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THE FEMALE UNCANNY?

A HISTORICISED READING OF THE UNCANNY FICTION OF EDITH WHARTON, SHIRLEY JACKSON & JOYCE CAROL OATES

Ann Lucille Patten

A thesis submitted to the Department of English at the University of Dublin, Trinity College, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2008

Declaration

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree in any other university. I agree that the Library may lend or copy the thesis upon request, subject to normal conditions of acknowledgment.

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Date May 26, 2008

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SUMMARY

This study evaluates whether it is appropriate to consider the work of three women writers of uncanny fiction as evidence of a distinctive female sub-genre in the uncanny.

A literature review of certain second-wave feminist critical perspectives in the area of female sub-genres demonstrates an established reading position, which suggests that female authors of uncanny fiction necessarily foreground either (1) the unique aspects of female experience; (2) a subversive statement against patriarchy, or (3) a narrowly-defined psychoanalytic drive, such as an unresolved mother-daughter conflict. The post-feminist position of this thesis argues for a more open approach that allows the fiction to suggest other meanings. By referring to the uncanny short stories of three women writers, who each had (or have) an ambiguous relationship to feminism, this study concludes that it is more appropriate to consider the uncanny fiction of Wharton, Jackson and Oates as the work of women writers who were influenced by their social and cultural construction as female authors, but not circumscribed by it. This subject position often involves the writers drawing on aspects of female experience for material, but also features material which is not limited to gender-specific concerns.

This thesis defines the uncanny as a literature of "unease:" it relates to a sense of feeling "not at home" in the world and a homesickness for an imagined notion of wholeness, often associated with the past. It is often motivated by swift shifts in value systems that culminate in a sense of disorientation over the inability to determine the full implication of the changes in one's moral, social and political

environment, and particularly how those changes redefine one's ability to recognise "home."

In Wharton, the uncanny largely expresses itself in the form of a ghost story. The enigmatic plots of ghost stories provide Wharton with a medium for grappling with that which appeared anomalous or difficult to reconcile about America such as concerns over corruption, immigration and the state of democracy in the Progressive Era, U.S. foreign policy, the First World War, nationalism in Europe, and the changes to American culture that, in her estimation, competed with an individual's "inner life."

In the work of Shirley Jackson, the uncanny broadens out and develops into a weird tale, where a story's atmosphere suggests that "natural" life has been interfered with by strange, occult or cosmic forces. In Jackson's case, anxiety is expressed over the disturbingly smooth functioning of conditions which enabled the Holocaust, McCarthyism, the Cold War, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. She also comments on antagonistic race relations and the elemental nature of evil in man. This thesis also discusses how Jackson was influenced by Abstract Expressionism.

In Oates, the uncanny changes to take on contours of the grotesque. In Oates, feminism itself predominates as social and historical movement that now stands ready to be critiqued. As well, Oates explores the symptoms of diminished social capital in American life. She targets subjects such as child abuse and neglect; the uncanny aspects associated with ageing in America, state of life in the suburbs, and hyper-capitalist modes of consumption. Additionally, Oates refers to issues such as the existence of an underclass in American society, human sex trafficking, Christian fundamentalism, and the rise of armed militias in America.

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PREFACE

The uncanny pertains to the ghostly and the mysterious, the off-kilter and the unhinged. It represents an emotional experience where categories of opposites blend in unanticipated ways: it refers to the appearance of the extraordinary within the bounds of the ordinary; the suspected presence of supernatural or cosmic forces and the disbelief that such forces exist. It relates to the mad passing as the collected; the grotesque and the sublime; the frightening and the disconcertingly amusing. Foremost, the uncanny relates not just to the strange; there needs to be a certain coexistence of the familiar and the strange. It is often associated with the feeling of not being "at home" at home.[1] That which is cosy is simultaneously disturbing. The subject experiences the uncanny moment as one where powers of perception feel fully engaged and vivid, while at the same time unreliable and thus, ultimately disoriented.

The argument of the following thesis maintains that uncanny tales pertain not to a list a experiences; uncanny stories are principally tales of unease which involve an emotional effect -- a feeling of cognitive uncertainty, both in the story's protagonist or narrator and in the reader -- that arises from a sense of disorientation caused by the commingling of the familiar and the strange. The uncanny effect depends on confusion over changed atmospheres, uncertainty over the reality of events, and often is associated with unresolved mental states that are evoked by changing patterns in belief and value systems, about which the author wishes to communicate a feeling of unease. The old rules governing behaviour no longer apply, and new rules have either not yet been established or have not proved

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (1927; New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 214; qtd in Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1993) 110.

themselves fully trustworthy. Foremost, uncanny stories are "un-easy" stories; they defy easy rational explanations and they do not function in a mechanistic way.

Both M.R. James and Julia Briggs discuss how the most typical hallmark of a well-written uncanny tale often involves a character or group of characters going about "their ordinary business" such that their "familiar surroundings create the illusion of security."[2] However, this atmosphere of security and familiarity is transformed by the interjection of some peculiar, mad, supernatural or ominous animation which eludes rational explanation. The unexplainable quality of the phenomenon then calls into question the protagonist's (and by extension, the reader's) own cognitive frames of reference. As M.R. James explains, the "ominous thing put[s] out its head [into the calm environment] unobtrusively at first, and then more insistently" such that a nervous energy builds in the story's atmosphere until it is released, not necessarily through a rational explanation, but rather by a "nicely managed crescendo" or as Briggs describes it through "a well-managed climax and a final twist."[3] It is my argument that the uncanny element introduces the idea of something shifty or deceitful about both one's external environment and one's cognitive ability to apprehend that environment reliably and accurately. This cognitive ability becomes undermined through successive, and as M.R. James describes, "more persistent," uncanny events so that cumulatively, the atmosphere in the story builds increasingly tense and the characters' and reader's emotional responses to the uncanny phenomenon come more into focus. The suspense in the story's atmosphere develops to a point such that the suspense in the story itself becomes unnerving.

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[2] M. R. James, Introduction to *Ghosts and Other Marvels*, ed. V.H. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924) vi; Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977) 19.

[3] M.R. James 13 and Briggs 13.

The following thesis provides a study of the uncanny writing of three American women authors: Edith Wharton, Shirley Jackson and Joyce Carol Oates. In particular, this study evaluates whether it is appropriate to consider the work of these three writers as evidence of a distinctive female sub-genre in the uncanny, with a set of normative rules that govern the way such a sub-genre functions and is to be interpreted; or if it is more appropriate to update the understanding of how female uncanny fiction, as a sub-genre, can be received. A literature review of the critical thinking in the area of female sub-genres can demonstrate the existence of an established reading position among certain second-wave feminist critics, which suggests that a woman writing about ghosts, madness or some form of the monstrous manipulates conventions of the imaginative genre to do one of several things.[4] Either the female writer is (1) foregrounding the unique aspects of female experience; (2) making a subversive statement against patriarchy, or (3) representing a narrowly-defined psychoanalytic drive, such as an unresolved mother-daughter conflict.[5] Throughout this thesis, I argue for a more open approach that allows the fiction to suggest other meanings that are not limited to this second-wave feminist reading position.[6] I identify my approach as post-feminist or "third-wave" feminist,

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[4] Second-wave feminist criticism is commonly associated with considering the relationship between a literary text and the ideology of the consciousness-raising activity in the Women's Movement from 1970s through the early 1990s, which followed the politically activist period of the 1960s and 1970s. Sources: Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London: Radius, 1989), 4 and 14; Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998; 1981), xv and xxvi; Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds. *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 53 and 57.

[5] See Rosemary Jackson, Introduction to *What Did Miss Darrington See? An Anthology of Feminist Supernatural Fiction,* ed. Jessica Amanda Salmonson (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1989); Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction (Cambridge: Polity Press,* 1990); Lynnette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar, *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991). Tania Modleski defines the female uncanny, in the latter terms, as writing which is concerned with deep psychoanalytic drives addressing unresolved mother-daughter separation anxieties in Chapter Four of *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Routledge, 1982).

[6] A reading position is a set of instructions about how to read a work in a particular way that has the effect of re-affirming a specific discourse. Gunther Kress explains that "a reading position ... is a set of instructions about how to read a text, constructed by means of conventions which encode discursive positionings." Gunther

terms which I use interchangeably.[7] By post-feminist or third-wave, I refer to the perspective of a generation who "grew up" with feminism as a discourse and who consider feminism as an active subject, one open to continual revision.[8] This point of view in literary studies notes the relevance of the contributions made by the many branches of second-wave feminist criticism, but also engages critically and sceptically with them. It negotiates and chooses which earlier feminist reading positions help to amplify meaning in the text and which, in fact, prescribe meaning. The post-feminist position employed in this thesis argues that women writers of uncanny fiction are working as authors whose work is influenced by their social and cultural construction as female authors, but not circumscribed by it. This subject position often involves women writers drawing on aspects of female experience for material (for example, the feelings of unresolved conflict associated with being a housewife, an unmarried career woman, or a single mother), but also features material which is not limited to gender-specific concerns (for example, issues related to race, class, politics, economics, existential and aesthetic subjects).

Kress, *Linguistic Processes in Sociological Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989; Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press, 1985) 37.

[7] Some critics prefer the term "third-wave feminism" to "post-feminism" because they think the latter suggests that feminism, as a movement, is over and that "third wave" more accurately describes a continuing movement. (See Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds. *Third Wave Agenda*, 1-18.) Throughout my dissertation I take post- and third-wave feminism to refer to the same cultural moment. In certain respects post-feminism is preferable to third-wave because post-feminism is the term that is more widely circulated in the public domain and there is a need for academics and popular cultural critics to use the same terminology. Part of the reason post- or third-wave feminism emerged in the first place related to the perception that the terms used by academics had become too far removed from the terminology used in popular culture as the following titles on feminism in the 1990s document: Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (Boston: Little Brown, 1995); Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (New York: Warner Books, 1995); Christina Hoff-Sommers, *Who Stole My Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life: How Today's Feminist Elite Has Lost Touch with Real Concerns of Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1996). For simplicity and consistency, hereafter I will refer to my perspective as the post-feminist perspective.

[8] Friedan, *The Second Stage,* 1991 introduction, xxiv. Also, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake refer to third-wave feminists as "young feminists who grew up with equity feminism, got gender feminism in college, along with post-structuralism, and are now hard at work on a feminism that strategically combines elements of these feminisms, along with black feminism, women-of-colour feminisms, working-class feminism, pro-sex feminism, an so on" (3). Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda* 3.

The research methodology employed in this thesis also incorporates a materialist-feminist approach. As feminist critics Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt explain, the materialist-feminist method is "'materialist' in its commitment to the view that the social and economic circumstances in which men and women live -- the material conditions of their lives -- are central to an understanding of culture and society. It is materialist in its view that literature and literary criticism are both products of and interventions in particular moments in history. [...] It is 'feminist' in its emphasis on the social construction of gender and its exploration of the intersections of gender with other categories like class, race and sexual identity."[9] This thesis particularly examines how Wharton, Jackson and Oates write as women who were also attentive to ideologies of economics and class. Foremost, the materialist-feminist perspective emphasises how "an understanding of history and an understanding of literature can interpenetrate to illuminate one another."[10] It differs from the analytical approach of traditional Marxists, "for whom gender is not a major category of analysis."[11] This study argues for the need to detach the writing of Wharton, Jackson and Oates from a perspective which would see the category of gender as influencing these writers in a mechanistic way, and has consciously selected the work of three female authors to explore how they wrote about other, gender-neutral subjects – as writers and not necessarily as "women" writers. In that is it concerned with emancipating the work of three women writers from pre-determined expectations of what the work "should" say, it is feminist.

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[9] Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt, eds., *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985) xi.

[10] Ibid xiii.

[11] Ibid xiv.

In describing the ways the work of Wharton, Jackson and Oates resists certain second-wave feminist positions, which suggest that the uncanny provides a unique mode for women writers, I have been conscious not to assume that second-wave feminism could be summarised in any monolithic way. I wish to point out in this Preface that the second-wave arguments of figures such as Rosemary Jackson, Anne Cranny-Francis, Lynnette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar represent different voices within second-wave feminism that can be historically and culturally situated in a period that ranges from 1981 to 1991.[12] Certain currents within the materialist-feminist perspective preceded, ran concurrent with, and came after this time period, thus illustrating the diversity of opinions that exists within second-wave feminism.[13]

I am also aware that the term "post-feminist" may itself be considered contentious. Betty Friedan, for instance, in her 1998 introduction to *The Second Stage* [1981] expresses exasperation at discussions of moving to a new stage of feminism when the goals of the second stage, namely economic equality for women and national child care supports, remain as objectives still to be achieved.[14] To reiterate, I understand the term post-feminism as a feminism that acknowledges the contributions made by the second wave, but is also continually revising them and engaging sceptically with the critical positions feminist critics in the twentieth-first century have inherited from critics in the late twentieth century. Interestingly, several materialist-feminist critics also critiqued some of the rhetoric they regarded

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[12] See Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981); Introduction to What Did Miss Darrington See? Ed. Jessica Amanda Salmonson (New York: Putnam, 1989); Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990); Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar, *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

[13] See Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt, eds. Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture (New York; London: Methuen, 1985); Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (New York: Summit Press, 1998; 1981) and *Beyond Gender: The New Politics of Work and Family* Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[14] Betty Friedan, 1998 Introduction to *The Second Stage* (1981; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) xv.

as predominating feminism when they were writing in the seventies and eighties. Thus, I am aware that defining post-feminism as a feminism that engages sceptically with rhetorical positions within feminism is difficult to fix discretely to the 1990s; dissenting voices within feminism were also present in earlier periods.[15] Nevertheless, as Chapter One will discuss, several books were published in the 1990s that refer to post-feminism; thus, since it is a term already in the public domain as fulfilling the above definition, I will continue to use it.

The materialist-feminist and the post-feminist positions seek to introduce a plurality of views and more open perspectives to the nature of the problem women struggle against in a continuing women's movement. Newton and Rosenfelt help to point out the way certain feminists, in 1985, became aware of a rhetoric within feminism that, in their opinion, was against the interests of feminists to maintain. This ideological position implies "a version of the world in which women are oppressed, for the most part, by literary constructs or in which female counter-myths are more powerful than (or as powerful as) economics."[16] They argue instead for a critical method that examines the material conditions out of which women's writing is produced. They also object to the way in which unequal, gender-based relations of power have been constructed in such a fashion as to render them "tragic – unchanging, universal and monolithic."[17] They argue that the time has come for feminists to examine the ways in which their "own constructions of history obscure

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[15] See Newton and Friedman, xv-xxix, where they quote references from Lillian Robinson "Dwelling in Decencies: Radical Criticism and the Feminist Perspective," *College English* 32 (1970); Jan Clausen, *A Movement of Poets: Thoughts on Poetry and Feminism* (Brooklyn, NY: Long Haul Press, 1982); and Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory and Practice of a Feminist Criticism," *Feminist Studies* 6 (Spring 1980): 1-25, and *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

[16] Newton and Rosenfelt xvi.

[17] Ibid xvii.

historical change, cultural complexity and women's agency, [and the manner in which] they themselves replicate the habits of thought they intend to challenge."[18]

An example of a feminist viewpoint which has become unhelpful is the essentialisation that "subsumes women into the sisterly category of 'woman' [...] or posits women's nurturing and relational qualities in themselves as counter to male domination."[19] This thesis argues that feminists need to undo those perspectives which see the masculine and the feminine polarised as diametric opposites, where the masculine is associated with violence, patriarchy and dominant economic systems and the feminine with their opposites. This thesis maintains that men are often caught in the same ideological and economic systems as women and, as illustrated in the stories discussed, women also participate in these systems. At times women can be victimisers, not victims, and sometimes women actively participate in replicating the conditions that create their own oppression. But more significantly, this thesis does not dwell on the issue of patriarchy as exclusively male-defined, or on the issue of female victimisation or inequality. It argues that feminist literary criticism needs to move on from positions which "hunt" for evidence of female subversion or statements of female experience and pay closer attention to what women writers were, in fact, writing so as to determine the extent to which that writing reflects the socio-historical, material conditions of its production. Often, the socio-historical problems a literary text highlights can not be strictly mapped to gender-based concerns.

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter One provides a theoretical foundation on what constitutes the uncanny effect as well as how female sub-genres

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[18] Ibid xvii.

[19] Ibid xvii.

have been defined. Chapter One will also discuss how historically the uncanny, as a subject and a mode, has been associated with women. It will also explain my reasons for studying the authors identified. Chapters Two, Three and Four provide close readings of the uncanny short fiction of Wharton, Jackson and Oates, respectively demonstrating how each author's aesthetic technique is unique and engages with her material context. The work of each writer will be historicised through an examination of how key events in history as well as social evolution are referred to in their work, in order to demonstrate how the female uncanny refers to more than gender-specific concerns. Chapter Five offers a conclusion and reiterates the relevance of a post-feminist reading position, which can be accommodated to support the existence of a sub-genre known as the "female uncanny," but which also understands how female writers are free either to use or not use aspects of "female experience" to make comments about non-gender specific issues in their social, historical, political and cultural contexts.

Chapter Five concludes this study of a sample of female uncanny writing with the important proviso that it is not always possible to associate the uncanny effect with a socio-political issue. Sometimes the emotional frisson associated with the uncanny can be attributed to a more personal, existential anxiety and sometimes, it is not "about" anything but the perplexities felt by a character and/or reader over a change in the story's atmosphere. A particularly thrilling feature of the uncanny, because it is concerned most directly with uncertainty and ambiguity, is that meaning in the uncanny text is very much derived from that which individual readers bring to it. As Nicholas Royle conveys, "everyone's relation with the uncanny is in some sense their own and no one else's."[20] It is this appreciation of the

[20] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) 26.

indeterminate nature of the reading process that I hope to restore in the uncanny writing by women, and particularly in the work of Wharton, Jackson and Oates.

In general terms, a decision was made to focus on female writers instead of male, and American writers instead of British, because in my survey of the field, I discovered that most anthologies under-represented the contribution American female writers have made to uncanny fiction.[21] A decision was also made to focus on short fiction versus novels because one feature usually attendant on the uncanny effect in fiction is that the fiction is short.[22] Since the focus of attention in uncanny fiction is intended to be on the reader's feelings, many uncanny stories were originally intended to be consumed in one sitting, thus the short story or novella was often considered to be the best form.

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[21] This point is corroborated by Lynnette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar, who note that despite the fact that women have been a significant presence in British and American magazines, particularly in the early part of the twentieth century, as story writers, readers and editors, "Literary historians have frequently associated women writers with the Gothic and Gothic romance genres, but rarely with [uncanny fiction such as] the ghost story. The anthologists have, for the most part, likewise failed to present women's work" (7 and 20). While the ghost story is only one aspect of the uncanny genre, the point Carpenter and Kolmar make about how the "persistent emphasis on the major male writers can obscure other valid perspectives" (5) is relevant to the whole of uncanny fiction. Carpenter and Kolmar mention how some of this trend has been corrected by the publication of collections by Alfred Bendixen, Richard Dalby, Alan Ryan and Jessica Amanda Salmonson. As well, this thesis notes how the volumes of uncanny fiction edited by Lady Cynthia Asquith in the 1900-1950 period are particularly important to understanding the contribution women writers made to uncanny fiction. Carpenter and Kolmar note how, "among British anthologists the exclusion is slightly less severe, perhaps because a larger number of the anthologists are women;" nevertheless "American women writers of the ghost story have received virtually no critical attention beyond the work of Salmonson and Bendixen" (20).

[22] As Julia Briggs notes, the majority of ghost stories take the form of short stories or novellas as opposed to full-length novels because "a horror that is effective for thirty pages can seldom be sustained for three hundred." Briggs elaborates by explaining that the density of the psychological response associated with the uncanny is attenuated when the subject is spread too thinly across a longer work or when the attention in the story is allowed to drift away from the reader's feelings to a supernatural element that has come "to occupy the centre of the stage" (13).

CHAPTER ONE

We believe we are at home in the immediate circle of beings. That which is familiar, reliable, ordinary. Nevertheless, the clearing is pervaded by a constant concealment in the double form of refusal and dissembling. At bottom the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extraordinary, uncanny.

"The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935) by Martin Heidegger[1]

Anthony Vidler has called the uncanny "the quintessential bourgeois kind of fear" for the way it excites a fear that is at once private, interior and intimate, but also couched within the comforts of the materially secure.[2] The uncanny exposes the tenuous, unreliable nature of one's most basic assumptions, particularly those that encourage a belief that there is some kind of link between that which is materially secure, or "cosy," about one's environment, and the security of one's most intimate relationships – with other people, within the self, and between the self and one's context. In the presence of the uncanny, often the most unnerving experience is to discover that those one thought one knew intimately are revealed to be utter strangers; similarly, the values and institutions which one once regarded as constitutive and shaping influences are discovered to be either shallow, fraudulent or deceptive in some fundamental way. The feeling that accompanies the uncanny is more than simple disillusionment; it is outright bewilderment, since the target of its attack is one's core assumptions, beliefs and relationships, in other words, one's literal and metaphorical "home."

The first chapter in this thesis will be approached in three parts. Part One

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[1] Martin Heidegger, "Origin of the Work of Art" (1935), tr. Albert Hofstadter, *Poetry. Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 15-87, 54; qtd in Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1993) 110.

[2] Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992) 4.

discusses the nature of the uncanny effect in literature and examines how it has been considered a sub-genre of the gothic. Part Two considers the relationship between the uncanny and women, and addresses certain second-wave feminist arguments that see a relationship between women writers and genre fiction, suggesting the uncanny as a unique mode for women writers. Part Three moves on to a discussion of my reasons for selecting Wharton, Jackson and Oates as a relevant group of authors to study. Ironically, they each have an ambivalent relationship to feminism; they all write uncanny fiction that represents female experience and at moments subverts patriarchy; however, at other times the fiction turns the gaze inward, requiring that readers recognise the role victimised women sometimes play in their own victimisation. At still other times, different stories or indeed sometimes the same story can be read as referring to non-gender-specific issues in the author's context. Thus, taken together, Wharton, Jackson and Oates can represent difficult figures to assimilate to linear feminist literary histories, which say that female-authored uncanny fiction necessarily deals with female victimisation under patriarchy, female experience, or unresolved mother-daughter conflicts. Furthermore, individually, aspects of each author's persona as a writer have been described in "uncanny" terms. In this way, Part Three lays the foundation for the central argument of this thesis, which aims to demonstrate the manner in which these writers resist the positions outlined in Part Two, and that, in fact, their work addresses far more than the parameters of certain second-wave feminist positions allow.

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There is something inherently evasive about the uncanny that makes many critics reluctant to define it with any degree of specificity, and yet, as a subject, it continues to engage and sustain numerous critical studies. Some critics consider it a genre; others consider it to be a reading or writing effect.[3] Another view suggests that certain external objects or experiences are uncanny; while other perspectives maintain that the uncanny is not something external, but rather relates to a special category of emotional feeling in the mind of the subject, the perceiver of the uncanny. Critic Allan Gardner Lloyd-Smith goes a step further and carefully points out that "the uncanny itself does not exist [...] that at most it is an effect caused by a sidelong look, something seen out of the corner of the eye."[4] And yet, Lloyd-Smith goes on to write a book on the subject "in the effort to get at this nothing, this no-thing."[5] Nicholas Royle explains that the uncanny often involves "a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper ... including the properness of proper names ... one's own as well as places, institutions and events."[6] As a category, the uncanny nearly defies categorisation; attempts to pin it down, name and control it, undermine its effect.

Understanding the "uncanny," as a term then, is not easy; however a useful place to start is Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay, "*Das Unheimliche*" or "The

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[3] The particular views of such critics will be discussed in more detail Part I.ii of this chapter, where I examine the uncanny as a genre and as a reading effect.

[4] Allan Gardner Lloyd-Smith, *Uncanny American Fiction: Medusa's Face* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) ix.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) 1.

Uncanny."[7] Freud begins with a discussion about the troubled etymology of the word *unheimlich* – how its meaning is hard to define because *unheimlich* is entailed by its opposite, *heimlich,* which itself offers no "pure" definition. At its first level of meaning, *heimlich* is that which is familiar, friendly, not strange, tame, intimate[8] and "homelike."[9] *Unheimlich*, then, is that which is unfamiliar, strange, and distinctly un-homelike. However, to understand "the special core of feeling"[10] associated the uncanny (which Freud claims is "undoubtedly related to what is frightening"[11]), Freud explains that we must also refer to a second definition which define*s heimlich* as pertaining to that which is "concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others."[12] Thus, *heimlich* takes on a decidedly sinister edge; it is pleasingly intimate while at the same time refers to that which is secretive and thus potentially dangerous if revealed. Freud looks closer at the mechanistic effect of the "un" in *unheimlich* and finds himself agreeing with an earlier eighteenth-century psychologist, Schelling, who explains that "everything i*s* *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light."[13] Schelling's definition helps Freud to explain that repressed elements are the hidden secrets that "come to light" or rather are "called forth" by the list of experiences said to evoke the disturbed emotions associated with the uncanny effect.[14]

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[7] See Sigmund Freud, "*Das Unheimliche*" ("The Uncanny"), tr. James Strachey, *The Penguin Freud Library*, Volume 14, Art and Literature, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1990) 339-376. Originally published in 1919 as "*Das Unheimliche,*" *Imago* 5 (5-6), 297-324. All references hereinafter referred to as "Freud, U."

[8] Ibid 342.

[9] Ibid 342, 346.

[10] Ibid 339.

[11] Ibid 339. There is some debate as to whether the uncanny is necessarily associated with that which is frightening. As will be discussed later, in English, it is also associated with that which is astounding.

[12] Ibid 344.

[13] Ibid 345

[14] Ibid 339.

Freud regards the uncanny as a term derived not only through reference to lexical definitions, but also as a term to be defined by understanding the psychological process at work. Freud explains that it is not enough merely to regard the uncanny as that which is unfamiliar, because the fact that something is unfamiliar, on its own, does not make the object or experience necessarily frightening. According to Freud, the uncanny is frightening precisely because "something has been added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make *it* (emphasis mine) uncanny."[15] Freud clarifies by explaining that "What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich.*"[16] Therefore, one could say that Freud does not regard the uncanny so much as an "it," but rather as a psychological process.

Freud explains that the study of the uncanny is usually considered to be part of the realm of aesthetics because it can be seen as an effect in literature and the arts. However, since the effect needs to be felt by an individual who acts as a reader or perceiver, the uncanny is closely related to an emotional response, and therefore, a study of the uncanny, because it relates to feelings, can also be considered to be part of the domain of psychology, and more particularly, psychoanalysis. One might expect that Freud would go on in his essay to explore the quality of the perceiver's emotional response, however, there is a distinct shift in emphasis away from the emotional response of the perceiver onto what serves as a kind of list of external objects and experiences that not only evoke the uncanny response, but have come to be regarded as uncanny agents themselves.[17] These include the appearance of

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[15] Ibid 341.

[16] Ibid 342.

