her fear of becoming an adult wife and mother (Fedorko 45). As a result, instead of living within the boundaries of True Womanhood and suffering under its infantilization, Luella infantilizes herself so as to escape servitude and adult responsibility. She would often "just sit and cry and do nothin'" and let everyone tend to her like a "poor little lamb" (Freeman 83-85). When asked why she did not tend to her own household needs, she would stare at the inquirer with a "sort of innocent and surprised" look on her face (Freeman 88). She has convinced herself that she is unable to take on the tasks of a grown woman and has convinced others that she is a "poor, abused woman, too delicate to help herself," both of which allow her to remain a guiltless and blameless child (Freeman 94).
Freeman characterizes Luella as physically resembling a child as well. Thus, although she is able to escape the perils of True and New Womanhood, she is condemned to the realm of childhood, devoid of adult power and voice. The ideal of True Womanhood justified, taught, and molded “women into becoming perpetual children, bereft of self-worth, weak in body and mind,” but Luella has purposely chosen to occupy a childlike space that allows her to subtly manipulate others (Cogan 16). She is described as having “little slender, clinging hands” and is a “slight, pliant sort of creature, as ready with a strong yielding to fate and as unbreakable as a willow” (Freeman 78). She exists by clinging to others, yet does not yield to the needs and desires of those around her. Her motives and actions are purely selfish and, as a result of her appearance, she is able to delude others into believing her narcissistic ways are justified.

The ghost story allows for Luella’s unique position by setting supernatural events “inside a kind of imaginative logic in which the normal laws of cause and effect are suspended” in favor of more spiritually-based ways of thinking (Briggs 124). Ghost stories allow thought itself to become a mode of power “in which wishes or fears can actually benefit or do harm,” a way of thinking that is “characteristic of very small children who haven’t yet defined their own limits, but which western educational traditions have taught us to reject or leave behind” (Briggs 124). Luella represents this means of thinking and its ability to produce physical effects in the real world. If one’s imagination can move beyond the confines of her mind, then it is potentially within her power to change her world with her thoughts. This is demonstrated by the ways in which Luella’s position in the household allows her to be the center of attention and not break
the rules of propriety – she is not defined by any adult limits; thus she does not have to conform to any.

Many nineteenth-century women adhered “to the stereotype of the fragile maiden (and used it as a cover for covert action)” (Cogan 4). Luella’s childlike and “fragile” status affords her an adult audience and gives her a taste of adolescent freedom; however, without that audience, she holds no practical value in society.

I looked straight at Luella Miller laughin’ and cryin’ and goin’ on as if she was the center of all creation. All the time she was actin’ so – seemed as if she was too sick to sense anythin’ – she was keepin’ a sharp lookout as to how we took it out of the corner of one eye. (Freeman 86)

Luella plays the part of a child because she is convinced that it will allow her to gain access to an audience – one that she must keep a close watch on, for if she loses it, she loses all means of communication with adult society. So Luella would have “her hysterics... till she got tired. When she found out that nobody was comin’ to coddle her and do for her she stopped” (Freeman 90). She is caught between her “inner needs for personal expression and... recognition” and a society that nearly “renders her invisible” (King 96). Luella desires freedom from domestic responsibilities and the oppression of marriage and motherhood, but only finds alienation and emptiness once “liberated” by her childlike position (Blackford 234).

However, despite Luella’s lack of power as a childlike female, she utilizes her helplessness to control the other characters in the story. As a result of her seemingly passive position, she is able to consume her caretakers, “feeding” off them both figuratively and literally and usurping a masculine, dominating status. Luella claims to
be physically unable to prepare her own food and takes from others without pause or consideration. When neighbors bring in food for her ailing caretakers, Luella literally “eat[s] up everythin’ that was carried in” (Freeman 83). Yet Freeman also alludes to Luella as a vampire-like creature, metaphorically living off the affection of her victims rather than their blood (Howard 61). Despite her childlike appearance, Luella is a dangerous and deadly creature.

There ain’t nothin’ weak about that woman. She’s got strength enough to hang onto other folks till she kills ‘em. Weak? It was my poor mother that was weak: this woman killed her as sure as if she had taken a knife to her. (Freeman 92)

Freeman’s allusion to Luella as a predatory creature signals her unnaturalness, a duality of character as both a “delicate flower and a passive parasite” that attracts and repels her victims at the same time (Cogan 3). ‘In this sense, Luella is depicted as a monster wreaking terror on a small New England village – a true example of domestic horror (Howard 61). And yet what is most horrifying is how her caretakers are so deeply obsessed with exemplifying the characteristics of a True Woman that they would rather allow Luella to suck the very life from them than fall short in their service. ‘

Under the ideals of True Womanhood, a female must never “show feelings of frustration, exhaustion, or being burdened” (Lundie 245). Although Luella’s caretakers are not literally hired as her servants, they hold this position since they assume the corresponding household responsibilities and never reveal any dissatisfaction with the life they have been dealt – it was better to suffer under nineteenth-century ideals than be rejected by society as an abnormality. But this inability to express adverse emotions
towards their societal placement renders them outsiders anyhow – outsiders to powerful positions in society, to realms of male-dominated knowledge, to their own inner needs and desires. Freeman’s story reveals women’s ultimate reality during the nineteenth century – “that continually effacing oneself, putting one’s own needs to the side, leads to the ultimate position of ‘outsider’: the ghost” (Lundie 273). Thus although Luella’s caretakers have a metaphorical placement as ghosts once they are in her service, they have a literal placement as well.

Domestic servants are spectral presences, haunting upper and middle class households and the “bourgeois female psyche” (Blackford 237). Their position in the domestic realm gives them “a freedom of mobility that upper-class female characters do not feel and, in fact, envy” (Blackford 237). However, domestic servants are deprived of societal power and recognition and therefore remain ghosts, watching and watching over their employers; in a sense, haunting them. While Luella “lived like a queen,” Lottie Henderson did all the teaching for her, Lily Miller did all her sewing, and Maria Babbit cut and fit all of her clothes (Freeman 81). And yet, despite all of their hovering over her, not one of Luella’s “servants” was given recognition for her hard work. In addition, domestic servants are isolated in their job and their relationships, often with no coworkers to offer support or reinforcement. The figure of the servant as the undead – serving her employer in a zombie-like trance – illustrates how the domestic female is prevented from taking possession of and defining herself. And yet both the servant and employer feel inferior because their positions inherently deny male power, which in turn “creates a tendency for both mistress and servant to scrutinize the customs and behaviors of one another – to be, in short, competitive” (Blackford 236). The depiction of such
competition illustrates the opposing features of the female psyche and uses the figures of servant and employer to pit these aspects against one another. Being a domestic servant, and a woman in general, literally sucks the life from Freeman’s characters, as is demonstrated by the fate of the servants in her tale.

Luella’s husband Erastus, despite being male, exemplifies the characteristics of a True Woman by becoming Luella’s mother figure and servant. “He always got the breakfast and let Luella lay abed. He did all the sweepin’ and the washin’ and the ironin’ and most of the cookin’” (Freeman 81). This ironic gender role reversal illustrates how Freeman meticulously establishes Luella as a helpless female character in order to force the male figure in the household into experiencing the perils of True Womanhood.

Because Erastus eventually gives his life for another’s contentment and happiness, he is feminized in society’s eyes. Just like females in servitude, he experiences a loss of identity, power, and voice. And in the end he is consumed by Luella, growing weaker and weaker until he bent double and “spoke feeble, like an old man” (Freeman 80). Erastus is forced to endure True Womanhood, which renders him “more dead than alive”; a ghost servant (Freeman 80). In this manner, both female and male readers are forced to experience the constricting role of a True Woman through him and understand its detrimental effects regardless of the gender of its victim.

Luella’s sister-in-law Lily, who gives up her home to live with Luella after her husband dies, is Luella’s first female victim. It wasn’t long after moving in before Lily was also drained of her life and died of exhaustion.

It was not six months after she [Lily] had taken up her residence with her sister-in-law that her rosy color faded and her pretty curves became wan
hollows. White shadows began to show in the black rings of her hair, and
the light died out of her eyes, her features sharpened, and there were
pathetic lines at her mouth.... (Freeman 83)

Lily’s good looks and physical strength faded within months of taking on the full time
role as Luella’s caretaker, and she too begins resembling the undead. But Lily is gladly
playing the part of a True Woman, allowing Luella to live a responsibility-free life in
exchange for the socially acceptable identities of mother and servant. She always “wore
an expression of utter sweetness and even happiness... and was perfectly content in her
service” (Freeman 83). Unable to express any displeasure at her situation, Lily accepts
her fate and learns to devote herself completely to it.

Luella’s Aunt Abby is the next to fall victim to her greedy habits and in no time
had “begun to droop just the way Lily had” (Freeman 85). Because her own daughter
was now married, she gladly accepts the opportunity to adopt Luella, to not remain idle
or useless to society. Maria Brown is also unable to pass up the chance to adopt Luella
and she too falls prey to the same monster as her predecessors, “fad[ing] away just the
same fashion the others had” (Freeman 94). As an unmarried and childless woman, she
desired to fill the socially imposed void in her life by serving and mothering Luella. She,
like Luella’s other servants, held fast to the ideals of True Womanhood and believed that
it was her responsibility to help “them that couldn’t help themselves,” even if she died
doing so (Freeman 94).

Through her servant characters, Freeman illustrates the detrimental effects of
female repression and the devastating fact that the women in her story “die without ever
having fully explored... themselves” (G. Johnson 179). By conforming to True
Womanhood, they lose any sense of an identity or voice. While serving, they are metaphorically dead, and yet “despite being dead, [they] refuse to relinquish their positions in their households” (Blackford 233). Once they become servants to Luella, they are shorn of their autonomous identity and are reborn as powerless wives/mothers (slaves) to her. They have lost touch with the outside world and with themselves – they are “lost in the air like ghosts” (Wallace 57). When there is no one left to care for Luella, she is shorn of her childlike identity and begins to go into a decline just the way her caretakers had, unable to live with the same physical and mental restriction they had perished under. It seems, however, that death frees Luella and her servants and they are able to gain power through a literal ghostly status. Through death all of the characters are united as feminine beings, working together instead of competing against one another.

I saw Luella Miller and Erastus Miller, and Lily, and Aunt Abby, and Maria, and the Doctor, and Sarah, all goin’ out of her door, and all but Luella shone white in the moonlight, and they were all helpin’ her along till she seemed to fairly fly in the midst of them. (Freeman 102)

Once dead, Luella is able to physically become a member of a female community, something that is key to her gaining an authentic and adult voice. However, despite this ability, she rejects her sisters and does not become a part of their circle. In the last scene, Luella is still being helped along by her caretakers, and is thus not truly a part of their sisterhood or the quest to initiate change and break down the constraints of marriage and motherhood.

Lydia Anderson is the only living female character in this tale who is not bound by these constraints of True Womanhood. She represents the shift and evolution into
New Womanhood and rejects the stifling constructs of marriage and motherhood. Freeman depicts Lydia Anderson as a woman who “never in all of her life had... ever held her tongue for any will save her own, and she never spared the truth when she essayed to present it” (Freeman 77). She has embraced the freedoms available to her as a New Woman, speaking her mind and addressing others honestly and directly. However, her complete immersion in New Womanhood also comes at a cost; Lydia can speak her mind as she pleases, but her thoughts are “clothed in the rude vernacular of her native village” and she remains unmarried (Freeman 77). Because she has strayed too far from the needs of the female community, she is unable to inhabit a middle ground where she can possess both the propriety of a True Woman and the autonomy of a New Woman. Freeman characterizes Lydia in this way to warn against nineteenth-century American women rejecting motherhood and marriage altogether. It was a common fear that if one “does not succeed in being chosen [for marriage], she becomes a thing of mild popular contempt, a human being with no further place in life save as... an old maid” (“Women and Economics” 45). And women were told that “they obtain their livelihood as mothers” and that “the duties and services of the mother entitle her to [economic] support,” when in truth motherhood bears no relation to one’s happiness as a woman or economic status (“Women and Economics” 8).