[17] Freud claims the process of understanding the *unheimlich* is best achieved "If we go on to examine individual instances of uncanniness" (347). This is where, in my opinion, Freud's argument begins to shift away from an emphasis on the perceiver's feelings and more to a list of experiences. Others agree. In a PhD dissertation Marc Falkenberg explains how "Freud's excellent explanation for a limited number of cases has made those cases the benchmark for qualities as uncanny." See Marc Falkenberg, "The Poetical Uncanny: A Study of Early Modern Fantastic Fiction (Ludwig Tieck, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Sigmund Freud, Edgar Allan Poe)" PhD

ghosts, dolls come to life, dismembered body parts, epilepsy and madness, doubles, the fear of being buried alive, corpses, telepathy and the power of one's thoughts to affect a material reality, and famously, the fear of being castrated or losing one's eyes.[18]

In brief, Freud's psychoanalytic premise maintains that these experiences either (1) stem from a mind where a "once surmounted" primitive or superstitious belief has been re-confirmed or (2) represent the revival of a neurotic, unresolved infantile complex in the individual. According to Freud, both sets of experiences signal a return to something which was once familiar but now has been repressed.[19] In the case of the first type of experience, the suppressed material is not so much "repressed" in the clinical, psychoanalytic use of the term, but rather represents a conscious "cessation" of belief in the "realm of animism."[20] Educated people, for example, no longer believe that the world is inhabited by the spirits of human beings; neither do they believe that their thoughts have some kind of magic power, for instance, to cause another person to materialise just by thinking about him or her. Freud points out that the cessation of a belief in animism represents a "surmounting" of a previous, more primitive "mode of thought."[21] The uncanny event or circumstance merely reminds us of this earlier, more childish way of thinking, which, once regarded as true by our "primitive forefathers," has now been wilfully

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Diss, The University of Chicago, 2000, 61. Nicholas Royle points out, "Freud keeps pausing to see if it is now possible to draw up an inventory, an exhaustive list of what is uncanny. It is as if he thinks, or is willing to pretend that we might think, that the uncanny can be collated, classified, and taxonomized" (13).

[18] Ibid 351-368.

[19] Earlier in his essay, Freud makes no distinction between two categories of the uncanny and explains, in general terms, that "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (340) Later he reiterates that his "general contention [is] that the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed" (370).

[20] Ibid 373.

[21] Ibid 370.

alienated by us through a process he calls "surmounting," a looser form of repression.[22]

As for the second category of the uncanny, where unresolved infantile complexes are revived, Freud explains that this class of repression is more clinical in the psychoanalytic use of the term. In this category, Freud attributes uncanny objects or circumstances such as dismembered limbs or presences which threaten the loss of one's eyes as being directly connected with a neurotic fear of castration. Freud explains that this brand of repression is more "resistant" than the former because it can be buried deep in one's unconscious, and yet still commands a powerful influence over one's behaviour and emotional responses.[23] Despite pointing out the differences between the two types of uncanny classifications, Freud admits that "the distinction is often a hazy one" and he would still have his readers believe that both categories involve a return to what was once familiar, which has become either alienated through suppression or strange by being buried deep in one's unconscious.[24] Given Freud's pioneering work as a psychoanalyst, it is the second variety that fascinates him more.

Nonetheless, from the perspective of critically evaluating Freud's contribution to a study of the uncanny, it can be said that he sees both versions of the uncanny as working perhaps too mechanically. In the instance of the first category, the appearance of a ghost unnerves precisely *(and for no other reason than)* because it reminds the subject that his former belief in the animistic realm cannot, perhaps, be totally surmounted by a conscious act of will. In the case of the second category, Freud argues for a "substitutive relation between the eye [or the dismembered limb]

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid 374.

[24] Ibid 372.

and the male organ" as the reason for the fear inspired by the uncanny event.[25] In both cases, Freud argues that it is not just being returned to the unfamiliar that causes the subject fear, but rather that "something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny."[26] It is this "something more" that makes Freud's theory problematic. By adding something more -- either a reawakened belief in animism or a buried infantile complex as the cause of the uncanny -- Freud tries to explicate definitively the uncanny as a signifier associated with some form of psychological repression instead of exploring the idea that the uncanny is an emotional response to one's feeling of intellectual or cognitive uncertainty, a notion that will be discussed below.

Freud's 1919 essay has left an immensely influential legacy, such that most academic writers on the uncanny find themselves having to mediate Freud's ideas, determining the extent to which they agree or disagree with him. Two dissenting voices belong to academic critics Roy Sellars and Marc Falkenberg, who believe that in Freud's effort to tie the uncanny to theories of surmounted beliefs or repressed infantile complexes, he prematurely dismisses the view of an earlier psychologist, Ernst Jenstch, who also wrote on the subject.[27] As Freud, Jentsch believed that the uncanny "arises in psychological terms," however for Jentsch the uncanny is a much more complicated field of experience, rather than one that can be clearly pegged to repression theories.[28] To Jentsch, the uncanny merely describes the feeling of being

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[25] Ibid 352.

[26] Ibid 341.

[27] Roy Sellars, Introduction, Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of The Uncanny," tr. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki* 2.1 (1996): 7-16, 8. Originally published as "*Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen*," *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8.22-23 (1906) 195-98, 203-5. Also see Marc Falkenberg, *The Poetical Uncanny: A Study of Modern Fantastic Fiction.* Diss. The University of Chicago, 2000.

[28] Ibid 8.

"not quite 'at home' or 'at ease' in a strange or 'foreign' situation."[29] Jentsch goes on to explain that "In brief, the word suggests that a *lack of orientation* is bound up with the impression of a thing or incident."[30] In the face of the uncanny, a person has difficulty "establishing quickly and completely the conceptual connections that the object strives to make with the previous ideational sphere of the individual – in other words, the intellectual mastery of the new thing."[31] The argument of this thesis concurs with this view; the uncanny relates more to the intellectual or cognitive uncertainty that the subject feels when he or she encounters the new or the unfamiliar and attempts to reconcile it against that which he or she knows to be the object's familiar or proper role, form or function. In this regard, the uncanny is about the cognitive struggle to gain a sense of orientation, but not being able to. As Edith Wharton explains, the fear often associated with the uncanny is of the "speculative, conjectural" kind and is related to "impulses to push forward" in an effort to surmount "the urgent desire to know what is going on."[32] The uncanny, then, is not to be rigidly associated with repression theories or even a "list" of experiences, but rather, relates to a larger idea: it is that sense of tension and bewilderment that occurs when the strange meets the familiar.

Part of the difficulty in defining the uncanny with any greater degree of precision relates to the observation that each instance of its occurrence cannot be relied upon to produce the same effect, to the same degree from person to person, or even within the same person.[33] It also confounds because it appears to contradict

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Edith Wharton, "All Souls" (1937), *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) 290 and 289; hereafter referred to as "*Ghosts*."

[33] Jenstch 8.

itself. The uncanny does not always inspire fear and dread as Freud maintains; the uncanny can often stimulate humour, delight and wonder.[34] The sense of being privy to a secret encounter with the sublime or supernatural can threaten to bury, castrate or annihilate, but it can also promise to enlarge and emancipate.

My own argument is that the uncanny inhabits an "in-between space" where, faced with the strange, one tries to gain some sense of orientation, not so much over the external occurrence, but rather over the feeling of disorientation. This limbo lasts only "as long as a certain hesitation" as Tzvetan Todorov describes.[35] A reaction can pass into fear, when what is being confronted is recognised as unfamiliar, and therefore, a possible threat. But it is really the moment before fear -- the time of engaging with the strange, the time of disorientation by the strange -- that qualifies as the uncanny. During this time, one has not yet decided whether the strange aspect is a threat or is benign; the person is in a state of bewilderment and wonder at the bizarre. Thus, a liminal state such as dying can be seen as an appealing "mesmeric trance" as in "The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar" by Edgar Allan Poe.[36] A less well-known writer, G.W. Stoner, explains how uncanny experiences can operate to clear mental pathways, making new ranges of psychic

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[34] As Falkenberg points out, "the emphasis [of the uncanny] in English lies less on what is fear-inspiring, and more on the fantastic" (58). Falkenberg also refers to how Jentsch notes that "a slight nuance of the uncanny effect is occasionally even present in the case of true admiration." (This is Falkenberg's translation of the original by Jentsch, "Eine leise Nüance unheimlichen Effects kommt aber auch bei der echten Bewunderung dann und wann zum Vorschein und erklärt sich psychologisch aus der Rathlosigkeit rücksichtlich des Zustandekommens der Entstehungsbedingungen fur die betreffende Leistung, weshalb sie auch beim speciellen Kenner des betreffende Gebiets zu fehlen pflegt" (Jentsch 197).) Falkenberg notes that "the German term includes the connotation 'astounding,' but it is one among several meanings and is not as dominant as in English" (58-59).

[35] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre,* tr. Richard Howard (London and Cleveland: The Press of Case Western University, 1973) 41.

[36] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar," *The Portable Poe*, ed. Philip Van Doren Stern, (New York: Penguin, 1977) 279. Originally published in *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque,* 2 vols. in Philadelphia in 1840.

experience accessible: "With disillusion the mind takes on a strange clarity; the body becomes clairvoyant."[37]

Therefore, we can see that the uncanny is a liminal realm, and thus theories of the uncanny share common ground with aesthetic theories of the Sublime. Harold Bloom, for one, notes how studies of the uncanny help readers to understand the strangeness in literature, a concept Russian formalists had earlier referred to as the notion of defamiliarisation in literature or *ostranenie*.[38] Bloom regards Freud's essay on the uncanny as "the only major contribution that the twentieth century has made to aesthetics of the Sublime;" he develops his point by explaining that "when you read a canonical work for the first time, you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than the fulfillment of expectations."[39] Even in this state of being bewildered by the strange, one's emotional and intellectual capacities can feel fully engaged, as possessing a strange clarity even as they are trying to discern that which eludes clarity.

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Part I.ii - The Uncanny as a Genre or an Effect?

Discussing the uncanny as a genre is problematic. As mentioned, some critics consider the uncanny as a genre, while others regard the uncanny as a reading or writing effect. For example, Tzvetan Todorov considers the uncanny in complicated terms as a genre, in that it is defined relationally by adjacent genres: the fantastic and

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[37] G.W. Stoner, "The Memoirs of a Ghost," in *The Second Ghost Book*, ed. Lady Cynthia Asquith (London: J. Barrie, 1952) 31.

[38] Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1917), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, tr. Lee I. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 1965) 13.

[39] Harold Bloom, "Freud and the Sublime: A Catastrophe Theory in Creativity," in *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, ed. Maud Ellman (London: Longman, 1994) 173-195, 182.

the marvellous.[40] Nicholas Royle defines the uncanny with reference to Jacques Derrida's analysis of "blink," in that the uncanny can be both identified as a genre and yet remain heterogeneous to a genre.[41] Rosemary Jackson maintains the uncanny is not a literary category," but rather "there are 'uncanny' stories where strangeness is an effect."[42] And Allan Gardner Lloyd-Smith regards the uncanny as "a *writing effect* (or a reading effect, it comes to the same thing)."[43] As will be discussed in the section to follow, the argument of this thesis seeks to harmonise these views by maintaining that critics can talk about the uncanny as a genre, *where* such conversations refer to a particular kind of writing that evokes the uncanny reading effect. The short stories, novellas and, some may indeed say, novels with this effect possess features which evoke a very particular kind of emotional response in the reader, one of bewilderment at the commingling of the familiar and the strange.[44] As just discussed with reference to the theories of Ernst Jentsch, and Freud, the uncanny can not be identified purely on the basis of the presence of a ghost, a *doppelgänger*, or an animated automaton; such external objects by themselves are not uncanny. Their presence must evoke an emotional response within the story's protagonist and reader which is unsettling to the extent that it

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[40] Todorov 41.

[41] Royle 19 and Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," tr. Avital Ronell, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 231, 251.

[42] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* 32 and 24.

[43] Allan Gardner Lloyd-Smith, *Uncanny American Fiction: Medusa's Face* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) ix.

[44] It is fair to say that the uncanny reading effect can be perceived in larger works such as novels, but this thesis has concentrated its study of the uncanny reading effect as it appears in short fiction. My support for this decision was influenced by Julia Brigg's observation that one feature usually attendant on the uncanny effect in fiction is that the fiction is short. Briggs explains that the majority of ghost stories take the form of short stories or novellas as opposed to full-length novels because "a horror that is effective for thirty pages can seldom be sustained for three hundred." Briggs elaborates by explaining that the density of the psychological response associated with the uncanny is attenuated when the subject is spread too thinly across a longer work or when the attention in the story is allowed to drift away from the reader's feelings to a supernatural element that has come "to occupy the centre of the stage" (13). Since the focus of attention in uncanny fiction is intended to be on the reader's feelings, many uncanny stories were originally intended to be consumed in one sitting, thus the short story or novella was often considered to be the best form.

refers to the psychological process of trying to gain a sense of bearing over the strange and not being able to; this sense of unease comes in degrees, from the mild to the intense depending on the perceiver.

Related to Todorov's point that the uncanny is defined relationally to adjacent genres, academic studies of uncanny literature, such as the present one, face another difficulty: the uncanny is often conflated with other genres, such that the distinguishing feature of the uncanny tale can be lost when it is included in anthologies with titles demarcating supernatural fiction, weird tales, stories of horror and terror, tales of wonders and marvels, imaginative fiction and fantasy. While the uncanny tale may contain a supernatural, weird or marvellous element, and may indeed inspire fear and dread, as do tales of horror and terror, uncanny tales are not focussed on external, objective phenomena or the alternative worlds of fantasy, where readers willingly suspend their beliefs about the reality of the fiction they consume.

The distinguishing feature of the uncanny is that it involves a more subjective sense of psychological unease evoked by a feeling that what was once whole or connected has now become fragmented or unhinged, particularly when this sense is evoked within the frames of the everyday. The "normal" has somehow been interfered with and thus provokes the feeling of bewilderment. The sense of unease is communicated unscientifically through the story's atmosphere as a sense of frisson. Again this observation is posited tentatively because, as M.R. James explains, "the genre is too small and special to bear the imposition of far-reaching principles."[45] Nevertheless, as Julia Briggs observes, "the best examples [of ghost

[45] M.R. James, Introduction to *Ghosts and Other Marvels,* ed. V.H. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924) v.

stories as a version of the uncanny] combine beauty and terror;" they have a "necessary frisson to them."[46]

By frisson, Briggs explains how "the form depends upon the existence of a tension between an outmoded, but not entirely abandoned belief and an enlightened scepticism."[47] In this regard, Briggs draws on an observation Freud made six years before his 1919 essay on the uncanny. In a footnote to *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud notes how "we seem to attribute the character of the 'uncanny' to all such impressions which seek to confirm the omnipotence of thought and the animistic method of thought in general, though our *judgment* has long rejected it."[48] The frisson is between old and new systems of values or beliefs. In these terms, the uncanny could then be seen as helping to convey the sense of unease people felt, particularly in the nineteenth century, over the conflict between a fading spiritual sense of the world and the emerging scientific and material one. The frisson between old and new value systems persists, and some might say even intensifies, in the twentieth century, suggesting new material for authors to consider in dealing with that which is bewildering about the new socio-cultural atmospheres they inhabit. The uncanny deals with an ambivalence toward the new as well as uncertainty, and in this way, the uncanny can often involve a feeling of nostalgia as writers tap into imagined notions of wholeness in the past, where earlier systems of organising thought were believed to provide the individual with a stable sense of personal identity and integration with the community. However, while all uncanny tales do not necessarily regard the past as better than the future, all uncanny tales do

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[46] Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977) 11.

[47] Ibid 16.

[48] Freud, footnote to "Animism, Magic, Omnipotence of Thought" (1913), *Totem and Taboo,* tr. A.A. Brill (New York: Promethus Books, 2000) 131-173, 151.

bear testament to a conflicted sense and profound disorientation over present and future moments.

To the extent that the uncanny can be thought of as a genre in which writers and readers abject unresolved inner conflicts, it can sound strikingly similar to gothic fiction. As with the gothic, the uncanny can disguise the unfamiliar and the unacceptable in a way that allows the reader to entertain emotional responses without censor. However, this is not its objective. While gothic fiction may provide a temporary narrative solution by affording readers the vicarious pleasure of engaging with a taboo, in the uncanny, there are no such "easy" solutions. Uncanny tales are tales of "un-ease." The entire point of the uncanny is to mediate the sense of astonishment that accompanies situations which are difficult to reconcile. Characters in the uncanny do not necessarily demonstrate a nostalgic desire for the old in lieu of the new, or the comfortable in exchange for the uncomfortable. Similarly, they do not wholly embrace the changes that accompany the new. They inhabit a middle zone where they are still making sense of the changes. Where in gothic fiction, protagonists often seek to transgress boundaries, in the uncanny, the zone of experience is on the boundary, a space where characters are thoroughly confused by the atmospheres which they inhabit; confounded, they have not yet decided how they feel about the changed state and its implications. As Wharton explains, the truly dreadful is not the idea of a ghostly solitude, but rather that there would "be no limit to this silence, no outer margin, nothing beyond it."[49] The real dread with the uncanny is that the chaos and the unsettled feelings might go on with out end and never be resolved. Fear often accompanies this state because one

[49] Wharton, "All Souls'," *Ghosts* 286. Similar senses of dread are felt by characters such as Elsa in Shirley Jackson's "A Day in the Jungle" by Jackson and Julia Matterling in Joyce Carol Oates's "Phase Change."

realises that all previous cognitive frameworks employed to understand reality are exposed as unreliable and satisfactory substitutes have not yet filled the vacuum.

Thus, by recognising the psychological process at work, the uncanny sits more comfortably with the definition that it is a reading effect. This conclusion is also more acceptable partly due to the many problems associating with the task of defining "genre." To those unaware of the post-structuralist legacy, identifying whether or not a story belongs to "genre" involves simply the detection of certain rules, conventions and stock features in the work. To this population of readers, stories of horror, detective fiction, science fiction, and fantasy are easily identifiable and categorisable. However, as David Duff points out modern literary critics are more hesitant in their assertions:

> To the modern ear, the word genre – in the sphere of literature at least – carries unmistakable associations of authority and pedantry. Even where there is no mention of 'rules' or 'conventions' (its usual corollary), the term seems almost by definition to deny the autonomy of the author, deny the uniqueness of the text, deny spontaneity, originality and self-expression. Most of us have an instinctive or ideological attachment to one or more of these values, and most of us are therefore at some level resistant to, or suspicious of, the concept of genre.[50]

For example, Frederic Jameson explains that

> Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artefact. [51]

Here, Jameson implies that readers bring certain expectations to their experience of the genre, both on a "*semantic*" and "*syntactic* or structural" level.[52] Readers expect to see certain rules, conventions and political meanings either reaffirmed or rejected. However, since "what the text means" (the *semantic* level) and "how it functions"

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[50] David Duff, ed., Introduction to *Modern Genre Theory* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000) 1.

[51] Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism," *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981) 103-150, 106.

[52] Ibid 108.

(the *syntactical* level) are based in history and therefore highly variable, notions about a genre's definition are always changing, depending upon the particular cultural moment of the work's reception.[53]

Because the uncanny, by its very definition, relies on reader's receptions, its ability to manifest uniformly across different audiences is particularly unstable. In fact, the uncanny provides a perfect illustration of the difficulties contemporary critics have in their reluctance and suspicion to even think of genre as a stable framing category. Yet there is *something,* even if it is only a *trace* of meaning – whether it is the frisson Briggs refers to, the return of the repressed familiar that Freud analyses, or Jentsch's uncertainty; the presence of this emotional effect on the reader allows modern readers to still recognise an uncanny tale, as belonging to a genre, if only a temporally defined sense of genre. At best, the argument of this thesis agrees most with Royle's point: that the uncanny is both *is* a genre and *sits anomalously to* the notion of genre. Royle relies on Derrida's essay "The Law of Genre" which David Duff acknowledges helps to contextualise the particularly vexing part of genre boundaries:

> [Jacques Derrida] makes the typically ingenious argument that the marks by which a work inscribes itself within a genre paradoxically do not belong to that genre; and hence the generic boundary is dissolved at the very moment when it is established.[54]

Such an analysis can remind one of Cixous's observations about the uncanny: the moment is able to too readily identify the uncanny effect, the effect is chased away.[55]

Some might say that ghost stories re readily fit into a recognisable genre: readers can expect to find a ghostly presence which haunts the text, along with a

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[53] Ibid .

[54] Duff 5.

[55] Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The "uncanny")," tr. Robert Dennome, *New Literary History* 7.3 (Spring 1976): 525-548, 533.

mood of mystery and suspense. However, as this thesis will make clear, uncanny stories can be about ghosts, but they are often about far more, as the essays of Jenstch and Freud have helped to illuminate. Moreover, even in the cases of stories where a ghost is present, the presence or absence of the ghost is not enough to make the story uncanny. The uncanny element depends on the *source* of the haunting, which is provided, in part, by the receiver of the story. In order for a ghost story to be scary, a dialectical relation needs to take place between that which the writer reveals as either mildly uneasy or deeply horrifying and that which the reader, in his or her judgment, brings to the story, in terms of his or her own conceptions of that which he or she judges to be disturbing.

In the Preface to her 1937 collection of ghost stories, Wharton provides some useful insights on the manner in which ghost stories come into being, both for the writer and the reader. In this Preface, she explains that to tell a good ghost story, one needs the ability to be a "ghost feeler."[56] Wharton is careful not to define too explicitly what a "ghost feeler" is, except to note that that such individuals have a sensitivity for detecting the haunting aspects of the "primeval shadows" in a ghost story.[57] Readers can be grateful to Wharton that her explication is necessarily vague as half the pleasure in reading her stories is in appreciating the openness of her symbolism. The source of the haunting in Wharton's stories is never pinned down as referring to any one thing; readers have to bring their own concerns to stories and there the haunting is brought into being. Wharton locates the fear in a tale, not in relation to some exogenous supernatural event or ghost, but rather to a vague feeling of unease inside the mind of the teller of the tale, which the reader might share.

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[56] Wharton, Preface to *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton,* ed. William R. Tyler (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973) 7. Individual stories published between 1907 and 1937; hereafter, this volume is referred to as "*Ghosts.*"

[57] Ibid 8.

This line of thinking is very similar to the reading process Wolfgang Iser describes in his essay, "The reading process: a phenomenological approach," where he explains that a literary work has two poles: "the artistic," which he defines as "the text created by the author," and "the aesthetic," which is "the realization accomplished by the reader;" the literary work is brought into being when the artistic and the aesthetic converge.[58] Iser discusses how the textual indeterminancy – the gaps or blanks in the text – actually serve as invitations for the reader to construct meanings which would not otherwise come into existence. In this sense, "the meaning [or the haunting] in the text is something that [the reader] has to assemble."[59] The material is presented by the writer "to provoke the reader into establishing for himself the connections between perception and thought."[60]

The process Iser describes parallels Shoshana Felman's discussion of the uncanny, not as a genre, but as a reading effect. In her 1977 essay on Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Felman explains that James's novella provides a series of readers or receivers of the governess's tale, who each, in their turn, help to write a new meaning into the story. At the first level is the governess herself; as an unreliable narrator, readers are never sure if her account actually happened, or is an embellished history she has prepared for her family. At the next level is the meaning of the manuscript derived by the governess's family; they presumably bring their own set of prejudices in their reception of the work, though this activity of meaning is produced outside of the text, as readers of James's novella never learn her family's reaction. The level of meaning James does share with the reader occurs when the

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[58] Wolfgang Iser, "The reading process: a phenomenological approach," *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (Harlow, Essex: Longman Group UK Ltd, 1988) 212-228, 212.

[59] Wolfgang Iser, Preface to *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, tr. The Johns Hopkins University Press (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) ix.

[60] Ibid xiv.

governess's manuscript is discovered by Douglas, the novella's narrator, who is himself a reader. Presumably, in his first reading of the manuscript Douglas conjured his own meaning of the story; however the in the process of sharing it with the novella's fireside audience, Douglas re-reads the text, and thereby James allows Douglas to re-interpret it, and in the process, through a series of reflections and recollections, adds still new layers of meaning to the story. Douglas's fireside audience, as receivers of the tale, presumably bring their own expectations to the their reception of the story, and yet another meaning of the story comes into being. And then, there is the reader of the book who effectively is pulled into this "fireside circle" and thereby into James's narrative frame. As Felman explains

> In the chain transmission of the story, each narrator, to relay the story, must first be a *receiver* of the story, a reader who at once records it and *interprets* it, simultaneously trying to make sense of it and *undergoing* it as a lived experience, an "impression," a *reading-effect.*[61]

The product is in effect a web of stories; however the important point to appreciate is that with each telling of the story, there is implicit a reader/receiver who is trying to make sense of the bewildering events relayed. This process is necessarily imperfect, but goes to the heart of what has been defined to this point as uncanny: by identifying with the story's protagonist, the reader similarly tries to make sense of events/ghostly appearances which disturb notions of the familiar and thereby encounters an experience of feeling cognitive uncertainty that is similar to that experienced by the story's protagonists. With each experience of reading, the reader adds something to the final meaning of the story, which *makes* the familiar strange depending upon the meanings the reader brings in his or her effort to fill the absences in the text. Henry James is deliberately vague in his provision of details so

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[61] Shoshana Felman, "Turning of the Screw of Interpretation," *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) 315-328, 319. Originally published in *Yale French Studies* 55/56, 1977.

that sufficiently ambiguous gaps are left in the story to produce myriad readings. These gaps function as the openings from which the source of the haunting emerges, and are either mildly uneasy or truly horrific, depending upon material provided by the reader's own prejudices or re-readings, which Iser refers to as "perspectives, preintentions, recollections."[62] The degree to which the governess is perceived by the reader as only a modestly unhinged and deluded character or the worse form of child abuser depends upon the material the reader brings to the text; such material defines the haunting, and in turn, the magnitude of the bewildered response.

The much commented upon fact that the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* is an unreliable narrator is perhaps the central aspect that makes James's novella such a masterpiece. The idea of unreliability is central to the uncanny. According to *The OED*, a 1630 origin for the word uncanny defines it as "unreliable, not to be trusted;" a 1773 origin specifies the definition to people, "Of persons: Not quite safe to trust, or to have dealings with, as being associated with the supernatural arts or powers."[63] The governess's unreliability is the auctorial mechanism by which the gaps in the text are produced; the gaps are then multiplied by the adulterating influence of each successive reader/receiver of the story.

In the chapters on Wharton, Jackson and Oates, arguments are put forward which show the stories discussed as possessing similar degrees of unreliability. While not all of the stories feature unreliable narrators, most do contain characters who on some level are striving to cope with and make sense out of an *environment* that is unreliable. At different points in the twentieth century, shifts in values were also attended by feelings of unreliability, a concept which extended to doubts that

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[62] Ibid 215.

[63] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Vol. XVII, ed. J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 895; hereafter referred to as "*The OED*."

one's most intimate relationships and once-sure identities were also not quite safe to trust. By evoking this sense of the untrustworthy, both in the story's atmosphere and in the context, Wharton, Jackson and Oates individually create their own gaps in the texts, which a reader is free to fill with their own set of perspectives, preintentions and recollections, and thereby creating their own version of an unsettling or deeply frightening story.

The materialist feminist perspective of this thesis chooses to fill those gaps by examining the social and historical context, alert to the "primeval shadows" cast by un-easy messages on gender representation, but equally by searching for openings in the text that can be read as references to more gender-neutral comments on issues such as war, economic systems, and depleted levels of social capital in society.

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Part II.i – The Relationship between Women and The Uncanny

Notions of the uncanny were also circulated in the eighteenth century, well before either Freud's or Jentsch's nominative essays in the twentieth century. Critics such as Mladen Dolar explain how, in pre-modern societies, the uncanny was largely relegated to the realm of the sacred and the untouchable because it could not be understood; however, with the rise of scientific rationality in the eighteenth century, "this privileged and excluded place was no more [...] the uncanny became unplaceable."[64] Terry Castle explains how the uncanny was produced in the eighteenth century "as a kind of toxic side effect" from the "aggressively rationalist

[64] Mladen Dolar, "I Shall Be With You on Your Wedding Night," *October* 58 (Fall 1991): 5-23, 7.

impulses of the epoch."[65] Attempts to harness and control that which was deemed to be inimical to the principles of the Enlightenment -- passion, magic, superstition, repression and madness -- produced a paranoid need to label and classify. This rational categorical sense masked and helped partially to manage, at least epistemologically, the darker, more unpredictable aspects of existence that eluded mastery.