Lydia Anderson represents a “ghostly” figure particular to nineteenth-century America. She is a spinster, a position viewed one of two ways during this time period – as either an “individual misfortune or as a manifestation of protofeminist assertion of autonomy” (Berend 935). Freeman uses the image of Lydia as a spinster to illustrate how women who reject domesticity “come into conflict with their friends, or established
custom” (Howard 58), yet can still be successful at making a statement on the position of women because their image was viewed as “highly moral and fully womanly” (Berend 936). Spinsters are said to be separated from the realm of sexual desire; they live their lives beyond earthly pleasures and instead can indulge in intellectual and philanthropic spheres. In addition, the scorn with which unmarried and childless women were treated lessened each year in “proportion to their advance in economic independence” (“Women and Economics” 45). Thus spinsterhood, just like Elsie’s separation from the ideals of True Womanhood through death, could convey the message “that woman’s life is valuable and can be useful under any conditions... marriage was not woman’s only mission, not the only chance for a happy life” (Berend 941-2). As a spinster, Lydia has liberated herself from the constraints of marriage and motherhood and demonstrated her worth beyond the domestic sphere. Given “the gift of description” and “always strong in... [her] arms,” Lydia was “wonderfully hale and hearty... until about two weeks before her death” (Freeman 77, 81, 103).

However, because Lydia altogether denies a bond with her sisters who have married and had children, she is victim to the same repressive patterns they suffer under. Instead of using her ghostly position, separated from the customary demands of a married woman’s life, to further the independence and education of women, she uses it to condemn True Women and silence them even further. Only another woman can save a female from perishing under the oppression of True Womanhood, and this rescue must be achieved through an ambiguity that places her between the two positions available to her (Wallace 61). Women do not necessarily need to take part in the realm of domesticity, but they cannot ignore its existence nor those still trapped within its oppressive patterns.
They can reject it, but they must not forget it. Because Lydia has rejected domesticity in its entirety, and in turn her fellow females, by merely observing and relating the events of the story instead of attempting to alter them, she cannot speak from an authentically female point of view.

- Yet in the end, Lydia is helplessly drawn to True Womanhood—when there is no one left to help Luella, she carries her bundles to her house. Although Lydia falls ill for two weeks as a result of it, she was satisfied that she had at least “done right by Erastus’ wife” (Freeman 101). She aids Luella yet again when she discovers she is dying, for she feels that “it was somebody’s duty to go in” and care for her. And a year later, while being cared for by a neighbor, Lydia’s dead body is found “stretched on the ground before the door of Luella Miller’s deserted house” (Freeman 103). This ironic reversal in which Lydia first reflects True Woman characteristics and then becomes a dependent herself illustrates her inability to either completely reject or embrace True Womanhood.

Freeman juxtaposes Lydia and Luella in order to not only demonstrate their dramatic differences, but also to illustrate their unfortunate similarities. Freeman is confronting, through the narrative strategies of the supernatural, the “basic conflicts of how to be both a person and a wife and mother” (Lundie 242). The sharp contrast between Lydia as the “frustrated old maid” and Luella as the “dangerously dependent wife” serves to dramatize the “unsatisfactory alternatives too often offered women” (Bendixen 251-2). Lydia represents the woman who has rejected True Womanhood and domesticity, but fails to attain status as a New Woman. She does not attain the same respect as Luella, for Luella is able to retain her propriety in spite of her rejection of True Womanhood. But Luella, although similar to Lydia in her rejection of domesticity, is
viewed ultimately as “a problem to herself, her family, and to society – ‘idle’ and ‘out of a job’” (Gullette par. 2). Her so-called freedom from adult womanhood renders her useless to nineteenth-century American society and portrays her “[i]dleness… as a moral defect” (Gullette par. 48). Women were thought to naturally inhabit a certain position in society and to deny this placement was to go against what was thought to inherently work best. New Women echoed a hatred for idleness, but had women-centered reasons for their disgust; inactivity and unemployment were preventing women “from gaining self-respect, economic independence and power, [and] male respect” (Gullette par. 51). In this manner, Lydia and Luella represent the duality often present in ghost stories – although they in essence both represent a rejection of True Womanhood and domesticity, they also illustrate opposite ends of a spectrum with a rejection of sisterhood on one hand and complete idleness, and therefore uselessness, on the other. Through her characters, Freeman posits that to truly exist in the sphere of New Womanhood and move beyond societal constraints, a nineteenth-century American woman must reject the niche society has carved for her but never repudiate her sisters along the way.

Thus Freeman is careful to include all women in her story, creating a sense of community that is key to breaking down the domestic ideal and its repressive hold on nineteenth-century women. As is the case with most of Freeman’s ghost stories, “Luella Miller” is set in the context of a visit, allowing an outsider (and her readers) “to gain access, to be told the background to the situation, or to slowly experience it firsthand, along with the ‘outsider’ character” (Howard 59). A “visit” story gives off an air of safety and comfort, reminding readers of quiet, happy times. But readers find out this is just a façade and the world they deemed “safe” is not quite so. Instead, they are candidly
shown how “the secure everyday world has holes in it... [and] people may fall through them at any time, in any place” (Howard 59). Instead of maintaining the “fairy tale of women’s sphere,” women writers like Freeman illustrated how females “patently could not continue within its traditional boundaries” (Cogan 11). With men in the position of employer and women as employee, women are forbidden the development of economic, and thus physical and emotional, independence (“Women and Economics” 5-6).

Freeman uses the ghost story to demonstrate how the female servant’s confinement to the home and the limitation of her knowledge and power restrict her expression and deny her the freedom to act. She warns us to not be accustomed to such disadvantageous conditions or fail to notice them; women had the power to incite social revolution, even if their current position suggested otherwise.

**Edith Wharton – “Pomegranate Seed”**

Edith Wharton’s tale “Pomegranate Seed” utilizes a female ghost writer to demonstrate how the supernatural story can expose the detrimental effects of idealized womanhood and provide a guide for women readers and writers in the early twentieth century who struggled to find an ideological middle position between the emerging feminist position and traditional female roles. “Pomegranate Seed,” published in 1931, was written after the reign of True Womanhood and its denouncement as “physically injurious, economically unworkable, legally contraindicated for survival within the restraints of marriage, and intellectually vacuous” (Cogan 3-4). However, although discussion of True Womanhood had dissolved by the twentieth century, traditional ideals of womanhood continued to be supported as a conservative and feminine alternative to
the “growing tide of turn-of-the-century feminism” (Cogan 257). Because it was less
dynamic than a revolutionary feminist position, the traditional and ostentatiously
feminine continued to be intrinsically valuable, particularly to those who still believed it
was a woman’s moral duty to “reform and uplift society” (Cogan 258). However, the
eyear twentieth century saw a strengthening disinterest in the domestic sphere and women
began to work outside the home not just because it was necessary and they could, but
because they found it personally fulfilling. Many critics of feminism feared that this
would destroy the womanly virtues necessary to keep society civilized; consequently,
women struggled to find a way to integrate their traditional and newfound roles in society
and avoid the political and social stigmatization their predecessors suffered.

Traditional ideals of womanhood had assumed that women were nervous and
hysterical creatures, inherently weak, and easily dominated by male strength and
rationality (Cogan 4-5). Wharton’s tale, as an illustration of the downfall of such
assumptions, reverses this dynamic, casting a male as an outsider to knowledge and
forcing him to learn about his gender’s “abuse of power and female victimization” but
characterizing him as “too timid to acknowledge his observations fully” (Fedorko 23).
This literary annihilation of the male leaves the women in the story to confront the
ultimate Gothic fear – that in addition to challenging male oppression, they must also
face their own femaleness without losing themselves in “domestic denial” (Fedorko 31).
Through Elsie’s haunting of the living and her ghostly texts’ power over Kenneth and
Charlotte, Wharton demonstrates women’s inherent need for free expression and the
complications that arise when breaking free from the societal constraints that prevent that
freedom from being realized.
As the literal ghost of this story, Elsie is described as being a “distant, self-centered woman” who “absolutely dominated” her husband (Wharton 220-222). Her need to express herself is so intense that it allows her to transcend death, “as if writing were more important than being” (Singley, “Forbidden Reading” 214). Even her portrait on the wall, “which Charlotte feels is following her with ‘guarded eyes’ and Kenneth believes will be ‘looking down on’ his and Elsie’s children while they grow, wields affective power” and emphasizes her control and intellect (Fedorko 126-7). These characteristics are representative of how Elsie, as an archetype of turn-of-the-century feminism, would have been viewed by early twentieth-century American society. Although she has her own identity and the freedom to express herself, she must as a result sacrifice her position with the living and endure being labeled with sterile, masculine characteristics. Thus, despite Elsie’s success in communicating with others from beyond the grave, her texts do not represent authentic female expression for they still utilize the epistolary format, a far too limiting structure based in nineteenth-century ideals of womanhood. “Excluded and repressed, ‘written as though there were not enough ink in the pen, or the writer’s wrist were too weak,’ her letters are ‘so faint and faltering as to be nearly undecipherable’” (Singley, “Forbidden Reading” 212-213). Similar to the narrator’s initial lack of success in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Elsie’s letters, though presented in a more conspicuous format than a personal journal, still cannot fully represent her thoughts as a female writer. However, her attempts to communicate are, indeed, a threat to traditional patterns of womanhood, thus endowing her writing with a mysterious power that manipulates the other characters in the story.
In contrast to Elsie and her power, Kenneth's second wife Charlotte is stifled and silenced by the earthly constraints of marriage and the emphasis put on its importance in society. Charlotte exhibits characteristics of a traditional woman, relinquishing her own identity for that of her new family. She buys into the institution of marriage, believing it will give her life both meaning and purpose; yet it proves to be her downfall, destroying any sense of self and individuality she may have possessed.

In the very heart of the hurricane she had found her tiny islet – or thought she had. And now, in the last months, everything was changed, and she always wavered on the doorstep and had to force herself to enter.

(Wharton 219)

She expects to find completion through marriage; instead she finds ambiguity and an irrepressible sense of insecurity. She hopes for a happy ending, but discovers such intense feelings of anxiety that they keep her standing outside her own front door, once her “veiled sanctuary,” for the first six pages of the story, fearing that another letter and all that it implies may lie inside (Wharton 200). She represents her predecessors, the nineteenth-century American women who “had language and literature used against them, to keep them in their place, to mystify, to bully, to make them feel powerless” (Freedman 368).

And yet Charlotte remains true to her domestic position, acting at times both content with and enthusiastic about her condition. Her own drawing room which, “since the death of Kenneth's first wife, neither furniture nor hangings had been changed,” vividly reflects her imprisonment in her marriage, regardless of how she attempted to make it “her own by moving furniture about and adding more books, another lamp, a
table for the new reviews” (Wharton 220). By agreeing to live in the house Kenneth shared with the first Mrs. Ashby, Charlotte is “essentially agreeing to appropriate the identity of the wife before her” (Fedorko 125). This is problematic, for Elsie preserves reading and writing as solitary acts and thus does not achieve a positive and progressive model of womanhood. Instead of proposing a “marriage of minds” in which a self-affirming collaboration of female consciousness occurs, Elsie makes the power of authorship anxious and exclusive (Singley 10). Her “embedded feminine texts... are both legible and illegible,” reinforcing for Charlotte the very power structures women writers seek to subvert (Sweeney 27). By literally becoming Mrs. Ashby, Charlotte is unable to break her silence and is denied access to feminine modes of expression.