One such "unpredictable aspect," the mercurial, was associated with women. Mercury, a substance that disperses on contact and is notoriously hard to handle, was particularly associated with the perceived emotional swings of women.[66] With the invention of thermometers in the eighteenth century, mercury (and some might say "the mercurial") had then been incorporated into everyday mechanisms, which were used, paradoxically, to gain one's sense of orientation with respect to the environment. According to Castle, images of thermometers and barometers were abundant in eighteenth-century publications and came to symbolise man's attempts to measure and therefore know the irrational. One ingenious device, purportedly invented to measure degrees of female lasciviousness, was the "Female Thermometer;" another device measuring moral character was the "Spiritual Barometer." Whether such devices actually existed is of some debate, but as Castle's study documents thermometers served as "emblem(s) of self-consciousness;" "inner and outer weather merged."[67] As emblems of this merged state, a kind of limbo, these tools were themselves uncanny, providing a way to measure the previously unseen. The fact that high readings could represent virtue on one device and vice on another operated to underscore the unreliable aspect of the

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[65] Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and The Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 8.

[66] Ibid 25.

[67] Ibid 43.

new devices.[68] (This idea of unreliability refers back to the early definition of the word uncanny as that which is "not quite safe to trust."[69]) The perceived emotional swings of women placed them in this untrustworthy category in the eighteenth century, an idea that perpetuates throughout much of the nineteenth century as women were associated with the sentimental and the emotional in domestic fiction.

A further reason why women were relegated to this untrustworthy realm related to the notion that they were child-like and possessed inferior intellectual abilities, an idea which continued, but was beginning to change, in the early twentieth century. Jentsch, for one, associates the uncanny with the intellectually feeble, with children and problematically, with women. In his 1906 essay, Jentsch discusses how those with "the weaker critical sense" have difficulty establishing the conceptual connections that would help them not to confuse the animate with the inanimate, the real and the imaginary. He explains that this weaker critical sense "is why women, children and dreamers are particularly subject to the stirrings of the uncanny and the danger of seeing spirits and ghosts."[70]

Perhaps a more significant aspect of the female that is entailed in the etymology of the word uncanny is the fact that, "one archaic synonym for the time of birth, giving birth or being born, is the 'canny moment.'"[71] Historically, discussions of the uncanny have centred upon the birth canal region of the female body as a kind of gateway to a mysterious zone that gives immense pleasure and life but also threatens with a sense of being buried alive, not making it out alive, or a dread of

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[68] On the Female Thermometer, high readings indicated "Abandoned IMPUDENCE" and low readings measured "Inviolable MODESTY." On another device, the "Spiritual Barometer," the opposite was true: higher degrees were associated with "love for the souls of men," "Patience," and "Glory;" and lower degrees were associated with the "Love of Novels," "Masquerades," "Drunkenness," "lewd songs," and "Perdition." Castle 21.

[69] *The OED* 895.

[70] Jentsch 13.

[71] Royle viii.

vagina dentata.[72] These terms suggest such a close association of the uncanny with the female anatomy that it is as if the uncanny and the female become interchangeable. Freud bolsters this view when he explains that there is nothing more uncanny than the female genitals. In his 1919 essay, he explains that "neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genitals. This *unheimlich* place however is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time in the beginning."[73] In his 1927 essay on fetishism, Freud extends the concept to include men in general, not just neurotics: "probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of the female genitals."[74] Tempted by an intense, repressed libidinous desire to return to its former home, the mother's womb from which it originated, the male phallus is both attracted to and repelled by the female genitals.

Critics after Freud, such as Jane Marie Todd and Kaja Silverman, are sceptical of this connection between Freud's castration complex and its relation to the uncanny and women. Todd explains that Freud's thesis reduces to a view which suggests that, "[It] is women who are *unheimlich*."[75] According to this perspective, a woman, because she lacks a phallus, can remind men that they too might one day be castrated. Silverman develops this idea further, "not only are [men] gripped by the fear that castration could one day happen to them, but also, there is something inherently uncanny in the spectacle itself [...] as an uncanny spectacle, women are

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[72] *The New OED* defines vagina dentata as "the motif of the vagina with teeth, occurring in folklore and fantasy and said to symbolise male fears of the dangers of sexual intercourse." See *The New Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Judy Pearsall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 2043; hereafter referred to as *The New OED*.

[73] Freud, U 368.

[74] Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism" tr. James Strachey, *The Penguin Freud Library, Volume 7, Art and Literature*, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1990) 345-357.

[75] Jane Marie Todd, "The Veiled Woman in Freud's "*Das Unheimliche*,"" *Signs* 2.3 (1986): 519-28, 523.

seen as having once been male, but having suffered the fate of castration, had their maleness taken from them."[76] Because women remind men that women once were men, women are recognised as the strangely familiar. A woman resembles a man in that he recognises her as human; but lacking a phallus, she also is strange—hence, she represents the strangely familiar or the familiar strange.

The fact of female uncanniness is not only to be perceived through the male gaze. The whole area of women looking upon other women provides rich territory for the uncanny. In her paper on "The Female Gothic," Ellen Moers relates how "from infancy, if not from the moment of birth, the looks of a girl are examined with ruthless scrutiny by all around her, especially by women and crucially by her own mother."[77] After enquiries are made about the sex of a child, if the answer is found to be female, the next question according to Moers can be expected to be: "Is she pretty?" This obsession with good looks is problematic for "ugly girlhoods" of intellectuals such as Maggie Tulliver's in *The Mill on The Floss* (1860), one apparently similar to George Eliot's own. Moers expands on one of Eliot's girlhood memories conveyed to Edith Simcox, who explains why Eliot preferred the company of men over women: "When she was young, girls and women seemed to look on her as somehow 'uncanny' while men were always kind."[78] This subject of women looking upon other women is mentioned here because it relates to the notion of the double and the uncanny.

The activity of women looking upon other women reminds women of their "twoness" – women share a kind of sisterhood with other women, but they also

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[76] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 17.

[77] Ellen Moers, "The Female Gothic: Monsters, Goblins and Freaks," *The New York Review of Books* (April 4, 1974): 36-40, 38.

[78] Ibid.

betray that solidarity as they engage in estimations of how other women compare to historically and culturally variable standards of femininity. That betrayal can take an external form whereby a woman can judge another woman as somehow not measuring up, but the betrayal can also be inwardly focussed as if by looking at other women, a woman can judge herself as falling short of the standards. The emphasis on ocularism, the me/not me, the female/not female, the feminine/not feminine, leads women to engage with muted distinctions, where the strangely familiar positions the activity of women looking at other women firmly within the uncanny. This activity of engaging duplicitously with one's double, of being double, "calls for," as Nicholas Royle explains, "the regulation of a strange economy, an art of negotiation which presupposes a kind of double talk, double reading, double writing."[79] Royle explains, "The uncanny is not what Freud (or anyone else) thinks. It has to do with a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves."[80] Although Royle does not refer here to the problem of the uncanny double and the female, his argument can be applied in a manner that bears similarities to the way French feminist critics such as Luce Irigaray refer to the female as "the sex which is not one."[81] The "doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self"[82] involved when women look at other women alienates women from an integrated sense of who they are such that women become strangers to themselves,[83] the ultimate strangely

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[79] Royle 16.

[80] Ibid 6.

[81] Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, tr. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Bark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985). Originally published as *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: *Les Éditions de Minuit*, 1977).

[82] Freud, U 356.

[83] This phrase is inspired by Julia Kristeva's book *Strangers to Ourselves*, where Kristeva describes how Freudian theories "teach us to detect foreignness in ourselves." Kristeva explains that the experience of feeling like an alienated foreigner is paradoxically what yokes humanity together and enables people to live together. See Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 191, 170, and more generally Chapter 8 "Might Not Universality Be ... Our Own Foreignness." This is an interesting point because it links into a theme prevalent in the uncanny fiction of Joyce Carol Oates, who

familiar. As Briggs explains, "out of an alienation [...] there emerged the figure of the double, neither self nor another, a powerful symbol of unresolved inner conflict" related to "hopes and fears too deep and too important to be expressed directly."[84]

Whether or not women can legitimately be associated with the uncanny as a subject may be of some debate, nevertheless, the above discussion has tried to demonstrate how women writers have inherited a significant cultural context for thinking of women in this regard and how this context needs to be mediated -- either exploited or jettisoned -- by women writers and critics turning to the subject.

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Part II.ii – The Uncanny as a Mode for Women Writers

Because the uncanny is associated with the eerie or surreal feeling of being not quite comfortable "at home," and because women have had a long cultural history of being associated with the home, the uncanny could be seen as a subject where women writers have an ability to express something unique about their conflicted feelings surrounding domestic spaces. As well, the instability of categories that is associated with the uncanny can be seen to have special appeal to women writers and readers, who maintain that the female experience is difficult to summarise. This aspect can be seen as attractive to women writers and readers who have gained insight from the way post-structuralist feminism has undermined essentialist notions

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describes that the only universality associated with the human condition is the irreparable sense of being utterly alone, which could be interpreted as a version of feeling foreign. "The most profound mystery of our human experience – the fact that, though we each exist subjectively, and know the world only through the prism of the self, this 'subjectivity' is inaccessible, thus unreal, and mysterious, to others. And the obverse – all *others* are, in the deepest sense, *strangers*." See Oates, Afterward, *Haunted* 303.

[84] Briggs 19 and 23.

of the female and the category of the feminine.[85] The uncanny is a genre where identities are called into question. Distinctions between male and female, reality and unreality are blurred; in the limbo zone of the uncanny, categorical statements about reality either totally lose their authority or are revealed as provisional at best.[86] The uncanny unsettles mental categories and in the process, it has protagonists, and in turn readers, question reality and the thought systems employed to understand that reality. For these reasons, the uncanny can be seen as a genre that affords women writers and readers with powerful ways to engage in debates about gender politics.

A genre with these features can be seen to have special appeal to women writers who maintain that there are many different versions of womanhood and that attempts to classify female nature and reality are untenable. Attempts to define both the female and the uncanny are fraught by similar problems. Hélène Cixous describes Freud's efforts to understand the uncanny as a "wily and interminable pursuit (of 'something' – be it a domain, an emotional movement, a concept, impossible to determine yet variable in its form, intensity, quality and content)."[87] In this way, the subject of the uncanny has much in common with the dilemma many women (and men) have in understanding and writing about female nature in general terms.

In thinking about the "wily" terrain that describes uncanny writing, one is reminded of the word's Scottish roots.[88] "Wily," according to the *OED*, means

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[85] Post-structuralist feminism resists efforts to tie theories of gender to metaphysical categories of "masculine" or "feminine;" post-structuralist feminism instead insists upon a plurality of meanings and implies that definitions with fixed meanings are inherently unstable. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989) 2, 4, 7 and 16.

[86] Royle 24.

[87] Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* ('The "Uncanny"')," tr. Robert Dennome, *New Literary History* 7.3 (1976): 525-48, 525.

[88] According to Nicholas Royle, "The 'uncanny' comes from Scotland, from that 'auld country' that has so often been represented as 'beyond the borders,' liminal, an English foreign body" (12).

"skilled at gaining an advantage, especially deceitfully"[89] Though associating Scotland with such an essentialising term creates critical difficulties, Scots and Scottish literature have historically been positioned to be culturally constructed in this way. As Darryl Jones notes, literature from the "Celtic Fringe" (Scotland, Ireland and Wales) has problematically led to the belief that such remote locales fester with conditions especially conducive to producing "literary forms belonging to the cultural margins, the disenfranchised, the voiceless, or even the culturally 'backward.'"[90] A great number of uncanny stories, particularly in the 1900-1950 period, are set in the region.[91] Arthur Machen's "Song of the Whistling Lad" is probably the most famous tale to recall the treacherous mystery of the Scottish Highlands.

The Scottish link to the uncanny relates not only to images of precarious cliff-side walks, but also suggests something treacherous about language itself. As Royle explains, "the uncanny comes out of a [Scottish] language that is neither purely English (as if such a thing could exist) nor foreign."[92] It is as if there is something about the uncanny which produces language that remains outside normative frames of reference. The *OED* associates the uncanny with an 1815 quotation from Sir Walter Scott, "I wish she binna uncanny! her words dinna seem to come in God's name or like other folks."[93] Emanating from a language that appears outside the patriarchal, the uncanny has much in common with the perceived manner in which colonialised or marginalised subjects say what needs to be said in

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[89] *The New OED* 2113.

[90] Darryl Jones, *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 18.

[91] For example, "Rats" by M.R. James and "The Lass with the Delicate Air" by Eileen Bigland are set in Scotland. "Munitions of War" by Arthur Machen is set in Wales and "Danse Macabre" by L.A.G. Strong is set in Ireland.

[92] Royle 12.

[93] *The OED* 895, where it features this quotation taken from Scott, *Guy M* liii.

oblique terms. Such indirections are also closely related to culturally constructed notions of women's writing which direct female authors to "Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant."[94] Thus, homologies exist between the way uncanny writing is thought to be a literature from the margins and popular ways of thinking about structures in women's writing.[95]

In this sense, the uncanny could be seen as attractive to women writers, not only as a *subject* but also as a *mode*. The uncanny often titillates precisely because it invites analysis while remaining elusive. Mysteriously, artfully uncanny stories can inspire fear, dread, or indeed a feeling of excitement or even joy when there is a

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[94] This is the first line of poem 1129 by Emily Dickinson. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson,* ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber, 1975) 506.

[95] In approaching women's fiction from a post-feminist perspective, readers can become aware how the idea of a "woman's way of writing" has established itself as a metanarrative of its own that now could be challenged. The idea of a female sentence was first popularised by Virginia Woolf in 1929. See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Chatto & Windus, The Hogarth Press, 1984) 68; originally published in 1929 in London by L & V Woolf. The idea gathered renewed critical attention by second-wave feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s who maintained that a distinctive female aesthetic exists in writing – either one based on the gynocritical point of view popular with American feminists such as Elaine Showalter, which foregrounds female experience or one seen as evidence of the distinctive *écriture féminine* as discussed by French feminist critics such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva.

Showalter draws a distinction between feminist criticism and gynocriticism. Feminist criticism focuses on the ideological assumptions associated with criticism, the representation of women and canon formation and emphasises how these have been over-determined by a male literary establishment. Gynocriticism, in contrast, argues for critical energies to be placed elsewhere, on an entirely new kind of female framework that focuses in the study of female experience and the study of women in their particular socio-historical context; Showalter suggests that the unique psychodynamics of female experience influence modes of female creativity. Showalter elaborates on these ideas in two essays: see Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982) 9-36, and "Toward a Feminist Poetics," *Women Writing About Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1979) 22-41.

L'écriture féminine refers to a female way of writing from the fluids of a body, particular the pre-natal semiotic. For useful summary of the theories behind *L'écriture féminine*, see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985) 102-173. Also see Hélène Cixous, "Sorties," tr. Ann Little, *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, (Brighton: Harvester, 1980) 90-98. Originally published in 1975 as *La Jeune* Née (en collaboration avec Catherine Clément), Paris: UGE, 10/18; "The Laugh of Medusa," tr. Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs* I (Summer 1976): 875-99. Originally published in 1975 as "Le Rire de la Méduse," *L'Arc*, 61, 39; "Castration or decapitation?" tr. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7, I, 41-55. Originally published in 1976 as "Le Sexe ou la tête?" *Les Cahiers du GRIF,* 13, 5-15; Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, tr. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Bark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985). Originally published in 1977 as *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: *Les Éditions de Minuit*); "When our lips speak together," tr. Carolyn Burke, *Signs* 6, I (Autumn 1980): 69-79. Originally published as "Quand nos lévres se parlent." Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980); also see Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 68.

collision in the text between "that which is secret and should remain hidden"[96] and that which threatens to be revealed. Part of the entertainment in reading a ghost story, for example, can lie in determining the reason behind the ghost's haunting. Very often the ultimate account or explanation behind the uncanny manifestation -- the ghostly solitudes, the mental fragmentation of characters or the questionable nature of reality itself -- can only be arrived at through a process of conjecturing with the text. Definitive answers are rarely supplied, rather the moments of interrogation proliferate in several directions. This disguised element of the uncanny text can make the uncanny seem ripe, then, for appropriation by female writers who wish to make a subversive comment about society or their experience for which they would otherwise be censored or silenced. The uncanny seems particularly suited to providing "the masquerade" women writers supposedly require.[97] By calling into question basic epistemologies and given assumptions about the way the very mechanics of distinctions operate, the uncanny invites its participants to question all dominant ideologies, including those governing gender politics. In this way, women writers might use the genre as a functional mode to re-imagine gender relations.

Thus, the uncanny can be seen as serving as a vital mode for women writers. However, one is prompted to ask the question: does the extent to which women are associated with the uncanny as a subject and as a mode constitute sufficient grounds for thinking of uncanny fiction produced by women writers as a separate sub-genre? This question will be addressed in the next section.

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[96] This quote comes from the eighteenth-century philosopher Schelling, whom Freud quotes in his 1919 essay. Freud, U 345.

[97] Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cara Kaplan (London and New York: Methuen, 1986) 5-44, 38.

Part II.iii - The Relationship between Women Writers and Genre Fiction

To understand the second-wave feminist argument that there is a special relationship between women writers and genre fiction, it is important to understand the critical context from which such an argument descends. Following the publication of *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf in 1929, there developed through the twentieth century a context for considering women's writing as uniquely shaped by women's values.[98] Momentum for considering women's writing thus shaped, and as a separate literary tradition in its own right, became energised by second-wave feminist critics after the civil rights and women's political movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Patricia Mayers Spacks, for example, in *The Female Imagination* (1972), outlines the value of studying women authors for the way female experience is fore-grounded as a theme in their work.[99] Moers, in *Literary Women* (1976), explains that the female tradition is marked by a strong sense of shared influences, values, conventions and experiences.[100] *Literary Women* contains a chapter on the Female Gothic, which was based on her earlier 1974 article by the same name. In this critical milieu, notions of separate female sub-genres, particularly in relationship to the gothic, flourished and were further bolstered by studies such as Juliann Fleenor's 1980 book-length study, *The Female Gothic*, to the point where many stories featuring female experience within a genre came to be seen as latent with politically-charged messages of female protest against patriarchy. In this environment, female experience became a kind of criterion for female sub-genres.

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[98] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 68-69, 93 and 96.

[99] Patricia Mayers Spacks, *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972; 1976) 4.

[100] Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: W.H. Allen, 1977).

If the female-experience criterion is applied to female-authored uncanny fiction, one might be tempted to see evidence for a unique female sub-genre in the uncanny. As a test, in my research, I examined the uncanny stories collected in five volumes by Lady Cynthia Asquith to determine if there were perceptible differences between female-authored and male-authored stories.[101] While I share a view similar to Richard Dalby's that there appeared to be no difference in the form of ghost stories written by either sex,[102] it is true that many of the ghost stories written by women do foreground female experience more frequently than those written by men. For example, "One Grave Too Few" by Cynthia Asquith addresses anxieties over childbirth and "The Villa Désiree" by May Sinclair deals with female fears about consummating the marriage on the wedding night. Another popular female experience story deals with the dilemma of being a second wife and wondering about the fate of the first. Such a theme, which one could identify as resonant of the Bluebeard legend,[103] is present in "Those Whom the Gods Love" by Hilda Hughes, and is perhaps best portrayed in the novel *Rebecca* (1936) by Daphne du Maurier. Nevertheless, male writers also wrote about female experience – the story "The Snow" by Hugh Walpole is another second-wife tale and "Spinster's Rest: Variations on an Old Tune" by Clemence Dane poignantly relates the story about a woman who finds herself unmarried without children. While women may have

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[101]See the following volumes of uncanny stories all edited by Lady Cynthia Asquith: *The Ghost Book: Sixteen New Stories of the Uncanny* (London: Hutchinson, 1926); *Shudders: A Collection of New Nightmare Tales* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Lt. 1929); *When Churchyards Yawn, Fifteen New Ghost Stories* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd, 1931); *My Grimmest Nightmare* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1935), and *The Second Ghost Book* (London: J. Barrie, 1952).

[102]Richard Dalby, Introduction, *The Virago Book of Ghost Stories: the Twentieth Century* (London: Virago, 1987) ix.

[103]The legend of Bluebeard, who murdered his new (sometimes pregnant) wives after they discovered the dead bodies of his earlier wives in a secret chamber, is a tale which has a fascinated male and female tellers of fiction alike as written stories since the seventeenth century, and earlier as part of oral folklore. Notable versions of the written tale come from Perrault and the Grimm Brothers as well as more recently from writers such as Italo Calvino and Angela Carter.

written about female experience more frequently, they do not appear to have had exclusive purchase on the subject.

Many female-authored stories deal with other themes besides gender-specific concerns. Mary Webb looks at new reading and publishing patterns in the book trade in "Mr. Tallent's Ghost," and follows a similar theme pursued in male-authored stories such as "Mrs. Lunt" by Hugh Walpole and "The Lost Tragedy" by Denis MacKail. Nancy Spain in "The Bewilderment of Snake McCoy" tackles the issue of suburban life after the war, and shares this theme with "Possession on Completion" by Collin Brooks. The ghost stories of Elizabeth Bowen often refer to diminished financial or cultural status as in "Hand in Glove" and "The Cat Jumps," and in this way share the theme of a family's lost financial and class position with "The Rocking Horse Winner" by D.H. Lawrence and "The Chelsea Cat" by C.H.B. Kitchin. Other stories such as "Bombers' Night" by Evelyn Fabyan describe the horror of World War II, while "Whitewash," by Rose Macaulay, engages with difficult questions about contemporary political leaders, the presumed leaders of post-War peace. Macaulay asks: "And how long will it be before our contemporary monsters have the whitewash buckets poured over them, and emerge saints, or victims of circumstance, more sinned against than sinning? Most of us are more sinning than sinned against, why should monsters be exceptions?"[104] This sensitivity to war, its consequences and its leaders, however, is by no means a quality unique to women writers, "Dispossession" by C.H.B. Kitchin and "The Guardian" by Walter de la Mare also deal with these issues.

By the 1980s academic critics who focussed on the specialist field of women's literature began to drop the notion that female experience, alone, was a criterion to

[104] Rose Macaulay, "Whitewash" in *The Second Ghost Book* 66-67.

establish categories of women's writing as special genres and sub-genres. As the above discussion of the stories collected in the Asquith volumes demonstrates, it became obvious that women authors were not the only ones writing about female experience, and that they also wrote about other socio-historical issues.[105]

Additionally, the whole notion of female experience as a measure grew problematic as theories of post-structuralism and deconstruction, which held that it was impossible to define essential categories, became more widely circulated.[106] Moreover, "difference" camps within feminism maintained that the female experience of lesbians, women of colour, and working class women was significantly different from the female experience of the largely white, middle-class feminist critics who, up to that point, had controlled the debate.[107] Thus, female experience as criterion for a sub-genre began to look simplistic.

In an effort to adapt some of the intellectual framework of deconstruction, feminist literary critics began to change the language they used in their own criticism. As feminist literary historian Janet Todd observes, "works became texts;

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[105]In addition to noting the influences at work in the area of production, from the point of view of reception, contemporary women authors such as Margaret Atwood also began to wonder why when men write about domestic themes such as "doing the dishes it's realism," but when women write about such matters it is considered "a genetic defect," part of the elusive zone of female experience, when it could be regarded as material. Margaret Atwood, "Paradoxes and Dilemmas, the Woman as Writer," *Women in the Canadian Mosaic,* excerpted in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 74-77, 76.

[106]The work of theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, for example, helped to demonstrate that there were no "pure" binary oppositions, such as the terms male and female, because each depended upon the absence of the other for its own definition. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies,* tr. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993) 11. This translation was originally published, London: Cape, 1972 and was based on French edition published Paris: Éditions du Séuil, 1957. Also see Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* tr. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), originally published as *L'Ecriture et la difference* in Paris by Éditions du Séuil in 1967.

[107]See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience," *Signs* 5.4 (1980): 631-60; also bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982); Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women Studies* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982); Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory,* ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986) 168-85; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *'Race', Writing and Difference,* ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 262-80; and later Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

interpretation became hermeneutics; focus shifted from Marxist, political and materialist analysis to rhetoric, catachresis and figurative devices; emphasis on the author gave way to notions about the 'gendered signature' of the text."[108] Female writing began to be analysed syntactically, from the level of the sentence to whole genres.

An important contributor to the industry of looking at the syntax of genres was Rosemary Jackson. In her 1981 study, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Jackson examines fantasy as a "literary mode in terms of its forms, features, basic elements and structures."[109] Her approach is structuralist in that Jackson's model regards fantasy as a kind of language with certain paradigmatic features.[110] By paradigmatic, Jackson suggests that there is a relationship between the narrative conventions that form mutually exclusive choices which give those conventions particular syntactic roles. One of the syntactic roles or functions of fantasy is to "[trace] the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent.'"[111] Thus, fantasy becomes a "literature of desire;"[112] the syntax of its forms has social and political implications.[113] In the end, Jackson's theory concludes that fantasy's generic conventions work together in a way that produces readings which challenge dominant assumptions behind the rules, conventions and syntax of more realistic fiction. Thus, fantasy helps to reveal how the dominant assumptions, rules and conventions that are taken to be normative can themselves be challenged by manipulating stock conventions and syntax. In this

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[108]Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History: A Defence* (London: Polity Press, 1988) 39.

[109]Rosemary Jackson 7.

[110]Ibid.

[111]Ibid 4.

[112]Ibid 3.

[113]Ibid 6.

way, Jackson establishes that imaginative genres, such as fantasy, can be seen as *functional modes*.[114]

The theoretical groundwork that Jackson lays is picked up by later critics such as Anne Cranny-Francis who, in her 1990 study of feminist uses of generic forms, explains how generic conventions are re-worked by feminist writers to open up a new set of choices for syntactical roles, which then have the impact of effectively changing the conventions of the genre.[115] Cranny-Francis argues that patterns emerge and a separate female tradition can be identified. Cranny-Francis's 1990 study represents a significant shift from earlier ways of thinking about female sub-genres. Where earlier models relied on the female-experience criterion, in the model Cranny-Francis provides, the new criterion insists on a feminist theme.

In *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (1990), Cranny-Francis draws on Fredric Jameson's point that genres, in order to exist as genres, need to have some cultural function.[116] Essentially, genres must satisfy the expectations that readers have come to appreciate about the genre. Cranny-Francis explains that these expectations about what a genre should or should not contain operate as social contracts, by "social assent, not individual choice."[117] She explains that feminist writers re-work the conventions of a genre in such a way as to expose the dominant

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[114] As a mode closely related to fantasy, the uncanny can be seen to be operating in the same way critic Lucie Armitt discusses with reference to fantasy. Drawing on the earlier noted remark by Rosemary Jackson -- how genres like fantasy have a unique relationship to the "unsaid and the unseen ... that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (Jackson 4) -- Lucie Armitt adds that fantastic fictions are particularly good hosts for then re-imagining gender relations and interrogating contemporary ideological narrative structures. Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Hodder Headline Group, 1996) 2.

[115] Cranny-Francis explains that "In using and revising the conventions of particular genres, feminist writers are changing those genres. If a genre is a collection of texts which all use a particular set of conventions to construct meaning, then changes to those conventions change the kinds of meanings those texts can make." Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990) 195.

[116] Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism," *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981): 103-150, 106.

[117] Cranny-Francis 16.

ideologies those genres normally promote. By foregrounding the way the text is self-conscious of its generic conventions, those conventions and their underpinning ideological frameworks are similarly exposed as arbitrary and artificially constructed. She explains that genre narratives normally operate as ideological mechanisms that tell readers "how to think, to understand and to explain in ways appropriate to the dominant discursive formation."[118]

Cranny-Francis makes it clear that her study considers only feminist writers and examines the way that feminist writers manipulate generic conventions so that dominant ideologies, such as patriarchy, are subverted. The weakness of her argument, however, relates to the way she privileges feminist writers, as if the skill of manipulating generic conventions is lost on other writers.[119] She suggests that most other writers involved in genre fiction adhere to conventions and thereby affirm dominant ideologies. A dilemma then develops for the post-feminist reader when he or she encounters a female writer working in genre fiction: the reader can feel compelled to decide first whether the writer is conservative or a feminist. The answer to this question then determines the reading position, i.e., the set of instructions to apply in reading the text.

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[118]Ibid 13. Earlier in her introduction, Cranny-Francis helps readers understand what she means when she refers to discourses by explaining the differences between sexist, masculinist, femininist and feminist discourses. "Sexist discourse defines, describes and delimits how men and women must act in order to be considered masculine and feminine, how to be 'real' men and 'real' women in a patriarchal or male-dominated society" (1-2). Masculinist and femininist discourses, derived from sexism, and are respectively male- and female-directed, defining, describing and delimiting what it is to masculine and feminine in a patriarchal society. "As part of the formation of subjectivity of women and men from a very early age sexist discourse (including its gendered component discourses) determines not only what they do, but how they think, about themselves as well as others. This discourse is 'naturalized' as the obvious mode of representation and self-representation of women and men. The most important role and task of feminist discourse is to challenge this naturalization, this obviousness, this common sense. And to challenge it, feminist discourse has to make it visible. In feminist fiction, including feminist genre fiction, feminist discourse operates to make visible within the text the practices by which conservative discourses such as sexism are seamlessly and invisibly stitched into the textual fabric, both into its structure and into its story, the weave and the print" (2).

[119]One only has to think of how Jane Austen satirically manipulates the gothic genre in *Northanger Abbey* (1818) to see an example of how other authors, not readily recognised as unequivocally opposed to patriarchy, are also capable of manipulating generic conventions. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen manipulates generic conventions to deliver an ambiguous feminist message as well as to comment on general trends in reading patterns and the wider politics of her day, points that could be read as quite distinct from the novel's gender politics.

According to Cranny-Francis's model, if the reader identifies the writer as conservative, then he or she can conclude that the text affirms a patriarchal ideology; if the reader identifies the author as feminist, the expectation then becomes that the reader will also be able to identify the author's manipulation of the generic form to accommodate a position of feminist protest against patriarchy. This approach of dividing female writers into two classes, conservative and feminist, becomes complicated when one encounters female writers, particularly iconic female writers such as Wharton, Jackson and Oates, who do not fit into a rigid conservative-feminist binary. Wharton, Jackson and Oates all engage with generic fiction, uncanny fiction, yet it is hard to see feminist protest politics evident in their handling of genre in all instances. Sometimes their work seems to be making subversive statements against patriarchy; other times such rebellious messages are difficult to find.

Cranny-Francis attempts to address this territory of muted writers when she explains that many writers working conscientiously within dominant ideologies of gender, race and class are not precluded from also expressing oppositional views within their texts. However, this kind of hedging statement becomes meaningless as she goes on to explain that the writers she is concerned with do not make compromises with the dominant discourse.[120] But one may ask, then, whether the task of defining a passage, character or stock feature of a genre can be definitively identified as either complying with or diverging from dominant discourses. Such a suggestion discounts the role the reader and the writer play in interpreting and disguising these features so that they remain open and ambiguous. It would appear

[120] Cranny-Francis 1.

that the kind of writing Cranny-Francis chooses to focus on is without this ambiguity and instead is more overtly didactic.

Post-feminist readers schooled in this way of thinking, thus, can feel obliged to expect a subversive message from the text and can feel confused when they do not find it. Given the abundance of overtly feminist generic fiction which has been published since the advent of the women's movement, one might say that feminist appropriation of generic forms has been so successful that it has created a new vigilance, a new kind of twoness, in the reading process. On the one hand, post-feminist readers read to identify how the patriarchal ideology has been naturalised, unconsciously in a text; and on the other hand, they read to see the extent to which that ideology is made visible and thereby subverted. If it has been successfully subverted, readers can feel that the genre has satisfied their feminist expectation. If no subversive message seems to exist in the text, readers can prematurely dismiss the text as conservative, as one that colludes with patriarchy.

However, it could be argued that this "hunt" for the subversive message in the text too narrowly focusses the reading process, blocking the freedom of the text to signify other meanings that could perhaps be at odds with, or simply irrelevant to, feminist politics.[121] Ironically, this very polysemy was a stated goal of second-wave feminist criticism. Just because a writer's work sometimes contains themes which can appear to reflect assimilation with patriarchy does not mean that assimilation or

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[121] As stated earlier in this chapter, Roland Barthes explains when other connotations of a text are so minimised, the activity of reading is reduced to one of "passive unthinking consumption." Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, tr. Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1975) 4-5. Originally published in Paris in 1970 by Editions du Séuil. Wolfgang Iser elaborates on this point in a similar way in his review of Henry James's story, "The Figure in the Carpet," "so long as the critic's mind is fixed on the hidden meaning, he is incapable ... of seeing anything." Texts do not always offer "detachable meanings, but rather are ultimately read unscientifically through a convergence of the two." Wolfgang Iser, "Partial Art – Total Interpretation: Henry James, 'The Figure in the Carpet,' in Place of an Introduction," *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976) 6-7.

compromise can be taken as fact. Often a text operates in more subtle and sophisticated ways than such a reading position can explain.

For more detail on the kind of subversive content feminist critics such as Cranny-Francis claim exists in female-authored generic texts, it is helpful to refer to the critical work of Lynnette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar, who in their book, *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women* (1991), provide explicit guidelines on what modern readers can expect to find when reading a ghost story written by an American female author. Carpenter and Kolmar also begin their discussion with a hedging disclaimer. They are careful to point out that "what we found and wish to outline here is a series of tendencies, not inevitabilities: the work of some men may manifest the characteristics of this tradition; the work of some women will not."[122] This corollary is soon neutralised by the extensive generalizations that are made about women writers in the balance of their study.

Carpenter and Kolmar posit that the ghost story genre has been re-imagined by women writers in ways that are similar to the development of female sub-genres in the gothic, science fiction, autobiography and the *Bildungsroman.*[123] They maintain that women writers use the ghost story genre in a distinctly different way from male authors and thereby, inspire the reader to evaluate critically male culture, values and traditions. Carpenter and Kolmar maintain that ghost stories written by men are largely concerned with the tension between binary categories: "reason versus unreason, science versus spirituality, conscious versus unconscious, the

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[122]Lynnette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar, *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991) 2.

[123]Ibid.

natural versus the supernatural."[124] Male writers, they explain, are interested in seeing one side of the binary equation prevail over the other, where women writers allow a certain coexistence of dualities, or they discern at least a continuum of experience between the natural and the supernatural. Carpenter and Kolmar cite an observation made by Rosemary Jackson who maintains that male writers investigate horror for its own sake; where women writers investigate horror in order to "extend our sense of the human, the real, beyond the blinkered limits of male science, language and rationalism."[125]

Women writers, they explain, also draw from another well of material for their stories than male writers; women draw their concerns from women's culture -- in terms of the unique field of female experience and the separate female tradition -- and demonstrate how these reference points have not been fully jettisoned. In this way, Carpenter and Kolmar return to female experience as a criterion for a female sub-genre.[126] By referring to canonical works from the female gothic sub-genre, works such as *Jane Eyre* (1848), they explain that women writers look upon the genre of supernatural fiction as a place to "turn to" to address issues of gender and power.[127] Common themes in ghost stories written by women include issues such as the dangers of domesticity and the failed home; victimization and violence in the home; women being ejected from the home or dispossessed in some way of their

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[124]Ibid 11.

[125]Rosemary Jackson, Introduction to *What Did Miss Darlington See? An Anthology of Feminist Supernatural Fiction,* ed. Jessica Amanda Salmonson (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1989) xviii, qtd in Carpenter and Kolmar 12.

[126]In the initial part of their introduction, Carpenter and Kolmar explain that they see their work as building upon the work of other female-experience critics such as Ellen Moers (*Literary Women*), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*Madwoman in the Attic*) and Elaine Showalter (*A Literature of Their Own*) (1).

[127]Ibid 2.

property; the need to understand female history; and the bonds between women, particularly the maternal legacy after death.[128]

While these "common" female themes can certainly be observed in Wharton, Jackson and Oates,[129] Carpenter and Kolmar are problematic for the post-feminist reader who recognises how their study over-interprets themes of female experience and feminist protest and neglects to highlight what other non-gender specific themes exist in uncanny fiction produced by American women writers. Carpenter and Kolmar emphasise that there is a key interpretative element which distinguishes ghost stories written by women from those written by men. They explain that sympathy replaces reason as the key interpretative faculty in ghost stories written by women. Because women are socialised to be more sympathetic, the female subjects within the texts are more open to encountering the supernatural and respond to strange happenings not with horror or terror but with understanding as they recognize common ground with the ghosts. Female subjects in the texts as well as female readers are more likely to connect with spectral presences, accepting them as familiar, not strange.

Wendy K. Kolmar even suggests that women from minority cultures are particularly receptive to the supernatural, citing how in African-American and Native American cultures family ghosts are often considered as living members of the family, as "simply part of experience" to be relied upon as nurturing figures providing guidance for survival or whose poltergeist force is to be merely tolerated

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[128]Ibid 10.

[129]These themes can be observed particularly in stories such as "Kerfol," "Mr. Jones," and "The Lady's Maid's Bell" by Wharton; in *Hill House*, and "Beautiful Stranger" by Jackson, and in "The Model," "The Premonition," "Phase Change" and "Martyrdom" by Oates. Also, as will be discussed in Part Three of this introduction common female experience/feminist themes include the difficulties of motherhood, the challenge of being a woman alone, and ageing.

like the crankiness of a crotchety old aunt.[130] These suggestions, that women are somehow more disposed to the supernatural because of their emotional and cultural make-up, are as problematic and essentialising as the comment made by Ernst Jentsch in his 1906 essay that women and children were more disposed to the uncanny because of their under-developed intellectual capacities.[131]

Such generalisations would appear also to be at odds with the express purpose of feminism: the re-evaluation of women, not as emotional and infantile but, as fully mature, logical thinking persons. It is difficult to accept the emphasis that Carpenter and Kolmar place on "female values" because such weight presents an unbalanced portrait of the aesthetic endeavour that women writers (and readers) struggle to master in creating (and reading) these works of fiction.

Thus far the discussion has focussed on how notions of female experience and feminist themes have been used as criteria to establish female sub-genres. The reading positions predicated on these criteria emphasise how uncanny writing by women should be interpreted as a protest literature in which women writers make a subversive statement against the patriarchal discourse. It is important at this stage to discuss another reading position which regards uncanny writing by women as literature that should be psychoanalysed so that repressed desires, which stunt female development, might be rooted out and purged. This reading position is one that is recommended by Tania Modleski.

The term "female uncanny" was first nominalised in 1982 by Modleski in *Loving with a Vengeance*, where she defines uncanny fiction by women as a sub-

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[130]Carpenter and Kolmar refer to the following works as examples: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976).

[131]Jenstch 13.

genre of "victim" narratives that have special appeal to women readers because they supposedly manifest repressed desires and unresolved mother-daughter separation issues.[132] In *Loving with a Vengeance*, Modleski is interested in studying the appeal that victim narratives hold for female audiences, particularly when the gains of feminism have urged female audiences to try to overcome such subordination. Modleski maintains that many women still in fact more readily identify with victimised characters either because they feel themselves to be victimised in their own relations towards their husbands and society or, perhaps more interestingly, because deep psychoanalytic drives help them to find something titillating, enjoyable or cathartic about victimised positions.

Modleski proposes that the allure of victim narratives lies in female notions of self-abasement, that secretly, many women enjoy the spectacle of seeing another female object being overpowered by the male subject because they feel unconsciously seduced by repressed drives related to the significant people in their childhoods. In particular, Modleski notes that the difficulty of separating from the mother is the underlying issue that causes most women to identify with characters who feel themselves to be victimised by their husbands. Modleski defines this dilemma as the Female Oedipal complex. Drawing on the work of Nancy Chodorow,[133] Modleski describes this complex as operating in the following way. Early in life, the child perceives that the father is capable of controlling the mother and in turn, develops hostility towards both parents, the father because he is the "tyrant" and the mother, because she is unable or unwilling to resist him. Later in life, the child's father comes to be valued for the very function for which he was

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[132]Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Routledge, 1982) Chapters 1 and 3.

[133]Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

originally resented – by identifying with the father and his ways, the child successfully negotiates separation from the mother. The male child then grows up to assume the role of victimiser, as the husband and father in his own family. Separation from the mother is completed by identifying with, and then emulating the behaviour of the former "enemy." But for the female child, separation from the mother is more complex. The only way the female can successfully separate from her mother is to first fall in love with a man (the substitute father figure whom through love she identifies with her real father), and then convert her lover, now husband, into her "enemy."[134]

This issue of determining who is or is not an enemy, Modleski explains, is a key feature in many female uncanny narratives. Being able to project ambivalent attitudes onto an enemy enables the paranoid person to establish boundaries of self. However, as Modleski explains, boundary confusion exists when the paranoid determines that the enemy is in fact the substitute father. If the substitute father is revealed as the legitimate tormentor, then the female protagonist (and in turn female reader/viewer) has her identification with the mother re-confirmed and her sense of autonomy from the mother is not achieved. Because female uncanny works are often concerned with what really happened to the victimised woman, they help to dramatise these deeper psychoanalytic drives related to separation anxieties. Modleski goes a step further and maintains that if her speculations about the Female Oedipal complex are correct and "the uncanny has its chief source in separation anxieties, then it follows that since women have more difficulty establishing a separate self, their sense of the uncanny may actually be stronger than men's."[135]

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[134] For a more detailed discussion of the Female Oedipal Complex, see Modleski 66-83.

[135] Ibid 71.

This is as essentialising and ghettoising as similar statements made by Jentsch and later by Carpenter and Kolmar, as previously discussed.

In addition, three key weaknesses are apparent in Modleski's method and argument. The first relates to how Modleski defines her study. Modleski explains that the focus of her study is on "pure Gothics," where the typical plot involves a new bride, in her new home, who grows to suspect that her husband has done a horrible deed, such as murdered his first wife.[136] Eventually the heroine then grows to fear that her own life is in danger. While many uncanny tales written by women contain similar "second-wife" themes,[137] many other uncanny tales do not deal with this subject at all, but encompass other plots such as dolls come to life, children with imaginary or ghostly playmates, and houses haunted by more elemental and gender-neutral presences where an oppressive male and a victimised female are conspicuously absent. In defining the scope of her study in this way, Modleski narrows the field and distorts our understanding of female-authored uncanny fiction as comprising a sub-genre of the female gothic instead of highlighting the qualities that make the uncanny distinct from the gothic.

Secondly, Modleski considers a formula she sees present only in novels; her research does not consider shorter fiction, however short stories and novellas comprise the bulk of what generally has come to be regarded as the mass of uncanny fiction. The third weakness relates to the way that some of the authority of Modleski's theory can be decentred when it is historicised and viewed as symptomatic of a wider enthusiasm for female-centred interpretations of

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[136]Ibid 59.

[137]In Wharton, versions of the "second-wife" theme exist in stories such as "The Lady's Maid's Bell," "Kerfol" and "The Pomegranate Seed." In Jackson, *Hill House* can be read as a "second-woman" tale to the extent that the fates of previous matriarchs of the house appear to be bound to the fate of Eleanor. In Oates, the second-woman theme can be identified in "Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly."

psychoanalytic methods based on phallocentric models. In a similar fashion to the way theories of deconstruction were appropriated by certain second-wave feminist critics to compensate for the perceived weaknesses in female-experience methodologies, as discussed earlier, there was also a parallel enthusiasm to re-interpret feminist versions of the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and particularly, Jacques Lacan.[138] In brief, Lacan held that efforts to master communication represent a repressed desire for the original unity felt in the mother's womb.[139] Lacan's theories generated much interest among certain feminist critics because of the way they asserted new significance to the mother-infant bond. Modleski's theory can be seen as symptomatic of this trend in feminist literary studies.

Before leaving this discussion of the relationship between women writers and genre fiction, I wish now to discuss some of the later views on the subject that Rosemary Jackson has contributed. In the latter stage of my research, I examined the anthology of feminist supernatural fiction edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, *What Did Miss Darrington See?* (1989) because Jackson's introduction to it practically codifies in one place a reading position post-feminist critics have inherited about how they are to approach supernatural fiction written by women, of which the uncanny forms part. Jackson's introduction and Salmonson's Preface help to synopsise the critical culture which the arguments of Modleski, Cranny-Francis, Carpenter and Kolmar helped to create and which post-feminist critics now mediate.

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[138]For a discussion of feminist appropriation of Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, see Todd 51-70. Also see Camille Paglia, "Ninnies, Pedants, Tyrants and Other Academics," *The New York Times Book Review* (May 5, 1991): 29.

[139]Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis,* tr. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). Originally published as "*Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychoanalyse*" in *La Psychoanalyse,* Vol. 1 (Paris: 1956). This translation originally published in 1968. As well see Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, tr. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979). Originally published in London by Hogarth Press, Institute of Psychoanalysis in 1977 as a translation of *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychoanalyse* (Paris: Éditions du Séuil, 1973).

As the author and editor of over twenty books of fantasy and the supernatural and as a collector of short stories for over thirty years, Salmonson's authority as a scholar of supernatural short fiction is undisputed. However, in her Preface to *What Did Miss Darrington See?* Salmonson makes several sweeping statements which can prove troublesome. For a start, she conflates supernatural fiction with "women's literature" and she privileges a "feminist" perspective without defining her understanding of "feminist." For example she writes, "[...] supernatural fiction written in the last two hundred years has been predominantly women's literature and much of it clearly feminist."[140] If post-feminist critics have been taught to think not of "Feminism" but rather "Feminisms,"[141] a response to Salmonson would be that she needs to be more specific on exactly how such literature is feminist.

Secondly, in reference to Jackson's introduction, Salmonson writes that Jackson "looks at the history of *women's* supernatural writing in the West since its inception with the work of Ann Radcliffe and other eighteenth-century gothic writers and discusses each of the stories in this volume in the context of this feminist literary tradition" (italics mine).[142] Here, Salmonson collapses the distinction between fiction written by women and a "feminist literary tradition." Interestingly, while Rosemary Jackson makes a brief, darting reference to the work of Shirley Jackson, she conspicuously misses mentioning the uncanny fiction of Wharton and Oates, two major writers associated with the uncanny. Significantly, all three writers are absent from Salmonson's volume of stories.

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[140]Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Preface to *What Did Miss Darrington See? An Anthology of Feminist Supernatural Fiction* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1989) ix.

[141] See Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'Écrituré feminine*," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory,* ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986) 361-372, 361; as well as Rich, hooks, Hull, Scott and Smith, Spivak, and Hennessy.

[142]Rosemary Jackson, Introduction to *What Did Miss Darrington See?* x.

It would be more precise to acknowledge that there is a wider body of work referred to simply as supernatural fiction written by women, of which uncanny fiction written by women would be a branch. Within each of these, it is legitimate to acknowledge that there are "strands" that contain feminist themes. Post-feminist critics need to be sceptical of the metanarratives that are established, subtly and perhaps not consciously, through the industry of creating anthologies glossed with introductions such as Jackson's, which can give the impression that reverses this hierarchy. Less scrupulous critics after Salmonson and Jackson can come to the understanding that "a veritable school" of feminist supernatural fiction exists and lazily apply the expectations associated with this very specialised group of feminist writers to all supernatural fiction written by women.[143]

To be fair to Salmonson, her Preface does include a discussion of certain supernatural fiction written by women that is not feminist, but rather belongs to a grouping known as "gentlewoman's short story anthologies."[144] Salmonson acknowledges that many of these ghost stories, written by Victorian women, cannot be "construed as feminist per se."[145] However, as has been shown in similar provisos put forward by Cranny-Francis as well as Carpenter and Kolmar, this hedging statement loses its focus when the reader goes on to read the generalisations put forward in Jackson's introduction. Salmonson tells us that Jackson's introduction elucidates the "links between feminist goals and the concerns of

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[143] Ibid xi.

[144]Salmonson xi.

[145]Salmonson xii. Salmonson notes that "gentlewoman's" ghost story anthologies include the following: Richard Dalby's *The Virago Book of Ghost Stories* (1987), *The Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (1988), Peter Haining's British *Gentlewomen of Evil* (1969) and *A Circle of Witches* (1971), Marcia Muller and Bill Pronzinin's *Witches Brew* (1984), Alan Ryan's *Haunting Women* (1988) and Alex Hamilton's British *The Cold Embrace* (1967). See Salmonson, xi-xii.

supernatural fiction," which Salmonson previously classified as "woman's literature."[146]

Jackson goes on to identify the features that "*women's* supernatural writings," produced over the last two centuries, "share" (italics mine).[147] The following list of genre characteristics documents the way Jackson repeatedly swaps the word "feminist" for "women" and how this shift in terminology creates troubling generalisations. She observes ten common features:

1. It is women who tell uncanny stories; for example, many stories are told by figures such as nurses, maids and grandmothers.[148]
2. Supernatural plots are related to the fears and anxieties of female protagonists.[149]
3. Women writers use the supernatural to deliver a subversive message.[150]
4. Women writers use terror, abnormality, even madness "to explore the edges, the limits of female sanity, and its relation to social control and propriety."[151]
5. Women writers clearly associate "the issue of ghost, ghostliness, and the supernatural with female exclusion."[152]
6. Women writers use the stories to imagine utopian solutions to earthly dilemmas.[153]
7. Women writers use supernatural stories to craft a new language for an experience that "lies beyond words."[154]
8. The stories often feature women "returning from the dead to correct social wrongs," often developing into a theme of "female revenge and support of women in difficulty."[155]
9. Women writers use supernatural fiction to re-appropriate the male gaze.[156]

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[146]Salmonson x, ix.

[147]Rosemary Jackson, Introduction to *What Did Miss Darrington See?* xviii.

[148]Ibid xix.

[149]Ibid.

[150]Ibid xx.

[151]Ibid.

[152]Ibid.

[153]Ibid xxi.

[154]Ibid.

[155]Ibid xxiii.

10. Male writers use external violence and horror for its own sake; women writers use violence and horror to convey "psychological and existential issues, and inner, psychic experiences".[157]

Discussion of each of these generic features will not be included in this introductory chapter, because dissecting each of these claims about the supernatural fiction written by women involves arguments that are addressed in Chapters Two, Three, and Four. This list is mentioned here, briefly, in the introduction because such a list helps to isolate and summarise the critical milieu against which this thesis positions itself.

In concluding this section, which has explored this extent to which the uncanny can be considered a unique generic mode for women writers, it is appropriate to posit, however tentatively, an answer to the question this thesis originally set out to consider: does the "female uncanny" exist as a distinctive female sub-genre? The answer is a qualified yes. Since earlier sections of this chapter defined the uncanny as a genre to the extent that the writing associated with that genre evokes an uncanny reading effect, and the uncanny reading effect is determined by that which readers bring to the story, then, yes, if readers with the above second-wave feminist reading positions wish to bring their aspects of female experience, subversion of patriarchy, or psychoanalytic themes as the material that *evokes* the haunting, they are free to define the female uncanny thus as a sub-genre.

However, the important corollary this thesis seeks to make room for is that female-authored uncanny fiction need not be approached with such expectations; the gaps in the writing need to remain open so that they can be filled in different ways by other readers who complete the gaps with different material. Since, genres or indeed sub-genres are in part defined by the expectations readers bring to them, and

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[156]Ibid.

[157]Ibid xxxi.

since those expectations can vary widely with the uncanny, the conclusion of this section returns to an adaptation of Royle's point: one can postulate that the female uncanny both *is* sub-genre and simultaneously s*its anomalous to* the sheer notion of genre, since it is largely defined by reading effects, which can vary widely, depending upon who the reader is and what critical perspectives they bring to their experience of the work.

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Part III – Commonalities between Wharton, Jackson and Oates

The uncanny fiction of Wharton, Jackson and Oates forms an interesting cross-section of work to justify a doctoral thesis, because taken together, their work spans the course of the twentieth century and illustrates shifts in how uncanny writing was approached. The twentieth century begins with the term uncanny largely referring to ghost stories, and although the "high-water mark"[158] for the ghost story is commonly regarded as the latter part of the nineteenth century, there is still prodigious activity in this area for the first thirty years of the century. In this regard, the ghost stories of Edith Wharton can be seen as reflecting the aesthetic of her time.

Then, after the ghost story genre begins to decline, the uncanny starts to take on broader manifestations of the weird, bizarre and surreal. A few of Shirley Jackson's stories include ghosts, but it is never clear whether the ghosts are real or the product of a mad mind. More generally, Jackson's stories are about a character's description of a reality under assault from either mad or cosmic forces that intrude in subtle, and at other times more overt, ways. The effect in Jackson is to suggest that

[158] Briggs 14.

the neat pattern, which frames the world to an ordered and logical grid and which reflects an underlying assumption of man's core benevolence and grace, has become ruptured in some way and instead betrays the chaos, distrust, and pure evil that has always lied just below the surface. Inanimate objects come to life, nice people turn nasty in a flash, and the desire to find a ghost, a witch or even the devil himself takes on the uncanny power to manifest these figures of wickedness. Characters struggle to recognise the most intimate aspects of their environment: children appear to parents as strangers, or worse, schizophrenics; spouses meet each other as if for the first time; and characters barely recognise their own home. In either case, the logic that holds characters' sense of themselves and their understanding of reality is revealed as insubstantial, evanescent, and capable of unwinding on a whim. This impermanence has implications that reach beyond the story of a character's or an author's sense of mental connection with the world; in Jackson, the capricious nature of identity has deeper implications which challenge the sense of conviction that coheres 1950's America's and man's sense of themselves. Jackson's work arrives on the heels of, and then later coincides with, the publication of *Weird Tales*, the most popular pulp fiction magazine in America from 1923-1954.[159] *Weird Tales* was founded specifically to address an appetite for stranger, more imaginative fiction.[160]

By the end of the century, in the work of Joyce Carol Oates, readers see how

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[159]This fact was received from http://www.vintagelibrary.com/WeirdTales/index.cfm, accessed on 21 May 2004.

[160]Other magazines titles reflect this general shift, but also demonstrate how the lines between movements overlap and therefore cannot be drawn into discrete periods. The magazines include titles such as *Wonder Stories* (1930-36); *Unusual Stories* (1934-35); *Tales of the Uncanny* (published in 1934, 1936 and 1938); *Thrilling Wonder Stories* (1936-55); *Eerie Tales* (published between 1937-41); *Unique Tales* (1937-38); *Uncanny Tales* (1939-40); *Uncanny Stories* (1941), *Strange Stories* (1939-41), *Strange Tales* (1946); *Strange* (1952). Many of the "strange" and "wonder" titles, including *Weird Tales,* include science fiction and fantasy stories about alternate worlds and are not specifically uncanny in the sense of emphasising a subjective, uneasy response to unreliable cognitive frames of references.

the uncanny shifts again and begins to merge with the grotesque. The grotesque suggests certain settings, as David Punter describes, where "feelings of degeneracy abound."[161] Punter continues, "the worlds portrayed are ones infested with psychic and social decay, and coloured with heightened hues of putrescence," where "violence, rape and breakdown are the key motifs."[162] The emergence of Oates's writing career is contemporaneous with the rise in horror, both in literature and in films that became increasingly graphic and visceral. Similar to the horror novels of Stephen King, and the film adaptations of his work, the foregrounding of gore, violence and victimisation in Oates often can be read as a metaphor for other socio-cultural subjects the author seeks to communicate a feeling of unease. While in Oates, the uncanny can be said to have a coarser, louder dimension, and thus, might be considered to have a more didactic aspect, the uncanny in Oates's hands still emanates from the subtle feeling both Wharton and Jackson share with her: a basic uncertainty about one's subjective response to shifts in the social, economic and political environment. Thus, viewed as a group, the work of Wharton, Jackson and Oates adumbrates an arc of how the uncanny both changes and stays the same throughout the twentieth century.