Charlotte’s presence is all but negated; like the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” she is not permitted to truly alter her surroundings and make them her own and must both literally and figuratively live with the dead. By utilizing a setting embedded in the past, Wharton creates an emotional and intellectual prison for Charlotte much like the one traditional womanhood has constructed for her. Charlotte is forced to either accept what is set before her or possibly be rejected by her husband, thus losing any identity beyond wife and stepmother. Both her husband and the institution of marriage find ways to restrict her, control her, and keep things “in order” according to traditional principles.

Wharton constructs Charlotte as a metaphorical ghost ruined by marriage and masculine power. But Charlotte, always in line with the feminine ideal, learns to not only accept her fate, but also convince herself it is enjoyable at times.
Sometimes friends dropped in; sometimes – oftener – she was alone; and liked that best, since it was another way of being with Kenneth, thinking over what he had said when they parted in the morning, imagining what he would say when he sprang up the stairs, found her by herself and caught her to him. (Wharton 220)

Instead of having her own identity, one that includes friends and personal interests, Charlotte has been taught to live for her husband and family. As a result, even when she is alone, she really isn’t; her mind is with Kenneth in all aspects. She, like the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” has been infantilized and stripped of her independence and individuality. As a result, even though she is a “living” character, she is just as much a ghost in the household as Elsie.

Marriage has silenced Charlotte, making decisions for her and rendering her invisible. Nevertheless, because she fits the traditional feminine ideal, her name comprises the first two words of the story, highlighting her achievement of marriage and motherhood. As the prototypical wife and mother, she represents what Elsie so noticeably lacks; therefore she never actually utters Elsie’s name, referring to her only as “the first Mrs. Ashby” or an impersonal “she” or “her” (Wharton 220). To Charlotte, Elsie is a nameless ghost haunting her husband with nearly invisible, and thus expressionless, letters. However, Wharton has purposefully manipulated Elsie’s language to demonstrate the importance of her virtual anonymity. Elsie not only represents the world of the unknown and indefinable, she also exemplifies the ambiguity ghost stories afford the female writer. Because the reader is given very little information about Elsie and never learns the true contents of her letters, a certain degree of
uncertainty haunts the story. The reader is never really sure who is writing the letters or what is being said, hence their purpose, and in turn Wharton’s, is deceptively unclear. Elsie’s inability to forge a middle ground that integrates her roles as a wife, mother, and writer denies her a meaningful place in the real world, yet affords her the ability to hide behind pen and paper and utilize unconventional methods of communication.

As the literal ghost in this story, Elsie represents a shift to New Womanhood and feminism. She demonstrates for readers how dying allows a woman to be recast as something other than a wife and mother. Marriage was often seen as the one plot available to women in the nineteenth century; it was the “sole means of success or survival… [and] symbolized her integration into society” (Gullette par. 5). Although “death symbolizes her failure to negotiate that entrance, as well as the culture’s failure to imagine her existence apart from marriage,” it allows her “individual ‘nature’ [to]… be uncovered, flourish, and write its own scripts” (Gullette par. 6). Marriage and mothering need only be incidents in a woman’s life, not definitions of it. Through death Elsie acquires a more powerful and independent female voice, one beyond the earthy constraints of marriage and motherhood. She is no longer subject to “the emotional silence of those condemned to the condition of non-communication with their fellow creatures”; death removes restriction and rejection real life offered her as either a traditional female or feminist, hence she is now able to grow both emotionally and intellectually. Thus, it is ironic that she, as a manifestation of the non-living and normally silent world, breaks down the “suppression and silence of women” in American society (Young 1). Because she can work towards changing her position as a woman clandestinely, her actions are not seen as immodest and unladylike. In addition, Elsie’s
position of power is manifested through nearly unreadable letters; hence both her power and her intimate knowledge of the living are more implied than overtly demonstrated. Elsie’s ghostly letters are a venue of expression that, despite being unreadable, allow her to “influence Kenneth’s emotions, words, and actions” and shift the power dynamic in the household without directly challenging traditional ideals of womanhood (Young 2).

The dichotomy created by Charlotte as a traditional female and Elsie as a turn-of-the-century feminist illustrates the choice available to women during this time—either remain repressed and be accepted by society or embrace expression and fear rejection, a metaphorical death that is made literal for Elsie. In “Pomegranate Seed,” these options manifest themselves in a conflict between the living and the dead, the old ways and the new. But the line separating the two is unclear—Elsie represents the other world, the non-living and unknown while Charlotte represents the living and what is “rational.” However, Elsie also symbolizes change and an authentic voice for women, while Charlotte embodies antiquated ideals of womanhood. Despite their antithetical positioning, Charlotte and Elsie are both battling for possession of Kenneth; but, more importantly, Elsie is struggling “to achieve a voice, to make herself heard and her desires known,” to have her presence sharply felt (Young 2). Through her ghostly position, Elsie hopes to achieve that which she could not as a member of the living—independence as a female writer and the opportunity to gain an authentic voice.

Beyond their desire to possess Kenneth, a strong connection indeed exists between Charlotte and Elsie. They are counterparts, literally representing the dichotomy of traditional and progressive womanhood. “[J]ust like the acts of reading and writing which they represent,” one is passive and the other is active (Singley, “Forbidden
Reading” 200). Writing, Elsie’s means of action in the story, seems to be a malevolent twin to reading, the act Charlotte hesitantly takes part in. Again like Jekyll and Hyde, Charlotte represents the mild-mannered, rule abiding citizen while Elsie represents independent thought and an unstoppable desire for free expression and power, particularly over men. And despite her rejection of Elsie’s supernatural existence, Charlotte is undeniably connected to Elsie’s act of writing; she is consumed with a desire to know what is in the letters, to know the author, to “read” her, and is always playing the potential reader to the actual writer. However, although Charlotte’s desire to read can be seen “as an ‘underground railroad’ of sorts – one which sought to rescue women’s texts from their minor position in the male-dominated canon,” she fails “to change... power structures in lasting ways” by rejecting the act of writing herself (Conboy 360).