Their work is also interesting to compare because they each had conflicted relationships to feminism. Hermione Lee explains that Wharton would be "appalled to be called a feminist."[163] R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis describe how Wharton "had no interest or belief in institutional reform, and rather shied away from literary

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[161] David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day, Vol. 1* (London; New York: Longman, 1996) 2.

[162] Ibid 3.

[163] Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2007) 186.

women who did."[164] Similarly, according to Judy Oppenheimer, Jackson "was no feminist;" her work demonstrates that "she had no interest in other women's problems."[165] Oppenheimer adds that Jackson had "a definite disdain for the sort of young mother who would read her work in *Good Housekeeping* or *Women's Home Companion* and think she had found a soul mate."[166] Greg Johnson describes Oates as always having felt "sympathetic towards the women's movement, particularly its goal of economic equality," but at the same time, he describes how "she had resisted any suggestion that a woman artist should be engaged in feminist propaganda at the expense of her personal artistic vision."[167]

As well, these three writers form an interesting group to study because many of their stories, and in some instances the same story, can be read as delivering ambiguous messages on feminism in addition to other non-gender specific problems in their respective social contexts. Wharton's stories "The Lady's Maid's Bell" (1902), "Kerfol" (1916) and "Mr. Jones" (1928), for example, can all be read as providing harsh portraits of female repression at the hands of brutal patriarchal figures. However, these same stories can also be interpreted as anti-feminist, for the way Wharton highlights how much of the suffering results from weak female resolve. In both "The Lady's Maid's Bell" and "Kerfol" women bear some

[164]R.W.B. and Nancy Lewis observe that "[It is] misleading to suggest that Edith Wharton was a feminist, at least in the current understanding of the term. She had no interest or belief institutional reform, and rather shied away from literary women who did, like the English novelist May Sinclair. The latter, almost exactly Edith Wharton's age, was indeed an active supporter of women's suffrage as well as an intelligent propagandist for psychoanalysis." They go on to describe how Wharton regarded Sinclair's recent novel (Dec 1908) as "pantingly didactic." R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988) 8-9; hereafter referred to as "*Letters.*"

[165]Judy Oppenheimer, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1988) 145.

[166]Ibid.

[167]Johnson reports, "When a feminist journal, the *Women's Review of Books,* printed a dismissive review of her 1985 novel, *Solstice*, and called it a 'Sadistic Lesbian Novel,' Joyce wrote the editors that she 'did not in truth know that such a genre existed.' She concluded the letter by attacking the slanted, propagandistic responses of some feminists to literature by women: 'If I want to write a novel about sadistic lesbians, however, I will. This is my prerogative as a writer. [...] And if the (woman) writer is forced to choose between being faithful to what might be called her personal artistic vision and feminist 'politics,' she will always choose the former.'" Greg Johnson, *Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Dutton, 1998) 308- 309.

culpability for their misery: they each compromise their principles in marrying for money instead of for love as a way of fending off a downward shift in class.[168] In "Mr. Jones," Wharton is equally critical of the wavering sense of principles she detects in some of the "New Women" of the 1920s. Lady Jane is initially described as formerly having led an "independent and decided life," however, on coming to Bells, she forsakes her identity in forming a kind of marriage with the estate that cuts her off from her wider interests. Moreover, all three stories can be read as referring to still more. As will be elaborated in Chapter Two, "The Lady's Maid's Bell" makes references to Progressive era concerns about workplace safety as well as American's foreign policy doctrines; "Kerfol" conveys unease over America's reluctance to enter the First World war and the plight of war refugees, and the dictatorial control of the ghost in "Mr. Jones" can be interpreted as referencing, not patriarchy generally, but fears over the rise of Hitler and Mussolini in particular.

Similarly, some of Jackson's stories deliver a subversive message against patriarchy at moments, while at others, the same stories ask readers to look at the role women play in their own victimisation. For example, in *The Haunting of Hill House* and "A Day in the Jungle" the female protagonists "escape" the confines of the domestic, have adventures and gain a greater sense of freedom. However, from a post-feminist perspective, the female agency exhibited takes in a field so narrow, it is nearly risible. In *Hill House*, Eleanor brags how she is free to wear trousers for the

[168]Wharton portrays Laura Lee's family in *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) as one of those Hudson River families who suffer financially, and have shifted down in class, despite the purity of their blood lines, because they failed to make more beneficial marriages with the new money class. Wharton describes the Tarrants as one of the old families who "have run to seed." Edith Wharton, *Hudson River Bracketed* (London: Virago, 1986) 51. Lee identifies a frequent theme in Wharton relates to "how 'the power of money' determines 'social credit' and morality, how the old money is complicit with and infected by the influx of the new, how consumption is increasingly linked to display and publicity, and how the role of women is created by, and dependent on, the financial imperatives of this society" (199).

first time and how wearing red shoes just "goes with being Eleanor."[169] The agency Eleanor exhibits suggests more about women's susceptibility to commodity fetishism than anything about advancing any genuine development of the self through the cultivation of female power. The journey she makes to the house "was her positive action" but her actual destination was "vague, unimagined, perhaps non-existent."[170]

Jackson's readers meet a similarly "rebellious" woman in "A Day in the Jungle." "Elsa" has decided to leave her husband because she is tired of doing all the housework and spending every night alone while he is out with colleagues. But like Eleanor, her agency takes in an incredibly narrow range. For example, taking her suitcase down from its place in the closet, "was itself an act of departure;"[171] and when she arrives at her destination, a local hotel, she is ill-prepared. Equipped with only a few dollars and a black evening dress, she is forced to rely on the generosity of a man she meets in the dining room to pay for her dinner. Jackson reconfirms the status quo when she has Elsa's world regain solidity only when Elsa decides to meet up again with her husband. Where earlier Elsa previously contemplated "a hand to mouth existence" and the "unutterable emptiness of the street," upon catching sight of her husband waving tentatively from across the restaurant, Elsa's problems are resolved: "suddenly the world outside fell into place, and she waved back; he was so wonderfully safe and familiar [...] and then, she thinks back on her afternoon, [...]

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[169]Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* in *The Masterpieces of Shirley Jackson* (London: Robinson Publishing Ltd, 1996) 281. Originally published in 1959; hereafter referred to as "*Hill House.*"

[170]Ibid 199.

[171]Shirley Jackson, *Come Along with Me: Part of a Novel, Sixteen Stories, and Three Lectures,* ed. Stanley Edgar Hyman (London: Michael Joseph, 1969) 131; hereafter referred to as "*Come Along with Me.*"

and thought, 'I have been alone for so long.'"[172] As a feminist escape adventure, "A Day in the Jungle" is a disappointing read.

Jackson was actually taken to task by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) for the way that her writing was read as popularising traditional gender roles.[173] While such an assessment does not accurately describe all of Jackson's writing (some stories do relate themes of female protest), it is true for many of Jackson's stories, particularly those where uncanny madness is portrayed as the vehicle through which women can attain power. From a post-feminist point of view, it is troubling that too often in female gothic fiction or in uncanny fiction written by female authors like Jackson, madness is depicted as some kind of enlightened mental state where gender relations can be re-imagined. Instead, it might be more helpful if female power could be portrayed as more level-headed. According to Friedan, in lampooning her life as a mother and a housewife, Jackson gives too much prominence to the comic side of her experience and denies the other, real, life she led as an author of serious fiction.

While Friedan's assessment of Jackson is compelling, imposing the "expectation" that Jackson must necessarily make subversive statements against patriarchy limits her freedom as a woman writer. By narrowly insisting on such a view, a reader can be inhibited from seeing the other themes present in her work. For example, as will be discussed in Chapter Three, *Hill House* goes on to articulate

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[172]Ibid 142.

[173]In *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan writes, "When Shirley Jackson, who all her adult life has been an extremely capable writer, pursuing a craft far more demanding than bedmaking, and Jean Kerr, who is a playwright, and Phyllis McGinley, who is a poet, picture themselves as housewives, they may or may not overlook the housekeeper or maid who really makes the beds. But they implicitly deny the vision, and the satisfying hard work involved in their stories, poems, and plays. They deny the lives they lead, not as housewives, but as individuals." Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1963) 57.

views of unease about the pressures for conformity during the McCarthy era and "A Day in the Jungle" relates Jackson's fears about a post-nuclear world.

Like Wharton and Jackson before her, a debate surrounds Oates regarding the extent to which she is or is not a feminist, as if being able to fit her with that label is fundamental to the reading process. Gayle Green, for example, maintains that Oates is not a feminist because she did not participate in the women's revolution from 1963-1977; Brenda Daly maintains that Oates *is* feminist because she reveals how gender is socially-constructed; and Elaine Showalter, somewhat apologetically, maintains that Oates should be considered important to feminist criticism, even if the feminist evaluation of her work is somewhat delayed in its response.[174] It is my argument that this preoccupation with labelling Oates as feminist or anti-feminist obscures the other meanings her work suggests. As Bruce Michelson reminds readers, in Oates's particular case, "labels seem actually to have thwarted understanding [of her work]."[175]

In stories such as "The Doll" and "The Dream-catcher," for example, Oates relates the experiences of lonely career women, but also expresses concern about the state higher education in America and how arts programs, particularly are under threat. "The Sepulchre," is ostensibly a story about the delusions of a menopausal childless spinster; but if readers observe the characterisation of the woman's parents, the story can also be interpreted to be about the uncanniness of ageing, generally. "The Model" and "The Collector of Hearts" are gruesome stories of female

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[174]See Gayle Green, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and Tradition* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 1991) 2 and 33; Brenda Daly "Sexual Politics in Two Collections of Joyce Carol Oates's Short Fiction," *Studies in Short Fiction* 32 (1995): 83-95; and Elaine Showalter "My Friend. Joyce Carol Oates: An Intimate Portrait," *Ms.* (March 1986): 44-50, 40; also see "Women Who Write Are Women" *The New York Times Book Review* (December 16, 1984): 1, 31; and "Joyce Carol Oates's 'The Dead' and Feminist Criticism," *Faith of a (Woman) Writer,* ed. Alice Kessler-Harris and William McBrien (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 13-19.

[175]Bruce F. Michelson, Preface to *Joyce Carol Oates: An Annotated* Bibliography, ed. Francine Lercangée (New York: Garland, 1986) xix.

victimisation, but they are also stories about the commodification of human emotions. "The Hand-puppet" conveys unease about the lack of "total" fulfilment motherhood provides, but is also a frightening tale about the human horror of seeing one's child display early signs of childhood schizophrenia; as well it is a story about the claustrophobia of suburban life. Further, so many stories in Oates deal with the issue of child abuse, but as Chapter Four will argue, Oates positions this issue not as female-specific, but as a problem that concerns both sexes and society in general. Oates resists how female-centred subjects, like childbirth, are considered to be appropriate subject matter for female writers, while violence and adventure are taken to be "male" subjects.[176] Oates believes that "subject matter is clearly culture-determined, not gender-determined. And the imagination, in itself genderless, allows us all things."[177]

The grouping of Wharton, Jackson and Oates is also relevant to this study of female uncanny fiction because, individually, each of their processes for writing has variously been described in uncanny terms, as if the writers themselves were somehow supernormal vessels for the uncanny. In describing Wharton's writing method, R.W.B. Lewis, for example, relates how Wharton in effect marries the male-scientific mind, which imposes clearness, sharpness and structure on the work, with the "feminine-mystical" or as Wharton explains, the "*au-delà*, dream-side of things"[178] This legacy of associating the feminine with "natural magic" and the "mystical" perpetuates the idea that the feminine influence in writing is a kind of

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[176] In an article in *The New York Times Book Review*, "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?" (March 25, 1981), Oates complains how it is unfortunate that the themes of "War, rape, murder and the more colorful minor crimes evidently fall within the exclusive province of the male writer" (35).

[177] Oates, "(Woman) Writer: Theory and Practice," *(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities* (New York: Dutton, 1988) 25.

[178] Lewis explains that "the feminine-mystical mind" is a phrase borrowed from *le dit* William James, who (in an essay of the 1890s) contrasted it with "the scientific-academic mind." See Lewis's discussion in *Letters* 13.

uncanny manifestation itself and that the female author herself is uncanny. As Hermione Lee notes, when Wharton talked in old age about her writing methods, she said (as many novelists do), that her characters "arrived", "coming seemingly from nowhere", complete with their names. They "then began to speak within me with their own voices."[179] If readers selectively attend to only this observation about Wharton, they might conclude that Wharton acted merely as an unconscious medium, through which the narrative flowed onto the page.

A similar view can be derived about the nature of Jackson's writing process. According to Judy Oppenheimer,

> Shirley had what the Irish call "the sight," the ability to see beyond reality, to pierce the veil into other realms. Shirley was, in fact, psychic: she heard conversations, even music no else heard; she saw faces no else could see. She was acutely aware, from childhood, that there were other very different realities as true as the one her family and neighbors lived in, existing simultaneously, perhaps only a half-turn away.[180]

Jackson's husband, Stanley Hyman, perpetuates the notion that his wife had a rare antenna for the strange, suggesting that she was not fully conscious in her designs as an artist, as if she were turning out these wonderful, uncanny stories unaware of the material that motivated them. Their close friend, Walter Bernstein, recalls Stanley telling him that "a lot of the things Shirley wrote she had no real idea what they hell they meant. It was the closest thing to automatic writing. She would go to him for explanations—what does this really mean?"[181] According to Walter Bernstein, "Stanley himself was convinced that Shirley never understood 'The Lottery,' [by far, Jackson's most famous piece of writing]."[182]

Likewise, Alfred Kazin refers to Oates as a kind of "inspired Cassandra,"

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[179]Lee 175. Also see Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (1934; London: Constable, 1972) 200-201.

[180]Oppenheimer 18.

[181]Ibid 121.

[182]Ibid 130.

whose prolific capaciousness gives rise to the perception that her work is sent to her editor with little revision. Greg Johnson also describes how during a phase in her career in the 1970s when Oates was on sabbatical in London, she became heavily involved in transcendental meditation, and that thereafter, her work was even more prodigious.

These views of course need to be balanced by recognising the technique each author brings to her work. Categorisations on the nature of the artistic process and the vehicles for inspiration need to be left open. As Lee points out, many writers -- both male and female -- often describe how they plumb mystical depths of consciousness and emerge with material they claim simply "came" to them. Readers need to resist associating these mystical depths with the female. Unless this point of view is restrained, a risk exists to view Wharton, Jackson and Oates as uncanny manifestations themselves, in part or more so *because* they are female.

Instead, it is more helpful to recognise the ways each writer brings design, control and a method to each of their writing attempts. Hermoine Lee balances her earlier observation of Wharton by also carefully pointing out that, Wharton never lets her characters "walk away with the subject":

> [Wharton] knows "from the first exactly what is going to happen to every one of them." So she describes a double operation (which parallels the mixture of cool analysis and deep emotion in her fiction). The process of writing "takes place in the sheer edge of consciousness" but "is always illuminated by the full light of my critical attention."[183]

In *The Writing of Fiction* Wharton argues that while is it important to tap in to the mysterious side of life and the unconscious, true art only happens with the highest degree of design, control and selection of material.[184]

Jackson's eldest daughter describes her mother's approach to writing as a

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[183] Lee 175. Also see Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 205.

[184] Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (1924; New York: Octagon Books, 1977) 8 and 21.

likewise disciplined and methodical craft:

> I think she felt about her writing the way joggers feel—you've got to go do it, you can't be good at it if you don't do it, and if you do it you can be really good. And she was really really good, as long as she kept doing it. ... Her approach to writing was practical, not mystical; she went at it like a dancer warming up at the bar.[185]

As the chapter on Jackson will describe, her persona as a writer was structured consciously as an accommodation to her social milieu. The repressive atmosphere of the McCarthy era encouraged her to assume the pose of a "witch," almost as a rebellious gesture against the communist witch-hunts of the time and the Abstract Expressionist School in American art inspired her to act as if her work was the product of a kind of automatism. That Jackson may have assumed these poses does not mean that a conscious design is absent from her work. She uses the supernatural, both in the form of specific tropes in her work and in her persona as a writer, as "a convenient shorthand statement" to write about subjects in the world she found disturbing.[186]

And by the time Oates is writing, the notion of a "female" way of writing had been so widely circulated, she uses many of the assumptions she knows readers bring to her work actively to unravel those very preconceptions. One of the expectations that critics and readers in her social milieu have imposed on her work is that, as a woman writer, Joyce Carol Oates's fiction must have something particular to say about female experience, and that her characters must supply positive feminist role models. This is an expectation Oates fiercely resists, and critics looking for these themes in every instance of her work are disappointed. Oates takes the pose of

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[185]Oppenheimer 45.

[186]Ibid 125.

"the female" as a vehicle to express her artistic design by consciously exploding the bounds of the female. Very like Emily Dickinson in the poem "My Cocoon Tightens,"[187] Oates feels the strictures of her female identity and uses it as a device to explode the meaning its label is meant to contain so that she could be free to convey points that are beyond gender. Similar to Dickinson, Oates labours to achieve a kind of invisibility through her writing. Throughout her criticism and her literary work the concept of invisibility recurs, even while she is emphasising the most visceral aspects of existence of being a woman.

In her essay on the status of the woman writer and whether a distinctive female voice exists, "(Woman) Writer: Theory and Practice," Oates explains how the desire to make "a connection between private emotion and the impulse for art" is essentially a genderless activity, yet it is the argument of this thesis that Oates often exaggerates her pose as a woman writer of the grotesque ironically to distance herself from the tendency her audience has to see her as a woman writer.[188] This idea is captured best in a poem she wrote for the *Bennington Review* in 1984:

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My Cocoon tightens – Colors teaze –
I'm feeling for the Air –
A dim capacity for Wings
Demeans the Dress I wear –

A power of Butterfly must be –
The Aptitude to fly
Meadows of Majesty implies
And easy Sweeps of Sky –

So I must baffle at the Hint
And cipher at the Sign
And make much blunder, if at last
I take the clue divine –

Emily Dickinson, c.1866

[188] Oates once said that "A woman who writes is a writer by her own definition; but she is a woman writer by others' definitions." "(Woman) Writer: Theory and Practice" 27.

"The Luxury of Being Despised"

The sneering shout in the street, the anatomical female
stretched wide across the billboard: St. Paul's contempt.

Montaigne instructs us that poetry belongs to women --
a wanton and subtle art, ornate and verbose,
all pleasure
and all show: like themselves.
And Freud, that women have little sense of justice.
And De Kooning, in these angry swaths of paint:
monster-mother women!

The fiery sightless eye which is your own.
The booming breasts, the maniac wink.
All is heat, fecundity, secret seeping blood.
Flesh is here: nor are we out of it.

And yet what bliss, to be so despised:
the closed thighs all muscle,
the Church fathers' contempt,
the Protestant chill, what freedom
in possessing no souls! --
what strange delight.

The angry swaths of flesh which are your own.
The blank stare,
the cartoon heart.
Virginity a mallet.
Mad grin worn like a bonnet.

In "(Woman) Writer," Oates glosses the poem by saying that it is "Better to be despised, than to be ignored; or damned with condescending praise. There is luxury after all in being despised if it frees energy away from the self and into the work; away from the distractions of visibility and into the permanence of art."[189] Writing as a woman provides Oates with an artistic freedom to explore the full limits of metaphor – either self-aware (or at least deeply convinced) that the world is going to hate women writers, she luxuriates in the role. Here the aberrant, overstated posture

[189]Joyce Carol Oates, "(Woman) Writer: Theory and Practice," *(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities* (New York: Dutton, 1988) 131.

allows the writer to say what she wants to say without her message being screened on reception by her gender.

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Part IV – Conclusion

The above discussion has tried to demonstrate how self-conscious ways of thinking about female sub-genres and their functional purposes can be mapped as evolving within a specific cultural and historical context within feminist literary history itself. Thus, the idea that uncanny writing by women operates as a functional mode can be historicised and its authority can be de-centred. While female-experience and feminist criteria together with psychoanalytic perspectives provide engaging interpretative suggestions, one is reminded that the express point of the uncanny is that it provides an experience that eludes fixed explanations. Protagonists and readers alike are meant to feel adrift, without an explicating theory in order for the uncanny effect to be experienced. Ready explanations or theories chase away its effect. Rita Felski discusses the implications of such ready theories: "attempts to define literary forms and structures in gender-specific terms [...] are not only politically counter-productive for feminism, but appear inappropriately abstract, attempting to ground a textual theory in ideologically shaped preconceptions about gender difference, while paying little attention to the texts that women were actually reading and writing."[190]

To redress this interpretative imbalance, the chapters in this thesis dealing

[190] Felski 42-43.

with Wharton, Jackson and Oates will try to place each writer in her particular social, cultural and historical context and thereby examine the non-gender specific problems the texts reference. Rather than focussing selectively on how the individual writers write as women, and what those patterns suggest about feminist politics, I will also look at how the women writers critique wider socio-political concerns and how they contribute to the aesthetic development of the genre. I agree with feminist critics such as Rosemary Jackson, who points out that works of fiction are "never free,"[191] but I also agree with later critics, such as Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt, that feminist criticism itself is never value free.[192] The argument of this thesis maintains that it is appropriate to update certain second-wave feminist reading positions by being open to the fact that female writers utilise the devices of the uncanny to make statements about their societies, not limited to representations of female experience, subversive expressions against patriarchy or narrowly-defined psychoanalytic readings.

By historicising the stories, I hope to demonstrate how the uncanny work of these three authors offer statements about particular social trends and specific historical events and reveal the writers' efforts to grapple with that which was experienced by many other people of their time as incongruous, disruptive and un-assimilated. In pursuing this approach, I am conscious that historicised critical approaches are not without their own problems. The vulnerability of my critical perspective is similar to the problems other historicists critics encounter. For example, in her 1985 historicised study of American popular fiction Jane Tompkins confesses to a shortcoming in the historicising approach:

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[191] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy* 3.

[192] Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt, *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985) xvi.

> any reconstruction of 'context' is as much determined by the attitudes and values of the interpreter as is the explication of literary works; my reading of the historical materials as well as the textual analyses I offer grow directly from the circumstances, interests, and aims that have constituted me as a literary critic. If I have from time to time accused other critics of "presentist" bias, the same charge can be levelled against my own assumptions, which are of course no more free than their from the constraints of a particular historical situation.[193]

My own method has the same shortcomings; the choices I make in my identification of certain features in the authors' contexts are invariably influenced by own social-historical positioning. I do feel strongly, however, that the time is appropriate to offer the post-feminist historicised approach as a balance to certain second-wave feminist readings of women's writing of the uncanny, which up to this point in feminist literary criticism have predominated. As a post-feminist historicist, I am aware that I occupy what Stanley Fish calls a specific "interpretative community."[194] It is important to recognise that the meanings that are derived when these works of uncanny fiction are consumed at the current social-cultural moment can be very different to that which existed ten to forty to ninety years ago when the works were produced or indeed ten years ago when the texts were analysed by different feminist "interpretative communities."

By focussing on the reader's response, I do not mean to emphasise my own subjective reaction to the text, but rather will be arguing for the freedom of what Roland Barthes calls the *writerly text* to exist and signify in its myriad ways.

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[193]Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) xiii.

[194]Newton and Rosenfelt explain how the theories of "interpretative communities" developed by Stanley Fish can be applied to develop new understandings of the cultural function of a text. "Specific interpretative communities will share common readings of the same text but different interpretative communities, with different experiences and different understandings of aesthetic and cultural codes, will produce widely different meanings. ... Some readers in different historical situations will produce different versions of the text, each with its own political effect, the political function of a text will change along with the goals and strategies of a reader in different historical situations. See Newton and Rosenfelt, xxiv. Also see Stanley Fish, *"Is There a Text in This Class?": The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Barthes defines the *readerly te*xt as the text where polysemy is constrained by the set of codes the reader expects to find in a text; this can be particularly true in the case of uncanny stories, which, as this chapter has shown, can be viewed as generic texts. In the *writerly text*, by contrast, the reader is encouraged to suspend his or her own expectations about what will be found in the text, and only in that way, can the reader be invited into the writer's world where generic tropes and conventions are not given stock interpretations but are open to endless signification.[195]

In my analysis of Wharton, Jackson and Oates, I have demonstrated how certain second-wave feminist critics -- emphasising female experience themes, subversion of patriarchy, or psychoanalytic reading – have nearly established these tools as textual themes, thereby limiting, as Barthes explains, the other connotations of the text and reducing the activity of reading to be one of passive and unthinking consumption. As Wolfgang Iser explains in his review of Henry James's short story, "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896), "so long as the critic's mind is fixed on the hidden meaning, he is incapable … of seeing anything."[196] Texts do not always offer "detachable meanings,"[197] but rather are ultimately read unscientifically, because the text does not emerge only with the writer or the reader, but imperfectly through a convergence of the two. In his essay on the reading process, Iser discusses how the "game of imagination" is important, because if the reader were given the whole story, the work would not hold the reader's interest,[198] much less, evoke an uncanny response from the reader. This idea is similar to the criticism Hélène

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[195] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, tr. Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1975) 4-5. Originally published in 1970 in Paris by Editions du Seuil.

[196] Wolfgang Iser, "Partial Art – Total Interpretation: Henry James, 'The Figure in the Carpet,' in Place of an Introduction," *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976) 6.

[197] Ibid 7.

[198] Iser, "A reading process" 212-213.

Cixous levels at Freud, when she explains how when psychoanalytic methods are "applied too rigidly and scientifically, the new element which should have remained hidden [becomes] too exposed" and the uncanny effect vanishes.[199] I submit that many of the critical perspectives associated with second-wave literary criticism have created the same sense of scientism. I will argue that while these perspectives are illuminating, they should be resisted as all encompassing because if repressed desires or sexual politics were too easy to neatly diagram, there would be no disorienting effect; instead, readers can be left with the impression that the writing is more didactic than truly uncanny. The uncanny depends on the effect of disorientation. As Freud's predecessor Ernst Jentsch explains, "It is only when one deliberately removes such a problem [or text] from the usual way of looking at it ... that a particular feeling of uncertainty [necessary to the uncanny] ... presents itself."[200]

When the reader approaches the text from a certain perspective, which in this dissertation will be the post-feminist perspective, the reader gauges the degree to which a text seems to mirror second-wave feminist theories. But at the same time, in the process of engaging with the text through the act of reading, the reader is forced to reveal the existence of moments which do not comply with such reading positions. In an active process, the reader is encouraged to disregard given expectations or pre-intentions about the text so that such expectations lay themselves open to modification. Iser explains that this process also involves recollections, so that what has already been read and digested as having complied with one set of pre-intentions, can be free to be re-interpreted against a different background, that serves as a host to previously unforeseen meanings.

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[199] Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms" 533.

[200] Jentsch 9.

Iser discusses the tendency readers have for searching for the pattern that exists in a particular work. The reader will strive to fit everything into this consistent pattern. However, he points out that when we rely on these patterns too consistently, we get into the slippery ground of "illusions."[201] However, this illusion-building process is necessary because without it, the unfamiliar world of the text would remain unfamiliar. Nevertheless, the goal of the truly creative reading of an uncanny text is one which encourages the integration or at least engagement with the "alien associations"[202] which do not fit into our "*gestalt*."[203]

In the dissertation to follow, I will be employing the steps Iser recommends in my own reading process. I will observe the areas where second-wave feminist approaches shed light on "familiar" meanings in the uncanny texts, but then I will lay aside the *gestalt* these feminist reading perspectives cultivate, so that I can be open to the meanings in the text that are unfamiliar, and in the process, arrive at the "something absolutely new"[204] that Hélène Cixous explains is the uncanny *effect* in operation. In this way, the meaning configured by the reading of the uncanny text acknowledges the crucial ingredient of the ultimately indeterminate nature of the text.

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[201] Ibid 220.

[202] Ibid.

[203] Ibid 219.

[204] Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms" 531.

As the author of over 40 volumes of work -- including 19 novels as well as books of poetry, short stories, travel writing, literary criticism, landscape architecture and interior design -- Edith Wharton had a wide-ranging and productive career that began just before the turn of the nineteenth century and continued through to 1937. Wharton's work offers unique perspectives on a period that saw immense changes in America, particularly as the country's "nouveau colonial aristocracy" had begun to lose influence in the face of massive waves of immigration and the rise of a post-industrial, new wealthy class.[205]

Throughout her work Wharton illustrates how processing all the changes in value systems was not always easy: the rigid codes of her youth in the late nineteenth century, emphasising prescribed social, cultural and economic hierarchies, often conflicted with ascendant notions of democracy and more liberal attitudes toward social mobility, interpersonal relationships and business ethics. Newland Archer's struggle throughout *The Age of Innocence* (1921), for example, is to recognise that there were parts of the old order that were unnecessarily constricting and had persisted beyond their usefulness; but, equally some of the new values which replaced them were to be viewed sceptically, as much about the new was regarded as thin and un-sustaining. By the novel's end, however, after he has made several difficult choices and worked through personal hardship, Archer achieves the hard-won perspective that some of the traditions handed down from previous generations were healthy for the way they promoted continuity, and, as in the case of the institution of marriage, for example, for the way they kept family

[205]Andrew Levy, *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 62.

structures together and, in turn, facilitated a certain cohesiveness in society; but likewise, he notes there was "good in the new order too," people were more flexible and tolerant.[206]

Wharton's objective is to demonstrate how this process of determining that which is useful about the old and the new is individual, uncomfortable, and often tragic; however the process of struggling with life's conundrums is ultimately the only route to true maturity and survival. Well-versed in the theories of Darwin and Spencer, Wharton understood the need for adapting to the new; yet, she also felt estranged from the America of her time and its enthusiasm for "fads and fetishes" as well as expedient answers to spiritual questions.[207] She maintained that the only way to guard against being the unconscious victim of trends was to expose the "half-gods" for what they were, and to be "the captain of one's soul."[208]

Wharton's work is particularly relevant to a study of the uncanny because, as was discussed in Chapter One, the uncanny often relates to tales of unease, and in particular, to stories about a subject's feeling of bewilderment as he or she struggles to assimilate the impact of shifts in society's values. The old or familiar is made

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[206]Edith Wharton, *the Age of Innocence* (1921; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) 341. Additionally, in *A Backward Glance*, Wharton credits the old order with "upholding two standards of importance in any community, that of education and good manners, and of scrupulous probity in business and private affairs" (21). Of the latter, Wharton mentions how the "severest social penalties" were inflicted on "whoever lapsed from them" (22). Steve Fraser provides an interesting discussion of how Julius Beaufort (the villain of *The Age of Innocence)* suffers the most abject social ostracism for his misconduct on Wall Street; however, a generation later his daughter is accepted into high society again and the memory of his impropriety is summarily forgotten, because by then "Society is living in a House of Mirth." Steve Fraser, *Wall Street: A Cultural History* (London, Faber and Faber, 2005) 209. The ease with which the new generation assimilates financial wrongdoings figures as a theme in several ghost stories as this chapter will go on to discuss.

[207] In *The Age of Innocence* Wharton writes of the new generation, "People nowadays were too busy – busy with reforms and 'movements,' with fads and fetishes – to bother much about their neighbors." Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (1921; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) 345. In a letter to Bernard Berenson, she expresses frustration at America's preference for "short cuts & providential improvisations." EW to Bernard Berenson, June 26, 1918, I Tatti, qtd in Lee 494.

[208] Wharton was an avid reader of Ralph Waldo Emerson and she used his idea (that "when the half-gods depart, the gods arrive") as the background for her Vance Weston novels, *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. With respect to *The Gods Arrive*, Wharton explains, "It is my ambition to portray the half-gods that are worshipped by all people – but especially the creative artist – the mistakes, the sufferings, the glimpses of glory, that go into the painful perfecting of a human spirit," Eleanor Carroll, "Edith Wharton," *The Delineator,* January 1932, Vol. 120, 4, qtd in Lee 674.

strange in the face of the new. Often that which is "old" continues to haunt and lay claim over the personality in inappropriate ways, but equally, an unexamined adoption of the new can eclipse one's inner sense of truth and mutate into a new phantom that competes with one's inner reserves.

Chapter One's definition of the uncanny as the double, the "me" and "not me," is also especially apposite to Wharton.[209] She always identified herself as American, but she often felt antagonistic toward America and her fellow Americans. She spent part of her childhood travelling throughout Europe with her parents; in maturity she travelled back and forth between Europe and America; she spoke five different languages, and eventually, she settled in France for the remaining twenty five years of her life. On one of her returns to America, Wharton wrote to Sara Norton, who shared a similar expatriate experience, "*We* are none of us Americans, we don't think or feel as Americans do, we are the wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house, the *déplacé* & useless class on earth!" She continues, "I feel in America as you say you do in England – out of sympathy with everything."[210] Remarks like these reveal how Wharton felt as much in flux between two continents as she did between two value systems. And yet, as the author of many novels and stories about America, she saw herself as one of its interpreters, a role Henry James encouraged her in for her ability to express what it meant to be "American."[211] Her class and literary accomplishments provided her with access to a cultured group of America's finest politicians, diplomats, scholars and writers, some of whom she was

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[209]The idea that the uncanny relates to the "me" and "not me" was discussed in Chapter One (page 33). Also see Royle 6 and 16. And Todd 51-70.

[210] EW to Sara Norton June 5, 1903, *Letters* 53.

[211] Henry James to EW, August 17, 1902, 34, qtd in Lee 109.

able to count as lifelong friends.[212] Her extensive reading and social connections gave her continuing perspectives on America that, in the end, strengthened more than weakened her ties with her home country.

Many of Wharton's readers and reviewers commonly misidentify her principal concerns as relating to romance, wealth and class. While much of her writing certainly depicts marriages and affairs within America's upper class, a view exists in Wharton scholarship that difficult marriages in her fiction often serve as metaphors for that which Wharton felt uneasy about in modern America.[213] Also, there is a view that her feeling of "not being quite 'at-home' in the world" intensified following the collapse of traditional structures after the First World War.[214] In the following chapter, I will demonstrate how Wharton's unease over the shift in values was a subject she engaged with from the very start of her career at the turn of the century. Wharton communicates this unease in *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (hereafter referred to as "*Ghosts*"), a volume collected and published posthumously in 1937, though individual stories were published between 1902 and 1936.[215] In her

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[212]Edith Wharton's circle included figures such as President Theodore Roosevelt; Walter Berry, President of The American Chamber of Commerce in Paris; Gaillard Lapsley, an American scholar of history at Oxford; W. Morton Fullerton, an American journalist in the Paris office of the *London Times*; Bernard Berenson, an American art scholar and dealer of Lithuanian background who was based in Tuscany; as well as American writers such as Henry James, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

[213]Peter L. Hays notes how marriage served as the "synecdoche for what was wrong with [American] culture." See Peter L. Hays, "Undine is US: Wharton's Attack on American Greed," *Études Anglaises* 48.1 (Jan-Mar 1994): 22-31, 23.

[214]Julie Olin-Ammentorp, "'Not Precisely War Stories': Edith Wharton's Short Fiction from the Great War," *Studies in American Fiction* 23.2 (Autumn 1995): 153-171, 170. Also in *A Backward Glance,* Wharton discusses how the "successive upheavals which culminated in the catastrophe of 1914 had 'cut all likeness from the name' of my old New York." (6).

[215] Wharton wrote two uncanny stories that were not included in *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton,* "After Holbein" and "The Moving Finger." "After Holbein" is story about Anson Warley, an ageing man who grows delusional about his capacity to maintain a busy social schedule and who spends an evening, by uncanny coincidence, with Evelina Jaspar, an older woman in his set who has already crossed the line into full senility; the spirits of both of characters are buoyed by the presence of imaginary dinner guests. "After Holbein" is uncanny for the way it deals with the subjects of doubles, split personalities, the idea of meeting a future version of one's self and madness. It is also uncanny for the way it renders aspects of the ageing process as uncanny, and shares this theme in common with "The Moving Finger." Both stories anticipate themes in Shirley Jackson and Joyce Carol Oates, as will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four. "The Moving Finger" relates the story of a grieving man who has his deceased wife's portrait altered, so that she ages with him, but it

ghost stories, readers see brutalising husbands, pallid oppressed wives and lonely old maids as disquieted for reasons that are not always obvious on an initial, cursory reading. Closer examination of the details of the characters' lives provides clues to socio-historical references that suggest an unsettled, tentative stance toward more general cultural trends.

In terms of an outline, this chapter will be divided into four parts. Part One will refer to how the uncanny in the twentieth century began with ghost stories and will show how Wharton incorporates the narrative frames of the genre into her work. This section will discuss how Wharton turned to ghost stories, in part, as a response and reaction to broader shifts in her artistic and publishing atmosphere. Part One will include a discussion of her story "The Eyes" (1910), as one of her finest statements about the value of staying attentive to one's "inner life." The "inner life" is one's inner sense of truth, which serves both as an emotional line of defence against the "welter of change," and as the inner organ that equips one to adapt successfully and assimilate positive changes.[216]

Part Two will discuss Wharton's relationship to feminism. Chapter One has already mentioned how different stories, and in some instances the same story, can also be read as delivering ambiguous messages on feminism. Part Two of this chapter will then move on to an examination of the notion of female writing, as represented in "Pomegranate Seed" (1928), and will conclude with some observations on how Wharton summarised her own method.

Part Three will demonstrate how Wharton's ghost stories mirror political and

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also refers to the uncanny dimensions of the artistic process: the portrait painter in creating his work of art, mysteriously extracts the woman's essence in his rendering of her, such that, Pygmalion-like, he is able to substitute his will for hers and impute magical powers into the painting, which cause her husband to die prematurely, which in turn, reunites the painter with his beloved portrait.

[216] Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 5.

social concerns from the start of the twentieth century up until just before the beginning of the First World War. As with Jackson and to some extent Oates, Wharton presented a pose to the public that was outwardly apolitical; however, by taking a closer look at the metaphors Wharton uses, readers can detect oblique references to particular social and political concerns. Specific comment will be devoted to how some of her ghost stories adumbrate the ideas contained in two influential books, Walter Lippmann's *Drift and Mastery* (1914) and *Problems of Power* (1913) by her lover, William Morton Fullerton. Both of these books discuss the challenges associated with emerging notions of "democracy" and the rise of a newly wealthy class of bankers and corporate leaders in America. In stories such as "The Lady's Maid's Bell" (1902), "Afterward" (1909) and "The Triumph of Night" (1914), Wharton addresses the issue of collusive business practices, the rise of corporate trusts, safety in the workplace, new forms of property ownership and the introduction of a new class of worker: the professional manager; all of these were contentious issues during the Progressive Era in America. In the area of international affairs, "The Lady's Maid's Bell" also references America's application of the Monroe Doctrine and the Open Door policy.[217] As well, Part Three will discuss how these stories convey unease over immigration trends, Christian Fundamentalism and the themes of moral evasion and a neglected "inner life."

Part Four will address the social, cultural and political issues referred to in her uncanny fiction completed during and after the war. Stories such as "Kerfol"

[217] The Monroe Doctrine was a doctrine that committed the U.S. to pursuing its own commercial and strategic interests in the Western Hemisphere by excluding European influence in the region. The Open Door policy was the policy which promoted U.S. economic interests in China and similarly sought to reduce the influence of international powers like Japan and Britain, France and Italy.

(1916) and "Miss Mary Pask" (1925) deal with Wharton's unease over the effects of the war, in particular America's reluctance to enter the war, the plight of refugees, and America's isolationist attitude after the war. In "Bewitched" (1925) Wharton refers to America's Puritan past while at the same time exploring contemporary anxieties associated with the Red Scare after the war, nativism, and the debates over eugenics. In "Mr Jones" (1928) Wharton conveys unease over Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany. "The Looking Glass" (1935) provides an uncomfortable portrait of how certain members of the newly wealthy class continued to lead frivolous, narcissistic lifestyles during the Depression while those left behind by "progress" perished at the hands of market forces. As well, "The Looking Glass" describes how the allure of fads and occultism contributed to weak wills and mindsets. And in "All Souls"' (1937) Wharton conveys unease over immigration in America and the way changing demographics contributed to the decline in power members of her class could command.

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Part I – Wharton, the Ghost Story and a Discussion of "The Eyes"

As mentioned in Chapter One, in the Preface to her 1937 collection of ghost stories, Edith Wharton explains that to tell a good ghost story, one needs the ability to be a "ghost feeler," which she defines as having the sensitivity to "invisible currents of being in certain places and at certain hours".[218] This definition is important because it helps readers understand the value of historicising her ghost stories. Wharton regarded herself as a writer, so imbricated in her social and historical context and yet

[218]Wharton, Preface to *Ghosts* 7.

detached as a social observer and interpreter of its history and trends, that she saw herself as having just such a sensitivity to the invisible currents of certain places (America and Europe) at certain hours (the first four decades of the twentieth century). This sensitivity was developed from her dedication to reading books about history, culture as well as science, along with her exposure and participation in intellectual circles; it did not stem from some kind of uncanny power associated with her sex or gender.

Wharton explains that when she first began to read, and then to write ghost stories, she saw herself as communing with a sense of unease about the trends in her world, an unease that was similarly shared by segments of her audience: "I was conscious of a common medium between myself and my readers, of their meeting me halfway among the primeval shadows, and filling in the gaps in my narrative with sensations and divinations akin to my own."[219] Wharton is careful not to reveal too overtly what these primeval shadows actually represented. She attributes the fear in a tale, not to some exogenous supernatural event, but rather to a vague feeling of unease inside the mind of the teller of the tale, which the reader might share. To Wharton, the successful ghost story is able to convey that something is not quite right about the world, or, as she ends her Preface with a reference to Hamlet, the instinct that there is something strange afoot in the world that is "undreamt of in the philosophy of Horatio."[220]

Wharton was disturbed by the way so much of the richness of human experience, and understandings of "character," both in fiction and in the real world, were being reduced to simple explanations and panaceas that elided the struggle and perseverance involved in reconciling incongruous aspects of material existence. She

[219]Ibid 8.

[220]Ibid 11.

was troubled by the way psychoanalysts, jazz enthusiasts and modernist artists confidently expressed that they had found a "new" way to view the world. She distrusted the rush to embrace the theories of modernism and Freudianism along with spiritual movements in occultism, evangelicalism and mind-cure movements. She saw individuals forsaking the rewarding experience of struggling with the questions associated with modern life, and thereby forgoing the opportunity to develop true character and their own power to discriminate and resist elements in mass culture that were inimical to the cultivation of what she referred to as the "inner life."[221]

Ghost stories helped readers return to this inner life by strengthening their abilities to figure things out for themselves. She saw writing them as a way to preserve the "ghost instinct," that might help rescue a generation "for whom everything which used to nourish the imagination because it had to be won by effort, and then slowly assimilated, is now served up cooked, seasoned and chopped into little bits."[222] Ghost stories help to cultivate creative faculties and lengthen attention spans because they provide a medium for grappling with that which seems anomalous, uneasy or difficult to reconcile about modern living. They embody for Wharton a space to hold ambivalent feelings toward the changes she witnessed around her, an ambivalence she believed some of readers also felt.

One of the challenges that concerns Wharton most is the implication for the

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[221]In a letter to Edward Sheldon Wharton discusses how, in addition to finishing *The Buccaneers,* she wanted to write more stories but that "the world is so changed, and readers and reviewers belong to such a new breed, that I feel in despair at the lack of any interest or understanding in the inner life, which was the material of novelists in my day." EW to Edward Sheldon, November 2, 1936, Lilly Library, qtd in Bauer xi. Also Wharton once explained how the concept of an "inner life" was at the centre of her own philosophy on life: "I believe I know the only cure, which is to make one's center of life in one's self, not selfishly or excludingly, but with a kind of unassailable serenity – to decorate one's inner house so richly that one is content there, glad to welcome anyone who wants to come and stay, but happy all the same when one is inevitably alone" qtd in Jill M. Kress, *The Figure of Consciousness: William James, Henry James and Edith Wharton* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 131.

[222]Wharton, Preface to *Ghosts* 8-9.

writer of the influence of popular tastes and new trends in high-brow culture on standards in publishing. Again in the Preface, Wharton explains that one of her biggest fears is that not only are the sensibilities of her potential audience under threat, more worrying is that the desire for expedient answers to life's conundrums will prove lethal to "ghost instinct" in writers: "What is to be feared is that these seers [writers] should fail; for frailer than the ghost is the wand of his evoker, and more easily to be broken in the hard grind of modern speeding-up."[223]

This reference to her writerly environment applies not only to authors of ghost stories, but also to her sense of what motivated good literature in general, and how that was at odds with more commercial forces in the promotion of both popular and higher-brow fiction nascent in her time. In her novel, *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), she describes the struggle of a similarly bewildered author who, on producing a 45,000-word manuscript for his publisher, is rebuffed by the comment that modern readers consume fiction like they consume goods and that they want elephantine novels like *Ulysses* (1922) or *American Tragedy* (1925): "When readers have paid their money they like to sit down to a square meal. An oyster cocktail won't satisfy 'em. They want their money's worth; and that's at least a hundred thousand [words]."[224] Ghost stories provided Wharton with the chance to resist this trend by writing shorter, more rarefied pieces of fiction in which she had an opportunity to convey her unease over a particular "inner life" struggle or her disquiet over an external event in her social-historical context.

Wharton faced genuine competitive threats from writers of popular fiction such as Carl Van Vechten, author of *Nigger Heaven* (1926), whose success she felt, was due to the disingenuous way he popularised stereotypes already circulating

[223]Ibid 9.

[224]Wharton, *Hudson River Bracketed* 379.

about that the black community's presumed sensuality.[225] She also faced pressure from higher-brow, modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Despite the very great differences in styles between writers of popular fiction and more literary writers, Wharton complained that in both styles, the emphasis in the way the books were marketed was on the cult of the personality of the author rather than on the brilliance of the fiction. Furthermore, to her mind, works like *Ulysses*, with its emphasis on the encyclopaedic inclusion of personal details such as Bloom's "rising smell" fell short of what she hoped writers would aspire to in rendering "character." She regarded these books as "me books," both in terms of their subject matter and the way publishers relied on the identity of the author; they were not true fiction.[226]

She did not disregard the work of all writers associated with Modernism. She was impressed with the work of Joseph Conrad and Marcel Proust, whom she admired for their creation of memorable characters. However, by and large, she felt that modernist techniques -- such as shifting consciousness and the emphasis on the fractured self -- were faddish theories that were "amorphous and agglutinative."[227] She joked with Henry James in 1915 that their letters were nearly the only "good

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[225] See Dale Bauer's discussion of Wharton's view on Van Vechten. Dale Bauer, *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) 53-55.

[226] In *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) she complains about the "'now-that-it-can-be-told school' (as someone has named it)" and what she saw as "dirt-for-dirt's sake, from which no real work of art has ever sprung" (65). She was concerned that "laborious monuments of schoolboy pornography are not mistaken for works of genius" (66). In a letter to Bernard Berenson, Wharton categorises *Ulysses* in the following way: "—It's a turgid welter of pornography (the rudest schoolboy kind) & unformed & unimportant drivel ..." Wharton explains that the novel has a feeling of not enough authorial direction and moulding in the raw material that Joyce portrays: "... until the raw ingredients of the pudding *make* a pudding, I shall never believe that the raw material of sensation & thought can make a work of art without the cook's intervening." And then adds, "The same applies to Eliot." EW to Bernard Berenson, January 6, 1923, *Letters* 461. She was similarly unimpressed with the work of William Faulkner; after reading Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, she stated to Edward Sheldon, "I have been much interested and amused, and am more than ever determined to write my article 'Wuthering Depths' on the new school in fiction." EW to Edward Sheldon, June 8, 1931, Beinecke, qtd in Frederick Wegener, *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 174.

[227] Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction" (1934), *Edith Wharton: the Uncollected Critical Writings,* ed. Frederick Wegener, 172. Also see, *The Writing of Fiction*, where she criticises the "stream of consciousness" method because "in the world of normal men life is conducted ... on fairly coherent and selective lines" (12-13). Wharton's views in this area are also discussed by Lee 621.

literature ... that the war has produced."[228] She felt that artists who bowed to commercial influences or the "Wanamaker touch" in publishing were not true artists and instead resembled the group of artists Vance Weston is initially impressed with in *Hudson River Bracketed,* who meet regularly in a place called "The Cocoanut Café" and write volumes of poetry called "*Voodoo.*"[229] She believed that the contemporary writer's "distrust of technique and the fear of being unoriginal ... [were] in truth leading to pure anarchy in fiction."[230]

In "Tendencies in Modern Fiction" she describes how the war had resulted in a kind of "moral and intellectual destruction" which had "far-reaching consequences," in the way that it shattered traditional culture.[231] She was disappointed to see how modernist theories seemed to concentrate purely on creating something "new" by annihilating what preceded them.[232] Instead, she maintains that "the accumulated leaf-mould of tradition" -- her style of writing and the kinds of characters she created -- needed to be preserved because such a method provided an essential host for the nurture of "new growths of art, whether or not those who cultivate them are aware of it."[233] Her ghost stories continue the tradition of writers who preceded her and whom she respected, writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Joseph Sheridan LeFanu and Robert Louis Stevenson. She also saw them as sitting alongside other writers in her contemporary environment whom she admired for the way they shared the "ghost instinct," writers

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[228]Lyall H Powers, ed. *Henry James and Edith Wharton: Letters: 1900-1915* (New York: Scribner's, 1990) 335.

[229]In a letter to William Crary Brownell, Wharton discusses "that Wanamaker Touch that seems essential to the booming of fiction nowadays." See EW to William Crary Brownell, February 14, 1902, *Letters* 58. Johnny Wanamaker's was a popular department store in New York.

[230]Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (1924; New York: Octagon Books, 1977) 14.

[231]Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings, ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 170.

[232]Ibid.

[233]Ibid.

such as Walter de la Mare, G.K. Chesterton, F. Marion Crawford and of course, Henry James.[234]

Wharton's work is often compared to James's for the way it refers to the traditions and taboos of upper-class life in New York from the 1860s through the turn of the century, and in particular, for the way they both wrote about the experiences of Americans abroad and expatriate Americans returning to New York after long absences.[235] As Hermione Lee notes, the idea of a double self in Wharton's story "After Holbein" (1928), about a New York socialite who murders his "better self, who used to read books and discuss ideas instead of going out in society all the time" is very similar in theme to James's "The Private Life."[236] Another story, "Autres Temps," while not uncanny, has echoes of James's ghost story "The Jolly Corner" (1909), about an expatriate American who confronts the ghost of the man he would have become had he stayed in America. And it could be argued that aspects of Wharton's Newland Archer make him a kind of male alter-ego or uncanny double for James's Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881).

However, as time went on, she found herself resisting "... the continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James (whose books of the last ten years I can't read, much as I delight in the man) ..."[237] In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), she complained that James's later novels were written as if they "had to be fitted into a predestined design" and thereby conform to a particular aesthetic.[238] She felt he constructed his characters in an unrealistically sparse way, as if they represented

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[234] Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* 34. Also see Terry W. Thompson, "Wharton's Bewitched," *The Explicator* 61.3 (Spring 2003): 155-158, 157.

[235]For example, the themes of Henry James's *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) have much in common with Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *The Age of Innocence* (1921), *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), and *The Buccaneers* (1938).

[236]Lee 714.

[237]EW to William Crary Brownwell, June 25, 1904, *Letters* 91.

[238]Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (1934; London: Constable, 1972) 190.

ideas rather than real people struggling with the contrary side of human existence. She complained that "his latest novels, for all their profound moral beauty, seemed to me more and more lacking in atmosphere, more and more severed from that thick nourishing human air in which we all live and move."[239] And later, as to his characters, she recalls how she once asked James "Why have you stripped them of all the *human fringes* we necessarily trail after us through life?"[240] In contrast, Wharton maintained that it was important to show her characters struggling with the material realities of life, living and moving in life, not removed from it. This point is important to consider because it illustrates a view of Wharton's writing method that is at odds with the claim some feminist critics make when they maintain that women writers write supernatural stories to relay an experience that "lies beyond words."[241] Wharton was not so dislocated from her material reality.

In her story "The Eyes" (1910), she expresses her alertness to how some people in her society (in her own generation, as well as in the younger generation) were being irresponsible to themselves and to society in the way they let themselves be distracted by external influences instead of attending more scrupulously to the development of their inner sense of truth and to discovering the way they might make a meaningful contribution to society. She was sensitive to recognising when people deluded themselves by not exploring truly who they were and thus, not really finding their purpose in life. The story's main character, Culwin, conforms to a category of man, with whom, as Hermione Lee notes, Wharton had much

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[239]Ibid.

[240]Ibid 191.

[241]As will be discussed in Chapter Five, Rosemary Jackson maintains that women writers "use supernatural stories to craft a new language for an experience that 'lies beyond words.' She discusses how women writers of the supernatural attempt "to find a language, a different literature, other than the one forged by men, to articulate senses and experiences which are frequently *beyond* words, beyond social definitions altogether" (xviii) Rosemary Jackson, Introduction, *What Did Miss Darrington See?* xviii and xxii.

experience: detached, "self-pleasing uncommitted bachelors," from Egerton Winthrop to Walter Berry, and even Henry James.[242] Significantly, Wharton conveys how men, and not only women, are capable of being alienated from life. Here again, Wharton's themes are at odds with feminist claims which maintains that women are more inclined to write and feature female protagonists in supernatural stories to relate the uniquely "female" experience of displacement from society.[243]

A historicised view of Wharton gives a different impression of Wharton's task in writing the story, which is to comment on specific types of people in her particular social context. As Lee notes, "In *A Backward Glance* [Wharton] presents [Egerton] as a 'type' of New York gentleman, lamenting that a person of such intelligence should have wasted his life in trivia: no public service, no ambition, just a life of 'dilettantish leisure.'"[244] The story could also reference her lover, W. Morton Fullerton. A letter at the time signals as much when she writes to Fullerton, "I am working on 'your' story."[245] During this period, Fullerton had a frustrated career at in the Paris office of the *London Times*; Wharton wrote to him in October of 1910, telling him how he had "let [him]self drift" since he "made no effort to shape [his] life on any strong clear lines;" she encouraged him to make himself over and "*be* Morton Fullerton," by making the most of his intelligence and connections.

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[242]Lee 218. Egerton Winthrop, a New York lawyer and collector of paintings and antiques, was a long-time friend of Wharton's. Walter Berry, an important representative of American business interests in France, courted Wharton in her youth, but a formal proposal never came from him. Later in life, they became close companions, and many assumed they formed a couple, but Berry never formally committed himself exclusively to her.

[243]Again, as will be discussed in Chapter Five, Rosemary Jackson explains that since women are "displaced from their society and history, dislocated from their bodies, minds and marriages, they move into another realm, *in between* things, to a kind of no-man's land. Feeling that they don't belong socially, they come to occupy the ultimate non-social, asocial position – that of the spectre, madwoman, or ghost." Rosemary Jackson, Introduction, *What Did Miss Darrington See?* xx.