Charlotte and Elsie are also inextricably connected through their titles. Elsie’s name suggests “else” or “other,” one side or half of a larger entity. As the title of a character in a ghost story, Elsie’s name calls attention to her existence between two worlds. Unlike the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” who exists between two created realms, Elsie literally vacillates between the spheres of the living and the dead and is not truly a part of either. In addition, her letters, the only physical representation of Elsie throughout the entire story besides her portrait, are both absent and present in the same moment, existing somewhere in between the story and the act of storytelling. However, Elsie’s name also quickly brings to mind the familiar euphemism of “the better half,” even though Kenneth is not described as being Elsie’s kindred spirit. Readers are told that “[d]uring all the years of their marriage he was more like an unhappy lover than a comfortably contented husband” (Wharton 203). Thus it appears that instead of Kenneth,
Charlotte is Elsie’s other half. For example, despite the lack of any friendship between the two, near the beginning of the story Charlotte's memory of Elsie hints at their similarity in taste: “on the occasion of her only visit to the first Mrs. Ashby ... she had looked about her with an innocent envy, feeling it to be exactly the drawing room she would have liked for herself” (Wharton 202). And the two women of course attain an ever closer connection through their mutual relationship with Kenneth: they are both “Mrs. Ashby.” Charlotte is also called upon to be a stepmother to Elsie’s children, making them both “mother” to Kenneth’s offspring.

In addition, both women’s maiden names and the title of the story, “Pomegranate Seed,” link them as elements of the Persephone myth. As a ghost story, “Pomegranate Seed” grants Wharton the creative liberty to utilize the Persephone myth, linking it to oral tradition and its shifting and indefinable boundaries. This enables Wharton’s meaning to fluctuate and change with each reading, incorporating various parts of the myth and connecting the characters through an intricate web of similarities. Even though Charlotte is only a stepmother to Elsie’s children, her maiden name, Gorse, “is the name of the prickly plant sacred to the goddess Demeter, suggesting her association with the maternal figure in the myth” (Waid 195). And, just as Demeter desperately longs for something she cannot obtain (Persephone’s return), Charlotte is consumed with her desire to know what is in Elsie’s letters. But Wharton’s somewhat ambiguous reference to the Greek myth “gives rise to a host of interpretations” in which each main character has a turn as Persephone (Singley, “Forbidden Reading” 191). Just as Hades pulls Persephone into the underworld, taking her from those who love and care for her, Elsie takes Kenneth from the arms of Charlotte. Also, like Persephone, both Charlotte and Kenneth are trapped by
something more powerful than they – one by societal standards, the other by a ghostly woman who wields unearthly power over him. And finally, with the addition of Kenneth’s mother, the three Mrs. Ashbys allude to Demeter who embodies “women’s stages of life – innocent youth, middle-aged maturity, and old age – and women’s different ways of knowing throughout their life” (Fedorko 129). Yet Elsie is the most likely Persephone figure, as she is “the most dominant of the three Mrs. Ashbys” and the one through whom Wharton makes her most emphatic statement about female expression (Fedorko 129). In addition, Elsie never physically appears in the action; when the story begins she is already dead, has already descended to the underworld. She, like Persephone, always stands at a threshold, poised to re-enter the world of the living. And when Elsie does make contact with the living through her letters, it occurs at beginning of spring, following “the brilliancy of a March afternoon,” in the season of Persephone’s traditional return to earth (Wharton 200).

However, by writing only to Kenneth, Elsie denies her bond with Charlotte as a fellow woman. Elsie lives up to her maiden name, Corder, as “the author of the ties that bind” (Waid 195); but they bind her only to Kenneth and keep Charlotte at a distance, always in the position of potential, and never actual, reader. In the myth, Persephone cannot ever permanently return to her mother Demeter because she has eaten the seeds of a pomegranate offered to her by Hades.

The seeds, given by a man and accepted by the woman, cement the male-female relationship but destroy that of the women, the mother and daughter. Elsie’s letters reverse the gender roles somewhat; they are offered – written – by a woman and accepted – read – by a man. Still they
are at least partially masculine in nature and serve like the seeds to drive a wedge between women, between Elsie and Charlotte, and to ensure their continued mutual but separate exile from the “genealogy of women.”

(Young 5)

This gender role reversal is essential in one aspect; it provides Elsie with the power and status necessary to be heard/read by both women and men. However, Elsie’s obsession with free expression causes her actions to become destructive and masculine in nature; she is dominating female expression instead of speaking through womanhood as an experience. Elsie has simply shifted to the opposite side of the male/female dichotomy, which is ineffectual at giving her an authentic voice, for she cannot forsake both her own “sisters as well as her own femaleness in the blind struggle to increase her power by conforming to male-sanctioned standards of authorship” (Waid 44). But through her actions “[t]he powerful controller of letters is now a woman rather than a man, and the one controlled is a man rather than a woman” (Fedorko 124). The woman writer’s evolution into feminism cannot lead her to complete immersion in masculine discourse, for that will only reinforce the same patterns of repression from which women are striving to break free. Elsie should be using her position as a platform for reinterpretation and revision, but by creating texts that cannot be read or understood from a female point of view, she becomes a “co-conspirator in [a] crime against women” (Young 4). She not only denies a female audience, she outright distances herself from the female community. The ghost story allows Wharton to illustrate Elsie’s literal exile into the underworld, where the reader learns that her desire to be heard has gone too far, moving beyond the
process of re-envisioning womanhood into the realm of masculine, and therefore dominating, power where she is unsuccessful at expressing true female sentiments.

Wharton also uses the ghost story to demonstrate the ways in which the desire for knowledge can dominate even the strictest adherents to traditional ideals of womanhood. The unearthly longing for knowledge the characters in “Pomegranate Seed” experience causes them to act in wildly uncharacteristic ways and attempt to acquire masculine knowledge by any means necessary. Charlotte has been forced to confront a ghostly presence in her house and through it her assumptions about herself as a woman (Fedorko 118). But Charlotte’s attempt to appropriate the letter and its power is particularly problematic, for the letter’s power lies not in its contents, but in who possesses it through reading or writing. The canon is “shaped by Oedipal struggle – with the pen as phallus – creat[ing] difficulties for the female writer” (Daly 246). If Charlotte read the letter and appropriated its power over Kenneth, such action would only serve to reinforce the same patterns of dominance that suppress her and women in general. In addition, the cost of appropriating knowledge is high; one “must be willing to forfeit not only her domestic role, but her husband” (Singley, “Forbidden Reading” 204) for a woman who seizes the power of narration “threaten[s] the assumption that men controlled social reality” (Giordano 112). Charlotte is trapped – she cannot compete with the letter’s power over Kenneth, and yet when she attempts to take on “the traditional male role of detective and protector” by removing Kenneth from the letters and their power, she loses her husband and defining role in society (Singley, “Forbidden Reading” 206). Charlotte can never fully understand what Elsie represents and, even though she faces Elsie’s feminine power, her fate is just as unknown as the narrator’s in “The Yellow Wallpaper.”
Thus, although Charlotte and her mother-in-law cannot actually read the letters, Kenneth, as a male character, can. However, Kenneth also shows some difficulty with “decipher[ing] the faint writing,” and is able to read the letters only because he has prior knowledge of this type of discourse and has read other texts like them (Wharton 202). Charlotte remembers Kenneth telling her “that if you were used to a handwriting the faintest stroke of it became legible” (Wharton 229). And yet despite his ability to read the letters, one cannot deny their supernatural power over him. He insists upon reading the letters alone, and when he reappeared he “looked emptied of life and courage” (Wharton 222). The letters would “change him into a stranger, a mysterious incomprehensible being,” not quite a ghost, but certainly not the man he once was (Wharton 233). The letters’ unearthly power feminizes Kenneth; because Elsie has usurped the dominant, male position by reproducing the terms of her subjugation, Kenneth is forced to occupy the submissive and conventionally female stance. He isn’t “strong enough to acknowledge to Charlotte, or perhaps even himself, Elsie’s... female power” and “[t]he repression weakens him” (Fedorko 128). He begins to concern himself with the domestic realm, hinting “some criticism of her [Charlotte’s] household arrangements” and suggesting some change in the household administration (Wharton 222). Kenneth’s role reversal makes him acutely aware of the female plight under the ideals of traditional womanhood and it also forces him under the same oppression, motivating “a remoteness, an inaccessibility” that goes hand in hand with the denial of free expression (Wharton 233). The weight of this oppression is apparent after each envelope arrives, when Kenneth becomes “like a man who has had some dreadful shock. It takes him hours to shake off their effect” (Wharton 249). The ghostly effect of the
letters demonstrates the power of written expression over both men and women, and how the control of language translates into power in real life. Just as the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" steps over her husband to visually signify a shift in power, Elsie eventually uses the power of her letters to incorporate her husband into her world, illustrating her previously unrealized power as a female. But instead of falling prey to madness, they suffer the alienation of death, demonstrating how Elsie has gone one critical step further than Gilman’s narrator, usurping the power of the written word and denying her female readers. In the end, Elsie seeks to continue dominating her husband and, in turn, Charlotte, rather than cultivating a path to free expression for women. To be successful in this, Elsie needed to incorporate Kenneth’s knowledge and shift the power within their relationship, not reverse the dichotomy that holds her prisoner.

Wharton utilizes the components particular to the ghost story to compel readers to endure the anxiety and “madness” her characters experience. Her vacillation between her character’s viewpoints allows her to illustrate the mysterious power of written language and formulate “a condemnation of female ambivalence toward writing and female authorship in general” (Young 1). Wharton denounces the woman writer who allows the anxiety implicit in female authorship to silence her or forsake her femaleness. Although Elsie’s letters are similar to the wallpaper in Gilman’s tale in that they are seemingly available for other characters’ reading and free from the fear of rejection, the letters are addressed specifically to a male. They consequently symbolize the obstacles in communication among women during the early twentieth century and the seed of female disloyalty that Wharton exposes and condemns in her story. By maintaining a male/female relationship and being a co-conspirator in that dichotomy, Elsie destroys and
denies any potential bond between the women and drives a permanent wedge between them. She denies her responsibility to all women, writers and readers, to not treat them as men and society have, to not perpetuate their isolation and limitation. While she perhaps must partake of the masculine in order to gain a voice, she must also retain a sense of who she is, of her femaleness, and she must honor her ability and obligation to promote communication among women in general (Young 6). But she has failed to use her position to further the status of women, and thus fails at gaining any real power and independence as a female writer.

Wharton uses the ghost story to present to her readers her notion of just what the woman who writes must not do. She must not endeavor to conform to patriarchal standards, she must not exclude her female audience, and she must not repudiate her female status. Elsie is guilty of all three and therefore is portrayed as a “dead” female. Wharton also cautions that the female reader may encounter an experience just as burdensome and complicated and may suffer failures and “madness” like Charlotte's. And yet Wharton affirms that women readers and writers must continue searching for a position that does not trap them in masculine forms of expression and create “a female perspective that... gives access to regions beyond the imagination of the male writer” (Singley, “Forbidden Reading 203). By addressing their inequity and forced ignorance in society and refusing to accept them, women are able to demand a better life and “greater liberty to write according to standards of [their] own” (Young 6). They must stand poised on the threshold of change with Charlotte, declaring “I can't stand it! I can't stand it another day!” (Wharton 205).
Conclusion

The constrictive values of nineteenth-century America estranged women from their true identities, leaving them without many means of knowing and expressing their needs and desires. They longed for autonomy and an identity beyond those the home created for them, generating a female “impulse to be mistress of her own Person” (Battan 603). This yearning for independent expression is reflected in the creation and popularity of ghost stories written by Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman and other female authors of the time period. Because they were written by women and always kept women’s concerns at the forefront, no matter how subtly, these ghost stories were able to authentically articulate and illustrate the female experience. Despite its unconventionality, the ghost story was a venue that provided women with a voice outside of the domestic sphere and encouraged their thinking beyond its confines into the realm of New Womanhood and turn-of-the-century feminism.