[244]Wharton, *Backward Glance* 69.

[245]EW to W. Morton Fullerton, September 1, 1910, qtd in Lee 349.

In "The Eyes" Andrew Culwin, though a "wise old idol," is one such dilettante figure. Culwin hosts a dinner party for a group of younger men, where they entertain themselves by emulating the pastime of an older, more refined generation: they tell each other ghost stories. The intellectual and imaginative deficiencies of the younger generation are on display as each member is "taxed" to make a contribution; the narrator tells us that all bar one of the seven in the group were not used to "the habit of sending [their] souls into the invisible."[246] The younger men are found to be lacking in some core sensibility when juxtaposed against the older Culwin, who, we are told

> had always been possessed of a leisure which he had nursed and protected, instead of squandering it in vain activities. His carefully guarded hours had been devoted to the cultivation of a fine intelligence and a few judiciously chosen habits; and none of the disturbances seemed to have crossed his sky.[247]

Despite this initial, favourable portrait of Culwin, the character flaws of his kind do not escape Wharton's critical eye. Though Culwin had a greater appreciation for the cultivation of his inner life than the younger generation, he still evades his responsibilities and does not achieve anything beyond contributing a rather chilling ghost story that tops the rest; and in the end, the only thing he transforms into is the self-same ghost he has described as haunting him. The story's narrator tells us,

> His mind was like a forum, or some open meeting place for the exchange of ideas: somewhat cold and drafty but light, spacious and orderly – a kind of academic grove from which all the leaves have fallen. In this privileged area a dozen of us were wont to stretch our muscles and expand our lungs; and, as if to prolong as much as possible the tradition of what we felt to be a vanishing institution, [...].[248]

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[246]Wharton, "The Eyes," *Ghosts* 36.

[247] Ibid 37.

[248] Ibid 38.

Culwin's ghost story apparently really happened to him. He describes how, at different moments of his life, he was haunted by a pair of eyes that would appear at the end of his bed while he was sleeping. At first, the suggestion is that the eyes appear after key events, when he exhibited less than honourable behaviour: after he has abandoned the cousin he asked to marry him and when, in Rome, he disingenuously encouraged the literary ambitions of a young man to whom he was sexually attracted.[249] A reader might conclude that the haunting is somehow related to Culwin's repressed homosexuality; however, Freudian ideas are dismissed when Wharton makes a risible reference to the contemporary enthusiasm for Freud and his theories. She has Culwin wonder if the eyes were a projection of his "inner consciousness," but the reference is pejorative and slightly wry as she has him ask himself, "For if they were …, what the deuce was the matter with that organ"?[250]

Instead of encouraging a reliance on Freud, Wharton lets readers figure out that the ghost appears because there is unease over a more existential preoccupation. Culwin has spent time developing and knowing his inner self, however he has not exploited his potential. He had literary aspirations twice but they never amounted to anything. The first time was while living with his aunt in Connecticut after a sojourn in South America (often a metaphor in Wharton for irresponsibility[251]); he decided

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[249]The portrait of Culwin bears a striking resemblance to Morton Fullerton. Just before Fullerton paid his first romantic visit to Wharton in America, at her home in Lennox, Massachusetts in 1907, he reportedly asked first cousin Katherine Fullerton to marry him. R.W.B. Lewis reports how Katherine Fullerton had been brought up in the Fullerton household believing she was his sister. But around 1903 she learned that she was an adopted child, the daughter of a younger brother of Morton's father and "to her understanding they became engaged to be married," however, Fullerton abandons her. *Letters*, 139. Also, According to Lee, Fullerton was bisexual and had affairs with men including Lord Roland Gower, model for the character of Lord Henry in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), as well as the American poet Bliss Carman (323).

[250]Wharton, "The Eyes" 44. Wharton reveals how she believed that too much was being made of Freud's theories in a letter to Bernard Berenson, where she tells him not to let his wife Mary confuse their mutual friend, Philomène de Levis-Mirepox, "with Freudiansim and all its jargon ... What [Philomène] wants is to develop the *conscious*, & not grub after the sub-conscious. She wants to be taught first to see, to attend, to reflect." Wharton warned Berenson that Philomène would "take to it like a duck to – sewerage." EW to Bernard Berenson, February 12, 1922, *Letters* 450.

[251]Bauer 19.

to write a great book, but now he cannot remember what the book was about. The second time is during his present post in Italy; he plans to write a book on Etruscan influences in Italian art, but never gets around to it. Culwin spends his time "dabbling about in the Forum;" he becomes what he predicts his protégé Noyce would have if he had had Culwin's leisure: "an inoffensive idler."[252] The further haunting dimension in the story is that in telling his tale to a few of the gifted men in his number that evening, Culwin, by his example, holds up a mirror for the "ghosts" his audience will become: effete intellectuals who do not do anything real with their time and talents, even if they are part of the select few in their generation who choose to explore their inner gifts.

To possess talent without incorporating it into lived experience is to waste talent. Wharton conveys a similar sense of unease later in *The Age of Innocence* when she complains that no educated men in her time became politicians; instead they entered "gentlemen's" professions and became lawyers like Newland Archer, where sometimes they work too much for money and other times they sat around and read newspapers, but seldom did they go into government and make any real contribution to society.[253] At the beginning of the story Culwin is described as an

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[252]Wharton, "The Eyes" 48.

[253]In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer reflects to himself,

> No one was deceived by his pretense of professional activity. In old-fashioned legal firms like that of which Mr. Letterblair was the head, and which were mainly engaged in the management of large estates and 'conservative' investments, there were always two or three young men, fairly well-off, and without professional ambition, who, for a certain number of hours of each day, sat at their desks accomplishing trivial tasks, or simply reading the newspapers. Though it was supposed to be proper for them to have an occupation, the crude fact of moneymaking was still regarded as derogatory, and the law, being a profession, was accounted a more gentlemanly pursuit than business. But none of these young men had much hope of really advancing in his profession, or any earnest desire to do so; and over many of them the green mould of the perfunctory was already perceptibly spreading (124).

Wharton continues the theme of how educated men evade their responsibilities to society later in the novel when she has Archer remember his invitation to get more involved in politics, which he dabbles in, but to which makes no great commitment or contribution:

> The young men nowadays were emancipating themselves from the law and business and taking up all sorts of new things. If they were not absorbed in state politics or municipal reform, the chances were that they were going in for Central American archaeology, for architecture or landscape-engineering;

epicure, a gourmand of sorts, not of food, but of people. Though he has "astonishing" skills at observing and predicting the errors other people are making and will make, he is a loathsome figure because he makes no impact. He is a good, old-stock Victorian who

> ... belonged to the stout Positivist tradition ... But [who] had been, then and always, essentially a spectator, a humorous detached observer of the immense muddled variety show of life, slipping out of his seat now and then for a brief dip into the convivialities at the back of the house, but never, as far as one knew, showing the least desire to jump on the stage and do a 'turn.'[254]

This kind of character also figures in James's fiction, particularly in the character of Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller* (1878) and also in Wharton's own Seldon in *The House of Mirth* (1905).

As Hermione Lee notes, "The Eyes" has all the hallmarks of a Jamesian ghost story – it features an all-male audience and the story is told not through the eyes of its main character, but through the eyes of an observer who, for most of the story, stands detached and listens as he tries to figure out the real reason for the haunting, which he never makes explicit, because that would deprive the parallel role the reader has to deduce the same.[255] Wharton uses versions of this same technique in

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> taking a keen and learned interest in the pre-Revolutionary buildings of their own country, studying and adapting Georgian types, and protesting at the meaningless use of the word 'Colonial.' ... Archer, as he looked back, was not sure that men like himself *were* what his country needed, at least in the active service to which Theodore Roosevelt hand pointed; in fact, there was reason to think it did not, for after a year in the State Assembly he had not been re-elected, and had dropped back thankfully into obscure if useful municipal work, and from that again to the writing of occasional articles in one of the reforming weeklies that were trying to shake the country out of its apathy. It was little enough to look back on; but when he remembered to what the young men of his generation and his set had looked forward -- the narrow groove of money-making, sport and society to which their vision had been limited -- even his small contribution to the new state of things seemed to count, as each brick counts in a well-built wall, He had done little in public life; he would always be by nature a contemplative and a dilettante.... (338).

[254]Wharton, "The Eyes" 37.

[255]As discussed earlier, one of the features of a well-written ghost story, that contributes to the story's entertainment value, is the way a story stimulates a reader's ability to discern the underlying reasons for the supernatural manifestation. If the reason for the haunting is made too explicit or the reader is able to readily detect an author's didactic purpose, the tale is judged to be sub-standard for its obviousness. See Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Preface to *What Did Miss Darrington See?* ix and Rosemary Jackson's Introduction, xvi.

other stories as well. In "The Lady's Maid's Bell," Hartley has to piece together the reasons why the ghost of Emma Saxon appears from the crumbs other members of the domestic staff "let drop" in their conversations around the dinner table.[256] In "Afterward," Mary Boyce finds out why her husband has disappeared with the ghost of a man he double-crossed in business by reading newspaper clippings and putting pieces of the story together based on an interview she has, afterward, with his lawyer. Similarly, it is through reading newspaper clippings after the fact that George Faxon in "The Triumph of Night" discovers that the demon-double he thought he had only imagined really exists as sub-personality of the philanthropist, John Lavington, who is, in fact, a corrupt businessman. These are just some examples of how Wharton incorporates some of the stock features of the genre to make her wider point: real life is as enigmatic as a ghost story; one is meant to throw full light on that which is uneasy or morally corrupt about the social, political or business environment and only through struggling with incomplete, difficult meanings, can one deduce one's own meaning.

Wharton respected the rules of the form of the ghost story and she had no intention of creating "something new" for its own sake. In fact, in *The Writing of Fiction* she elaborates on the ingredients of a good ghost story. For a start, the capable writer succeeds by giving his or her reader "an immediate sense of security" and thereby, gains the reader's confidence to be led on the most fantastical journeys.[257] This is achieved, Wharton explains, by including credible descriptions, even of the most "incredible adventures;" "the least touch of irrelevance" or improbability is enough to "undo the spell."[258] The other constituent element is the

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[256]Wharton, "The Lady's Maid's Bell," *Ghosts* 18.

[257]Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* 37.

[258]Ibid 38.

building of tension; once the reader's confidence is gained, the writer must "avoid distracting and splintering up his attention."[259] As Wharton explains,

> Many a would-be tale of horror becomes innocuous through the very multiplication and variety of its horrors. Above all, if they are multiplied they should be cumulative and not dispersed. But the fewer the better: once the preliminary horror posited, it is the harping on the same string -- the same nerve -- that does the trick.[260]

Wharton employs these two techniques throughout Culwin's story with the appearance of "the eyes". She does the same in other stories as well, when ghosts appear, not in different forms or proliferating numbers, but as recurring instances of the same image. The repetition of the same ghost serves as a guidepost to readers to scrutinise the details of the story to determine the reason behind the ghost's haunting.

Though the story "The Eyes" deals more with an existential problem and is less about actual events in history or business, it is no less historically situated because of it. Wharton expresses her unease over the trend of how people in her time and class either ignored their inner life, or refused to listen to the higher purpose to which it called them. As this chapter moves on to Part Two, it is important to understand that Wharton saw her effort in writing ghost stories as much more than composing titillating tales; she believed that being in touch with one's inner self and reflecting upon that which was "uneasy" was the most authentic way to gain perspective on one's relationship to changing aspects of a social and historical context.

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[259]Ibid 39.

[260]Ibid.

Part II –Relationship to Feminism and a Discussion of "Pomegranate Seed"

Wharton's relationship to feminism is important to consider, particularly given the increase in feminist readings of her work in recent years.[261] Some Wharton critics have assessed that the themes of her work are becoming skewed, leaving a legacy which new readers of her work now have to negotiate. James W. Tuttleton, for example, objects in strong terms how since the 1970s, Wharton has been appropriated by "the sorority of feminists" who maintain that the issue is no longer "Wharton's snobbery or her disdain of democratic vulgarity," but "rather it is patriarchy itself ... that has become the focus of the new criticism."[262] Tuttleton goes on to argue that Wharton's fiction demonstrates how *both* women and men were victimised by the values of American bourgeois culture, which discouraged meaningful change and instead fostered a "tepid sameness of the moral atmosphere [which] resulted in a prolonged immaturity of mind."[263]

While feminist analyses of Wharton's work offer valuable insights, it is difficult to reconcile such readings with Wharton's own, very complicated relationship to feminism. For example, in a letter to Mary Berenson, in response to Mary's encouragement to her to read her daughter Ray Strachey's feminist study *The Cause*, Wharton replies, "To read a book called 'The Cause' (& *that* cause!) will

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[261] See Kathy Fedorko, *Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994) and "'Forbidden Thing': Gothic Confrontation with the Feminine in 'The Young Gentlemen' and 'Bewitched'," *Edith Wharton Review* 11.1 (Spring 1994): 3-9; Gloria Erlich, "The Female Conscience: Angel or Demon?" *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton,* ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 98-116; Judy Hale Young, "The Repudiation of the Sisterhood in Edith Wharton's 'Pomegranate Seed,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 33 (1996): 1-11; Margaret Anne Doody, "Desert Ruins & Troubled Waters: Female Dreams in Fiction and the Development of the Gothic Novel," *Genre* x (1977): 529-72; and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[262] James W. Tuttleton, "Feminists & Edith Wharton," *The New Criterion* 7.7 (March 1989): 6-14, 10.

[263] Ibid 10.

require all my affection for you."[264] After looking at the book, Wharton wrote back to Mary Berenson a comment that can sit very uncomfortably with feminist critics, "I, who think that women were made for pleasure & procreation, note with satisfaction that the leaders of the movement, judging from their photos, all look unfitted for the first, & many for both functions!"[265] Further, R.W.B. and Nancy Lewis observe how Wharton was not impressed by the work of contemporaries such as May Sinclair, who wrote feminist fiction and whose 1908 novel Wharton described as "pantingly didactic."[266]

Readings of Wharton's ghost stories also deliver an ambiguous impression of Wharton's feminist position. In "Miss Mary Pask" (1925), for example, Wharton takes a contradictory view of female independence by showing how an independent single woman is most attractive and most empowered when she is dead; being single is not portrayed as a positive independent experience, but rather a desperately lonely one. The tension and intrigue in "Miss Mary Pask" depends upon the cognitive uncertainty over whether or not Mary is in fact dead. The man who visits her feels his memory is playing tricks on him. It eventually emerges that Mary is not dead; she was only mistaken for dead when she suffered a cataleptic trance. The man feels a note of regret when he learns the truth, for she was more real to him dead than alive. The twist makes the tale more heart wrenching when readers apprehend the loneliness Wharton attaches to spinsterhood and how being dead is actually more

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[264]EW to Mary Berenson, 20 October 1928, I Tatti, qtd in Lee 606.

[265]Ibid 606. It is also noteworthy that Wharton was against higher education for women. In *A Backward Glance,* she complains that the "ancient curriculum of house-keeping [...] was so soon to be swept aside by the 'monstrous regiment' of the emancipated: young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilized living. The movement began when I was young, and now that I am old, and have watched it and noted its results, I mourn more than ever the extinction of the household arts. Cold storage, deplorable as it is, has done far less damage to the home than the Higher Education" (60).

[266] R.W.B. and Nancy Lewis remark how Sinclair was "almost exactly Edith Wharton's age, was indeed an active supporter of women's suffrage as well as an intelligent propagandist for psychoanalysis." See R.W.B. and Nancy Lewis, *Letters* 8-9.

interesting than being alive and not married. Alone and getting old, Mary is not really living, but rather, "was like hundreds of other dowdy old maids, cheerful derelicts content with their innumerable little substitutes for living."[267] This is hardly a positive portrait of the independent "New Woman" emerging in Wharton's time. But equally, Wharton does not frame the status of being married as a particularly vivid existence. Mary's sister Grace is described as "handsome [and] capable," but also as a "rather dull woman, absorbed in her husband and children, and without an ounce of imagination."[268]

Dale Bauer helps to explain Wharton's method with regard to feminist politics: "Wharton tried to redefine the nature of political writing, rejecting a reflectionist political literature and political allegory ... [suggesting instead] that the contradictions in women's lives do not allow them an unambivalent political position."[269] As discussed in Chapter One, at different moments, Wharton's ghost stories can be read as evidence of a certain feeling of rebellion against patriarchy and equally, other readings can demonstrate her conservatism. Wharton's method is not to objectify politics in her writing -- feminist or otherwise -- but rather, to show her characters struggling to assimilate the implications of society's politics and the urgings of its culture in their lives.

One might be tempted to say that her portraits of female difficulties under patriarchy were particularly rebellious, considering Wharton's time. However, Wharton regarded the representation of conflicts between the sexes as having a degree of inevitability and as a subject that already had considerable precedence in literary history. She would have resisted categorisation of her work as doing

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[267]Wharton, "Miss Mary Pask," *Ghosts* 147.

[268]Ibid.

[269]Bauer 87.

something new and particularly subversive in gender politics. In a letter to John Hugh Smith in February of 1909, for example, she upbraids him for his "scorn" for the subject of a play they both had recently seen, "Olive Latimer:"

> as I cast my eye backward over literature, I seemed to remember a few other neurotic women who were discontented with their husbands & relations – one Clytemnestra, e.g., & Phaedra, & Iseult, & Anna Karenine & Pia Tolomei, too Francesca da Rimini – who still live in the imagination, & will, I fancy, outlast Shaw – not to speak of Barrie! [...] We love Shaw because he's knocked over a few tottering conventions; but his satires won't outlast the special weaknesses he satirizes, because they're too specialized & don't deal with the general human fate. It's only the imagination that "sees things whole" that can keep its visions alive & so far those imaginations haven't been afraid to deal with the common, inevitable moral problems.[270]

Discontent over gender relations and protests against the hard lives some women lead in societies dominated by men is, Wharton suggests here, an age-old theme, a problem that is nearly an inexorable truth. Wharton endeavoured to record "reality" as she saw it around her; she was not necessarily labouring to deliver a feminist message. In a letter to William Crary Brownwell, Wharton explains, "I write about what I see, what I happen to be nearest to, which is surely better than doing cowboys de chic."[271]

One of the reasons for the boom in Wharton studies is that her writing is believed by some to contain evidence of a distinct *écriture féminine*. The subject of "female writing" is taken up quite literally in Wharton's ghost story, "Pomegranate Seed" (1928), which tells the story of Charlotte Ashby, a jealous wife who intercepts the letters her husband Kenneth receives from the ghost of his first wife, Elsie, and thus, concludes that her husband is carrying on a kind of affair with the spirit. In fact, in the end, Elsie's letters have the power to lure Kenneth away from his second-wife and he disappears. The key to the story is the extent to which Charlotte and her

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[270] EW to John Hugh Smith, February 12, 1909, *Letters* 175.

[271] EW to William Crary Brownwell, June 25, 1904, *Letters* 91.

mother-in-law can determine if the handwriting of the letters Kenneth receives is produced by a woman's hand. The story has been enthusiastically received by feminist critics who pay great attention to the ghost's ethereal handwriting, with its faint quality that is at once illegible, yet "visibly feminine."[272] As Kathy A. Fodorko notes, the ghost's writing, "so indistinct, so difficult for Charlotte to decipher, exemplifies Mary Jacobus's description of women's writing that deconstructs male discourse and writes 'what cannot be written.'"[273]

The story carries on the tradition of "second-wife" tales and anticipates Daphne du Murier's famous novel on that theme, *Rebecca* (1938), but perhaps is most uncanny for the way it is also eerily prescient of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which was not published until a year later, in the way it deals with the subject of the existence of a "female sentence," a sentence so distinctive in its grammar and syntax as to be visibly feminine. While it is true that there is a difference between the female sentence as Woolf defines it and determining whether the handwriting appears feminine, taking the handwriting as a metaphor for female-authored works can suggest that the ghost's letters represent some kind of rarefied form of a female aesthetic in writing. However, like the comment Woolf makes a year later that the truly "female" aesthetic has traces of both masculine and feminine influences, and thus embodies a kind a of androgyny, Charlotte notes how the handwriting appears to be both masculine and feminine. She observes "the imprint of the letters is firm, but the trace of the letters is faint, as if there were not enough ink in the pen, or the writer's wrist were too weak to bear upon it."[274] She continues

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[272]Wharton, "Pomegranate Seed," *Ghosts* 220.

[273]Kathy A. Fedorko, *Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1995) 129 and "The Difference of View," *Women Writing About Women,* ed. Mary Jacobus (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979) 13.

[274]Wharton, "Pomegranate Seed" 220.

by noting, "Another curious thing was that, in spite of its masculine curves, the writing was so visibly feminine. Some hands are sexless, some masculine, at first glance; the writing on the grey envelope, for all its strength and assurance, was without a doubt a woman's."[275] The androgynous characteristics of the writing give the writing its power to "have such a strange effect" upon Kenneth and lure him away from his everyday existence.[276] This idea is homologous to Woolf's concept that the truly creative artist draws upon a kind of androgyny in his or her inner being to produce great works of fiction and art, which also have the power to draw men and women away from everyday existence.

Beyond the level of the elusive female sentence, androgynous or otherwise, "Pomegranate Seed" can be historicised by considering the way it also addresses, more broadly, the problems Wharton was preoccupied with at the time in relation to the subject of female authorship. Many critics maintain that Wharton was more comfortable with male authors, an idea that might pose problems to second-wave feminist critics who emphasis that women's fiction is produced out of a distinct female literary tradition.[277] In *The Writing of Fiction* Wharton specifically highlights the virtues of Balzac, Tolstoy, James and Proust. In her work, she has characters read the work of the male authors such as in *The Age of Innocence* when she has her characters reading Bourget, Huysmans, the Goncourt Brothers, Spencer, and Alphonse Daudet, with only one reference to a woman writer, George Eliot. Furthermore, as the critic Elsa Nettels points out, of the twenty-two first-person

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[275]Ibid.

[276]Ibid 228.

[277] See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

narratives in Wharton's *Collected Stories*, nineteen have male narrators.[278] Nettels maintains that Wharton considered herself unlike other women in her generation in the way she was educated and thereby privy to male culture and thus, she often feels obliged to assume a male voice in her literary output.[279]

Nettels's point is significant to a reading of "Pomegranate Seed" because one of the story's key points is that the androgynous ghostly missives are legible only to Kenneth; Charlotte and Mrs. Ashby cannot read the letters. Therefore, not only is a masculine influence important in literary production, but this issue of legibility indicates that the writing is intended for a male audience. As Judy Hale Young points out, Elsie's ghostly missives are the exact opposite of an *écriture féminine* in the way they perpetuate a "crime against women, producing writing that cannot be read, or understood from the woman's point of view."[280] However, in the end, Young reads the story as vindicating instead of repudiating the importance of a kind of literary "sisterhood" because Wharton also has Charlotte finally confronting her

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[278]In my opinion, Nettels incorrectly attributes a male narrator to one of the stories in this number, "Kerfol." It can be argued that the narrator of "Kerfol" is, in fact, female, as pointed out in the discussion of the story earlier in this chapter. However, even if there are only eighteen instead of nineteen male narrators out of the twenty-two first-person narratives, Wharton's preference for male first-person narrators is clear and is often a subject that is highlighted when her novels, such as *Ethan Frome* (1911), *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* are discussed. Elsa Nettels, "Gender and First-Person Narration in Edith Wharton's Short Fiction," in *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays*, eds. Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit (New York: Garland, 1992) 256-260, 245.

[279]According to Nettels, because Wharton believed that most women were excluded from male culture, Wharton "did not endow women narrators with her own knowledge of art and literature and history and science." Nettels continues, "It is male narrators who display her culture" (250) and thus are the more authoritative and more interesting because male narrators are "often blind to the meaning of their own behaviour, misjudge others, but believe themselves infallible" (251); whereas female narrators are often placed in the roles of "confidant, confessor, and interpreter" Ibid, (251). In her story "Writing a War Story," Wharton shows the difficulties a female author has in being taken seriously as a writer when writing about subjects, such as war, that have traditionally been considered outside the female sphere. "Writing a War Story" has a male narrator but a female protagonist whose publisher asks her to write a war story. When Miss Ivy Spang produces her work, however, she is incensed that it is published with a picture of herself, draped in robes, and that her male, would-be-readers have not even read the story, but instead compliment her for her image. "Writing a War Story" is less about the inability of women to write about "male culture" than a depiction of the frustrations women writers face when they make such an attempt. Critic Claire M. Tylee discusses how the role of a gender-neutral narrator is used as a "disguise" in Wharton, "ironically adopted to distance the author from both the male gaze and the woman constructed by it" (337). Claire M. Tylee, "Imagining Women at War: Feminist Strategies in Edith Wharton's War Writing," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 16.2 (Fall 1997): 327-343.

[280]Judy Hale Young, "The Repudiation of Sisterhood in Edith Wharton's 'Pomegranate Seed,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 33 (1996): 1-11, 7.

husband about his reading habits and when faced with the prospect of yet another letter from Elsie, Charlotte protests, "I can't stand it! I can't stand it another day!"[281] Young even goes so far as to call "Pomegranate Seed" as Wharton's "anti-manifesto of female writing:"

> She presents us here with her notion of just what the woman who writes must not do. She must not ignore or deny the potential of a female readership, as Elsie does. And she must never deny or try to mask her female identity, as Elsie's letters do. Wharton offers warnings to the woman reader as well. Her part will not be easy, and she may experience failures like Charlotte's. But she must at least make a beginning, must confront her exile and her ignorance and refuse to accept them. Her imperative is to insist on a broader education and greater liberty to write according to standard of her own and to speak in her own voice.[282]

Reading the story as an encouragement to women to value their own literary tradition, the story again anticipates Woolf's arguments in *A Room of One's Own.* However, it is not obvious which side of the debate Wharton supports; rather, she is characteristically ambiguous. Elsie could be seen as the character through which Wharton privileges the male voice and tradition, or she can be seen as just the opposite. There is no clear solution; as is typical with uncanny stories, Wharton leaves the meaning of story enigmatic: readers have to figure it out for themselves, a meaning that is determined by the perspectives readers individually bring to their readings of the story.

Still another reading of the tale suggests that "Pomegranate Seed" is concerned with more prosaic anxieties. As R.W.B. Lewis notes, Wharton was very concerned at this stage in her career, in the 1930s, about the decline in an audience for her fiction, and its effect on her financial position towards the end of her life.[283] Therefore, the anxiety in the tale may not relate to literary concerns about female

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[281] Wharton, "Pomegranate Seed" 226.

[282] Young 10-11.

[283] Letters 506-8.

authorship, or female agency, but the fact that the second (and younger) wife, as well as the older mother-in-law, literally cannot read the letters may act as a metaphor for how Wharton was losing readers to the younger generation of writers.[284]

By way of conclusion to this section, it is important to mention how Wharton summarised her own methods. In a letter to her earlier publisher, Robert Grant she explains that she conceives of her subjects like man and then executes them like a woman; the latter she defines as writing with all the "small incidental effects that women have always excelled in, the episodical characterisation."[285] While it is difficult to determine precisely what Wharton means by "episodical characterization," the important point to consider is that Wharton used the material closest to her: often these were fictional renderings of marriages among the wealthy, the experiences of American women abroad, writers contending with commercial pressures, and women repressed by factors in their environment, topics which can appear as female-centred, and thus feminist concerns. However, through a fully conscious process of artistic design, Wharton transforms these subjects imaginatively to serve as a synecdoche for wider comments about her specific political, economic, social and cultural context. Readings of how she implements

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[284] In a letter to her friend Edward Sheldon, the playwright, in 1936 she complains: "I am still pottering along with the Buccaneers ... and I hope to finish it within the next few months. I also want to write one or two more stories, but the world is so changed, and readers and reviewers belong to such a new breed, that I feel in despair at the lack of any interest or understanding in the inner life, which was the material of novelists in my day. I can think of lots of this to write about, but who will read me?" EW to Edward Sheldon, November 2, 1936, Lilly Library, qtd in Bauer xi.