Through the writings of Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman, “readers learn that ‘women just like us’ can ‘deviantly’ fight for freedom but still maintain their respectability” (Muellner 42). By utilizing the familiar and domestic in their tales, they were able to speak to more freely of the anxieties that plagued them without fear of being seen as improper or uncouth. Their utilization of the supernatural allowed their judgments of society and patriarchy to remain partially shrouded in the unknown, consequently remaining under the guise of propriety. Ghost stories permit their female authors to engage in a kind of self-disguise, influencing readers’ interpretation by “speaking in the third-person masculine when... [they] mean the first-person feminine, using ‘everyone’ or ‘all women’ to cloak... [their] own personal experience for self-
protection” (Giordano 107). And yet their public articulation could not be denied and, in fact, was more powerful because of the ghost story’s innate ability to overturn rigid boundaries between life and death. These authors are able to claim their cultural status as female writers without having to explicitly define their position as either feminine or masculine and can manipulate their authority over their texts without dominating and victimizing one another.

In a time where American women were “expected to put the care of family and others first,” it is no surprise that they found inspiration and sisterhood in literature that gave them a source of liberatory power within such confining conditions (Muellner 43). The supernatural gave them the freedom “to speak of taboo issues” and yet afforded them a limited visibility that was crucial in them being heard at all (Lundie 239). The ghost story allowed for these authors’ subtle approach; its subversive nature enabled them to express their differences of opinion regarding the realms of marriage and motherhood without fear of rejection (Lundie 241). The female characters in these stories often consider death a worthy alternative to remaining under suffocating captivity in their homes; they “do break down, do run away, do get mad. And, dead or not, they sometimes do get even” (Lundie 241). Ghost stories provided readers a staunch dose of reality – women were suffering and drastic measures needed to be taken, even if they revealed the horrors women wreaked upon their own kind.

Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman set their characters in metaphorical houses of mirrors, illuminating how the women ensnared within them are taught to objectify themselves and each other. The ghost story critiqued the high premium set on the domestic sphere by representing “the family as a source of danger, even as a model of
false consciousness” (Briggs 126-7). Nineteenth and early twentieth-century women would not find refuge in the home; instead they must escape it through either rejection of traditional forms of womanhood or, in these author’s stories, death. The ghosts haunting the pages of these tales are the spectres of “betrayed and disillusioned womanhood,” returning “to shake the very foundations, in fact, on which the domestic story is laid” (Barnes 158). As representatives of New Womanhood, Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman called into question the expectations of their society and advocated ideals for women that moved beyond the domestic and fixed.

This shift outside of the home, whether it occurred in actuality or simply through one’s experience via the ghost story, brought women face to face with the inequity in their relationship to men and the need for a union within the female self. This duality of self manifested itself during this time period as divisiveness among women: a separation into those who accept the role society has prescribed for them and those who risk everything to escape the trauma of idealized womanhood (Fedorko 98). Females had to confront and accept the feminine and masculine parts within in order to successfully move beyond male-centered definitions of woman and yet retain their female-ness. In addition, it was necessary that women never renounce their sisterhood and their responsibility towards improving social conditions for all women. The ghost story reminds readers that American women’s movement towards autonomy rested also on “the wide, deep sympathy of women for one another” and “seeking a common good” as a female community (“Women and Economics” 69). Female authors of ghost stories needed to “use language not to gain power but to create intimacy,” to eradicate the boundary between “the self of the author and the subject of the discourse, as well as
between the self and the audience” (Freedman 364). Ghost stories provide women with a
degree of autonomy, but remind them that their loyalty must lie with the less powerful
and less articulate – those who are yet unable to move beyond the domestic sphere.

Authors such as Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman have created a space for women
in which they can voice their discontent with the restrictive culture present in nineteenth
and early twentieth-century America and express their desire to have a future beyond the
social death it brought. Bringing women together both internally and as sisters allows
them to redefine the ideal woman “by replacing virtues such as ‘obedience, submission,
[and] chastity’ with newer ideals that allowed her to be self-reliant, assertive, and
sexually and emotionally fulfilled” (Battan 604). By advocating positive ways for
women to cope with the world around them, their writing begins to dismantle many of the
structures upon which social definitions depend and break down the rigid definitions
patriarchy depended on in order to keep women disempowered. The boundaries between
“life and death, waking and dream states, self and not-self, bodily and non-bodily
existence, past and future, reason and madness” are made fluid, not fixed (Lundie 240).
As a result, ghost story authors and characters can claim their supernatural experiences as
theirs alone as females, producing an uncanny sense of familiarity and community.

Above all, the ghost stories of Gilman, Wharton, and Freeman remind us of the
power inherent in the written word and why all women, out of necessity, must become
authors. One’s true voice and identity are “formed through both private and public
discourses”; if “we do not author language, language authors us” (Daly 237). Women’s
liberation from repressive patriarchal ideals must take place in written language, in the
area where women have been traditionally forced into a submissive and silent position.
They must use this inferior position in society as a location for beginning, a place to present a conscious challenge to the nature and foundations of both men’s texts and the dominant notions of womanhood as a whole. They must give female language a voice as it gives them a voice, using unconventional methods such as ghost story to alter the traditional roles imposed upon them, yet being careful to not become the ghosts themselves.
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