[285] In a letter to Robert Grant, Wharton wrote, "I am very much pleased that you like the construction of the book [*The Fruit of the Tree*, published on October 19, 1907], & I more than agree with you that I haven't been able to keep the characters from being, so to speak, mere *building-material.* The fact is that I am beginning to see exactly where my weakest point is. -- I conceive my subjects like a man – that is, rather more architectonically & dramatically than most women -- & then execute them like a woman; or rather, I sacrifice, to my desire for construction & breadth, the small incidental effects that women have always excelled in, the episodical characterisation, I mean. The worst of it is that this fault is congenial, & not the result of an ambition to do big things. As soon as I look at a subject from the novel-angle I see it in its relation to a larger whole, in all its remote connotations; & I can't help trying to take them in, at the cost of the smaller realism that I arrive at, I think, better in my short stories." EW to Robert Grant, November 19, 1907, *Letters* 123.

this method in her ghost stories, both before and after the war, will be supplied in Parts Three and Four of this chapter.

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Part III – Persona as a Writer and Pre-war Context

Wharton positioned herself as a writer who did not directly engage in politics. In fact, she disliked propaganda in literature generally and was critical of writers, such as Upton Sinclair, who made politics too obvious in their work.[286] As Hermione Lee notes, Wharton was "not an American realist;" she "did not 'do' head-on and large scale" literary treatments of the corruption present in industries such as meat-packing, oil, the railroads or banking.[287] She felt that such direct presentations of an author's views were tantamount to using a "megaphone"[288] and believed that greater subtlety was required in the artistic method. In a letter dated August 19, 1927 to Upton Sinclair, about his novel *Oil!*, Wharton disapproved of the way that his novel nearly becomes a "political pamphlet."[289] The fact that Wharton does not make overt political references in her writing, however, does not mean they do not exist in her work. Rather than identify problems specifically, she uses metaphoric imagery to represent that which she was uneasy about or, more generally, she illustrates the

[286]Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle* (1906), about dangerous working conditions in the meatpacking industry, for example, was believed to relate so faithfully the need for political reform, that President Roosevelt established a task force issuing a series of workplace reforms after reading a copy. His novel *Oil!* (1927) was another accurate account of a true-life scandal in the oil industry involving Teapot Dome that called for socialist reforms. The Teapot Dome scandal was the most high profile scandal of the many that plagued the administration of President Warren G. Harding from 1921-1924. Harding's Secretary of the Interior, Albert B. Fall, was found guilty of granting to private companies the rights to drill for oil on public lands that had been previously designated for conservation during the Progressive Era.

[287]Lee 46.

[288] In "Permanent Values in Fiction" Wharton criticizes Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence for using their characters as "megaphones" for an author's ideas. "Permanent Values in Fiction" (1934), *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings,* ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): 175-179, 175-6.

[289] EW to Upton Sinclair, August 19, 1927, *Letters* 500-1.

difficulty her characters have in adapting to the harsh conditions new political, economic and social realities introduced.

The first decades of the twentieth century were marked by a distinct sense of rootlessness. Even before the war, people's abilities to refer to external markers and long-held traditions for guidelines on behaviour were proving untenable. This sentiment is eloquently conveyed by Walter Lippmann in his influential social and political study, *Drift and Mastery*, published in 1914, where he relates,

> We are unsettled to the very roots of our being. There isn't a human relation, whether parent or child, husband and wife, worker and employer, that doesn't move in a strange situation. We are not used to a complicated civilization, we don't know how to behave when personal contact and eternal authority have disappeared. There are no precedents to guide us, no wisdom that wasn't made for a simpler age. We have changed our environment more quickly that we know how to change ourselves.[290]

There was a perception that America had changed utterly, even before the war. As W. Morton Fullerton articulates in *Problems of Power* (1913), which Wharton reviewed and helped to edit in 1912, "so numerous have been the changes within the period reaching from 1890 to 1910 that they have cumulatively resulted in differentiating the America of to-day from the America of the earlier date by a real and impressive quality and in kind. Not merely the surfaces have changed: the mental and moral traits of the American people have seemed to alter."[291] Fullerton continues by explaining that when the foreigner or the returning exile "is confronted with the bewildering bulk of these transformations, both superficial and moral, he cannot but contemplate the spectacle of wonder."[292]

This disjunction between a shift in one's economic, social and even moral

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[290]Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (1914; Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 92.

[291]W. Morton Fullerton, *Problems of Power: A Study of International Politics from Sadowa to Kirk-Kilssé* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd, 1913) 15.

[292]Ibid 13.

environment and the individual's ability to assimilate such a shift is part of what motivates the uncanny and is at the heart of Wharton's ghost stories. Lippmann's characterisation of American society as a "confused" culture with "spasmodic" intellectual reactions and "out of kilter" emotional responses ties in directly to the argument outlined in Chapter One about the connections between cognitive uncertainty and the uncanny effect.[293] Fullerton's description of how America had become nearly unrecognisable to those of Henry James's and Edith Wharton's generations, who would return to America after being away for nearly two or three decades, corresponds with the idea that the uncanny is often accompanied by bewildering curiosity first, even before fearful elements can be identified.

In the following section, I will discuss how Wharton refers to the same *zeitgeist* of the times that Lippmann writes about in *Drift and Mastery* as well as the ways her ghost stories refer to some of ideas expressed in a *Problems of Power*.[294] Both texts share Wharton's views on the challenges posed by democracy and how changes in America's economic foundation influenced American's policies both domestically and internationally. Though there is no evidence that Wharton read *Drift and Mastery* when it first appeared in 1914, her entire oeuvre supports its central premise on the need for individuals to engage with and not escape from life by effectively developing inner reserves, which allow them to adapt to a new framework. An example of this preoccupation was discussed in Part One in the

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[293] Lippmann 112.

[294] Later in life, Wharton's good friend, Bernard Berenson, met Lippmann at the Peace Conference in Versailles and, in the 1930s Wharton met Lippmann himself when he visited her home in the South of France. She described him as a "thoroughly delightful person" and she read his work enthusiastically. Though Wharton's romantic relationship with Fullerton proved to be more one-sided on her part, she describes her initial attraction to him to be more than physical; she was impressed by his intellectual ideas and felt that their connection was unique for they way the both shared similar ideas and a "radiant reasonableness." EW to W. Morton Fullerton, June 8, 1908, *Letters* 151. The troublesome side of American foreign policy referred to in "The Lady's Maid's Bell," written in 1902, anticipates some of the same arguments Fullerton would articulate in *Problems of Power*. Wharton's letters to Fullerton of June 19, October, and November 1912 describe her suggestions to him – mostly to do with points on style – on how his book could be improved. *Letters* 270, 281, 283.

analysis of "The Eyes." Part Three will discuss how Wharton also reflects Lippmann's ideas on some of the problems associated with the rise of the modern corporation, new forms of property ownership, and the advent of the professional manager. As well, her ghost stories reference concerns over America's Open Door policy in Asia and the Monroe Doctrine in the Caribbean and South America, as outlined in Fullerton's *Problems of Power*. The argument in this section is not meant to demonstrate that Wharton's ideas in these areas were somehow awakened by Lippmann and Fullerton, but rather how her ghost stories mirror their mutual interest in the concerns of the times.[295] More generally, Wharton's ghost stories will be shown to demonstrate a myriad of Progressive era concerns as well as her unease over the way both the old guard and the newly rich ignored their wider civic responsibilities, with the former drifting into ill-suited marriages or paid employment as a means of survival, and the latter concerning themselves only with profit, conspicuous consumption and donations to charity selfishly made to facilitate social advancement.

Edith Wharton's first ghost story, "The Lady's Maid's Bell" (1902) was written in 1902, at a time when America was twelve years into the Progressive Era (1890-1930), a period known for redressing some of the imbalances created during the enormous economic expansion of the Gilded Age (1870-1890). Industrialists involved in the rapid growth of the railroads, mining, manufacturing, and banking had amassed unprecedented levels of fortune and formed a class of super-rich dynasties – such as those of Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. As well, Hermione Lee refers to how a "second

[295]Dale Bauer discusses how a later work of Wharton's, her 1912 novel *The Reef*, was directly influenced by Fullerton's ideas on the Open Door and the Monroe Doctrine as the two writers exchanged their respective manuscripts in the period when they were both working on their books (20-21).

order" class of millionaires (with fortunes between $5 million to $15 million) had emerged by successfully managing family-run businesses.[296] Henry James provides an example of this second group in the character of Daisy Miller, whose father made his fortune by trade, rather than through trusts, perhaps by owning or operating a mill. Whether the new breed of millionaires came from New York, Newport, or less illustrious places such as Andrew Carnegie's Pittsburgh or Daisy Miller's Schenectady, they had levels of purchasing power, along with increasing social clout, that posed formidable competition to Henry James's and Edith Wharton's parents' generation, many of whom left America in the 1860s to escape deflationary pressures after the Civil War and in neglect of their responsibilities to help rebuild American society in the years following Reconstruction. Lee notes how Wharton felt critical toward her parents' generation who, un-heroically, consistently took "the line of least resistance."[297] But equally, newer forms of negligence emerged with the current generation of wealthy Americans. During the Progressive Era, scandals relating to unsafe work places, new forms of property ownership and corrupt and collusive business practices along with unrestrained levels of conspicuous consumption introduced new points into the debate about the "responsibilities" that attended wealth.

A review of Wharton's letters and outlines for novels illustrates how she shared this concern with realigning a sense of responsibility with wealth, as well as her scepticism about the promises of an egalitarian democracy.[298] Many Americans

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[296]Lee 47.

[297]Ibid 576.

[298]In a letter to Morgan Dix, Rector of Trinity Church, Wharton writes, "Social conditions as they are just now in our new world, where the sudden possession of money has come without inherited obligations, or any traditional sense of solidarity between the classes, is a vast & absorbing field for the novelist." EW to Morgan Dix 5 December 1905, *Letters* 98-99. Also, as Lee points out, in planning the novel called 'Disintegration' (which Wharton did not complete), Wharton has one of the main characters, Henry Clephane, reflects on the kind of novel he would write about contemporary American manners:

believed that democracy could be improved through more direct representation; they wanted local and state-level politics to be rid of corrupt political machines and "bosses;" they wanted powerful business trusts, such as those in the railroad and steel industries, to be dismantled, and there were, of course, different religious movements and the Temperance Movement, in particular, that were aimed at uplifting moral behaviour. Though Wharton was sympathetic to the need for reform, she was also nervous about the misguided nature of such efforts, particularly when power was concentrated either in the hands of the newly wealthy or in the masses, who congregated like the servants "under the stairs" as in "The Lady's Maid's Bell."

Contemporaneous with Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle* (1906), about unsafe work practices in the meat-packing industry, this story too is about the dangers that can befall people at work. However, Wharton's technique differs from Sinclair's, with its very specific citations of actual hazards; Wharton, instead, is more indirect in her references by suggesting to readers that they are just reading another ghost story about an unhappily married couple who live in an isolated mansion, with some mystery surrounding the question of what really happened to the Brympton's first maid, Emma Saxon. Nevertheless, when "The Lady's Maid's Bell" is read in light of the Progressive Era's concerns about work-place safety, readers see that at the Brympton mansion, employees can not only get injured at work, they can actually be murdered by their employers.

It's to be a study of the new privileged class – a study of the effects of wealth without responsibility. Talk of the socialist peril! That's not where the danger lies. The inherent vice of democracy is the creation of a powerful class of which it can make no use – a kind of Frankenstein monster, an engine of social disintegration. Taine saw it long ago – I'm only preaching from his text. The place to study them is here and now – here in this huge breeding-place of inequalities that we call a republic, where class-distinctions, instead of growing out of the inherent needs of the social organism, are arbitrarily established by a force that works against it! Think of the mass of evidence our society supplies! No laborious researches – no years wasted on the trail of a connecting link. All the species are here, spread out under the immense lens of our social publicity. Why, I'm the finest kind of example myself: I can take down my own symptoms and note the progress of the disease in my own case.

Wharton, 'Disintegration,' Beinecke, qtd in Lee 178.

The story opens with the typhoid-recovering immigrant, Miss Hartley, who is looking for work and finds it on the suggestion of Mrs. Railton, "a friend of the lady that first brought [her] out to the States."[299] Throughout Wharton's fiction, names are frequently significant markers in themselves. Mrs. Railton can be read as representing the wife of someone who literally earns "tons" in the railroad industry, and by her name alone, Wharton references the collusive business practices that gave rise to the same business trusts that could not be trusted to deal fairly in the railroad industry. Though the Sherman Act put antitrust legislation in place since 1890, successful enforcement was an issue and an active debate throughout the first decade of the 1900s.[300]

The fact that Hartley is also an immigrant, shepherded into a new job by someone more powerful, also taps into an issue that fuelled nativist arguments at the time, namely how certain immigrant groups were under the control of powerful political bosses with strong ethnic ties, who, though they tended to the new arrivals' needs for work and shelter, also demanded that they vote in a certain way. Like the powerful business trusts, these guardians of immigrant groups, through their network, were considered to be an obstacle to good democracy. People like Mrs. Railton were not good for America and they were not helpful to innocents like Hartley. Based upon what happened to the previous maid, Mrs. Railton could have actually been sending Hartley to her death. Further, the xenophobia many Americans felt at the time is captured by Mr. Brympton's remark; when he sees Hartley for the first time, he confuses her with the ghost of Emma Saxon and wonders, bewildered, "*How many of you are there, in God's name?*"[301] Americans

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[299]Wharton, "The Lady's Maid's Bell" 12.

[300]The Sherman Act of 1890 was the first to limit monopolies and curb the power of trusts in America.

[301]Wharton, "The Lady's Maid's Bell" 24.

of Anglo-Saxon background were being replaced at a rapid rate by huge numbers of Irish immigrants such as Hartley, a trend that some interpreted as not only a threat to America's demographic, but to the smooth functioning of democracy itself.

Both Lippmann and Fullerton write about the need for a new kind of vigilance on the subject of democracy. Lippmann explains that in the hands of the uncritical, democracy is at risk of mutating into a new form of tyranny.

> Without a tyrant to attack an immature democracy is always somewhat bewildered. Yet we have to face the fact in America that what thwarts the growth of our civilization is not the uncanny, malicious contrivance of the plutocracy, but the faltering method, the distracted soul, and the murky vision of what we call grandiloquently the will of the people. If we flounder, it is not because the old order is strong, but because the new one is weak. … A nation of uncritical drifters can change only the form of tyranny, for like Christian's sword, democracy is a weapon in the hands of those who have the courage and the skill to wield it; in all others it is a rusty piece of junk.[302]

W. Morton Fullerton was also critical of the new form of democracy that had emerged at the start of the century. In the introduction to *Problems of Power*, he discusses how America is under the grip of "two occult forces."[303] One of these is "the disseminated Wealth of Democracy," which he defines as the "plutocratic oligarchy" of bankers, manufacturers and mining proprietors, who exercise undue influence on democratic policy, and the other is "the mysterious pervasive force known as Public Opinion," which refers to the same uninformed view Lippmann is critical of in the general populace.[304]

One of the reasons the political system continues the way it does for so long is that despite the air of reform, many of America's citizens were happy to remain blind to the abuses taking place and accepted the status quo, an idea Wharton personifies in the character, "Mrs. Blinder." When Hartley first reports for duty, a

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[302] Lippman 15-16.

[303] Fullerton 1.

[304] Ibid 1.

housemaid shows Hartley around the mansion and they discuss which rooms belong to whom. The housemaid gets upset when she discovers that Mrs. Blinder has left the doors to one of the rooms open again:

> "There – Mrs. Blinder's left the door open again!" said [the housemaid], closing it.
> "Is Mrs. Blinder the housekeeper?"
> "There's no housekeeper: Mrs. Blinder's the cook."
> "And is that her room?"
> "Laws, no," said the housemaid crosslike. "That's nobody's room. It's empty, I mean, and the door hadn't ought to be open. Mrs. Brympton wants it kept locked."[305]

One possible reading suggests that there is something blind about the support for Americans had given to Secretary of State John Hay's Open Door Policy.[306] Some intellectuals felt that in the long run, such "dollar diplomacy" would not serve U.S. interests, but would only alienate America from other world powers. The problems associated with relying on a policy of financial power rather than ideals and political diplomacy was an idea Wharton would later see elaborated by Fullerton.[307] This is not to suggest that Wharton was wholly against the idea of American imperialism -- her good friend, reviewer and mentor of her early fiction, Walter Berry, supported the acquisition of Cuba for the trade benefits that would accrue to the U.S. -- however, a reading of "The Lady's Maid's Bell" suggests that

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[305] Wharton, *Ghosts* 14.

[306] In 1899 a relatively weak China was effectively carved up into spheres of influence, where countries such as Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Italy and Japan sought to assert certain trade privileges. But the boundaries for the spheres were unclear; conflicts between powers arose and America's ambitions to find new markets in China seemed as though they might be thwarted. Hay approached these countries with what were known as "Open Door" notes, which asked them not to erect trade boundaries and to leave an "open door" for other countries; he was able to secure the reluctant consent of the other powers. After America acquired territorial rights in Cuba, Puerto Rico the Philippines and Guam over its 1898 war with Spain, America's Open Door policy was perceived as the continuation of America's newly asserted position as a world power.

[307] In *Problems of Power*, Fullerton linked America's policy in Asia with the deal America had procured with the government of Panama, that in exchange for annual payments, Panama granted the United States the right to build and control the Panama Canal. He points out that while America was able to finesse its way in China by insisting on the Open Door, "the opening of the Panama Canal will not diminish but aggravate that distrust of the United States which marks the growing nationalism of the South American states" (362). Though the deal with Panama was brokered in 1904, after "The Lady's Maid's Bell" was written, America's Open Door Policy in Asia represented a the beginning of new "dollar diplomacy" that affronted other world powers. Wharton's story gives vent to some of the concerns about the perceptions of new America's conduct on the world stage.

Wharton expresses a degree of unease with the arrogant, inward-looking, unilateral nature of the American approach.[308]

The problem however, is that it is not clear who, in fact, *is* the bully. Like Roosevelt himself, Mr. Brympton's power over his house is intimidating, but in the end he is revealed as no more than a frightened, cuckolded husband.[309] In the same way Wharton complains about the arbitrary nature of signs in *The Age of Innocence* -- how "they lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world where the real thing was never said or done, or even thought, but only represented through a system of arbitrary signs"[310] -- the story urges deeper probing on the part of readers to discern that, in fact, the real bully may be Mrs. Brympton, who at first appears to be "the kindest of ladies."[311] Wharton provides clues as to the importance of this introspection and how difficult, but worthwhile, a process it is, when she has readers observe how vigilant Hartley needs to be in order to survive and make sense of her surroundings. One reading of the story can conclude that Emma Saxon was murdered by Mrs. Brympton and Mr. Ranford after she discovered the two having an affair, because Emma Saxon leads Hartley on a trail that ends at Ranford's house. If this is true, then Mr. Ranford is also not what he appears on the surface, "a slight tall gentleman

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[308]For Walter Berry's views on the American expansion in the Caribbean and his influence, generally, over Wharton's early work, see Lee 67. Also, Wharton once referred to herself as a "rabid imperialist" in relation to her support for Britain in the Boer War, Lewis 139. For Wharton's view on French imperialism, see Lee 504. But in relation to American imperialism, Wharton's views were more conflicted; as Bauer notes, "Wharton's imperialist impulses are more preservationist rather than expansionist, more aesthetic than political, and more aligned with European tradition than American progressivism" (14).

[309]Though Wharton is generally believed to have been supportive of Teddy Roosevelt (as documented in her letters), and while Hermione Lee points out that her enthusiasm for Roosevelt had Wharton put him into *The Age of Innocence* as "an exemplary public man," in "The Lady's Maid's Bell" Wharton reveals how she may not have always endorsed his "big stick" methods, particularly when such methods and their legacy worked to alienate America further from the rest of the world. See Wharton's letters to Sally Norton, August 29, September 1, and September 2, 1903 (Beinecke) and Lee's discussion (Lee 155) describing Wharton's general admiration for Roosevelt. And so, the above reading falls slightly outside of these supportive views of Roosevelt; however, as Fullerton outlines, some members of the American "old guard" detected problems with such a unilateral American approach.

[310] Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* 40.

[311] Wharton, "The Lady's Maid's Bell" 15.

of about thirty… [with a] "smile, which had a kind of surprise in it, like the first warm day in spring."[312]

Hartley and the other staff are also disconcerted by the way Mr. Brympton seems to rule remotely. Hartley notes how she had been at the house for nearly a week before she saw her master. Mr. Brympton's business affairs keep him travelling away from home for extended periods, in the West Indies, such that his staff are more comfortable in his absence than his presence. Hartley tells readers "It was plain that nobody loved him below stairs."[313] One interpretation is that Wharton discreetly suggests that nobody likes a bully in the territories "below stairs," a reference to American intervention in Central and South America and in the Southern Pacific at the time.[314] Fullerton discusses the Monroe Doctrine as a "rusting weapon" and how the economic imperatives of increasing internationalism in world trade might "ultimately cause the United States to be brought to bay by rival powers" and how the bullying side of the Monroe Doctrine may have to be readjusted "to bring it into harmony" with the interests of other powers in the region.[315]

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[312] Ibid 18-19.

[313] Ibid 17.

[314] Following the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, there was great debate over what to do with the territories formerly controlled by Spain. Territorial governments were established for Hawaii, Wake Island, Guam and eventually Puerto Rico, but the Philippines proved more difficult to manage with great losses suffered in 1899 as American forces helped to suppress insurrections from opposition forces in an effort to establish a system whereby the people of the Philippines could govern themselves. The Spanish-American War itself was inspired by an effort to "liberate," not colonise Cuba; however, withdrawal of American troops in Cuba in 1902 was made conditional on acceptance of the Platt Agreement, whereby Cuba could not make any treaty impairing its sovereignty without the U.S., which also allowed the U.S. to intervene in Cuba whenever it saw it appropriate in the name of securing political and social stability. In 1895, the U.S. threatened to go to war with Britain if Britain did not submit to arbitration in settling the conflict over the Venezuelan border with British Guiana. In 1901 the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty with Britain cleared the way for America to build and control what would later become the Panama Canal, after the U.S. made a $40 million payment to the French company who had tried but failed to build the canal in Panama. And in 1902, Roosevelt invoked the Monroe Doctrine again in an effort to block German, British, and Italian naval intervention in Venezuela to collect debts owed to German banks.

[315] Fullerton 12-13. With respect to America's policy on Venezuela, Fullerton argued that an enlarged Monroe Doctrine (that asserted itself against the South American states as well as Germany, England and Italy), would in the long term damage America's image for diplomacy. Fullerton urged Americans to recognise the growing

Another reading suggests that Mr. Brympton's status as an absentee owner of the estate refers to the shift in attitudes toward property ownership. With the rise of the modern corporation and remote shareholders, who were similarly divorced from the day-to-day running of a company, some intellectuals were disturbed that America's attitude toward the means for wealth creation was breaking with past Victorian notions, which had organised relationships between owners and workers on more organic, comprehensible lines. Lippmann writes about the very notion of how a shareholder "may never see *his* property" and the ways financial positions could appreciate or depreciate overnight were interpreted by some as "inscrutable mysteries."[316]

Wharton conveys unease over how ordinary citizens at home, who are represented as blind as "Mrs. Blinder" and as wasteful as "Mr. Wace," did not seem to take much notice or have many opinions about America's foreign policy or its changed economic landscape, much less even demonstrate or express any kind of resistance. Instead, they buried themselves in work or in religion, but something was off-kilter in their being:

> Mrs. Blinder took uncommon care with the dinner that night, but she snapped at the kitchenmaid in a way quite unusual with her; and Mr. Wace, the butler, a serious, slow-spoken man, went about his duties as if he'd been getting ready for a funeral. He was a great Bible reader, Mr. Wace was, and had a beautiful assortment of texts at his command; but that day he used such dreadful language, that I was about to leave the table, when he assured me it was all out of Isaiah; and I noticed that whenever the master came Mr. Wace took to the prophets.[317]

This passage can be interpreted as an expression of Wharton's complaint that many Americans, too uncomfortable or unconscious to confront the bullying practices of

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internationalization of world trade and that the South Americans were "masters in their own house and that North American imperialism must disport itself north of the Yucatan" (362).

[316]Lippmann 43 and 45-48.

[317] Wharton, "The Lady's Maid's Bell" 17.

business trusts at home and the actions of their government abroad, take refuge in religion as a stalwart support for the times when they come face to face with the figures who are really organising their lives. Again punning with character names, Wharton suggests there is something futile in the efforts Mr. Wace puts into knowledge of prophets and religious texts, which stand as "beautiful emblems" rather than effective agents which might bring about true justice or change. The dreadful language he uses hints toward the dark, hypocritical side of the Christian evangelists, who motivate their audiences to be strengthened by their convictions, but in their inner lives, are too insecure or inept to have any meaningful influence on the channels available through the democratic system. And yet, worryingly, these were the kind of people America was relying on to be the guardians of the new democracy. As Chapter One outlined, part of the uncanny involves confrontation with that which is unreliable or untrustworthy about one's environment; the new Americans and the new democracy, Wharton suggests, were similarly treacherous.

In the story "Afterward" (1909) Wharton moves on to a different subject: corporate fraud. "Afterward" was written against a landscape of stories that had been in the news at the time about various business scandals.[318] Despite Roosevelt's 1904 campaign promise to reform business, it was obvious that many Americans felt

[318] One of the most notorious cases was the trial of William B. "Big Bill" Haywood for the murder of former Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg in 1906. Haywood was secretary of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) and it was generally believed that he and other key leaders at the WFM had a motive for wanting to kill Steunenberg for the time the governor called upon federal troops to suppress a worker uprising at a lead mine in Coeur d'Alene in 1899. In retribution, it was alleged that Haywood and his colleagues hired a hit man, Harry Orchard, to plant a bomb outside Steunenberg's home, which killed him in December of 1905. As the trial continued, it emerged that Orchard was in fact a spy planted inside the labour organisation who was conspiring with James McPharlan, the head of Pinkerton security, whose services had been specifically retained on the back of the success he had in breaking strike movements, such as his experience of defeating the Molly Maguires in the 1880s. Uncovering that Orchard's testimony in the trial was false, and that he, in fact, was involved in several other crimes on behalf of the Mine Owners' Association, the public was shocked and mine owners generally came to be seen as synonymous with untrustworthiness, corruption and as in this case, associated with murder. Sources: Melvyn Dubofsky, *"Big Bill" Haywood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) and J. Anthony Lukas, *Big Trouble: Murder in a Small Midwestern Town Sets-off Struggle for the Soul of America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

that the business environment had become an un-even playing field, where workers and small business owners (as well as the older moneyed-class) were finding it difficult to hold their own against powerful business trusts, whose members colluded to gain an unfair advantage, with some of them committing crimes such as financial fraud or indeed even murder.

Wharton's story "Afterward," while it may not reference a specific case of fraud in the mining industry, taps into a general unease felt toward mine owners at the time. It tells the story of a rich American couple, Mary and Ned Boyne, who move to an old estate in England on the ill-begotten profits Ned made on a mining deal in America. In the end, Ned is haunted and finally abducted by the ghost of the man who killed himself because he lost all means of supporting his family after Ned double-crossed him in business. At the time the story was written there was a general distrust of powerful business leaders and offence taken at their presumptuous ways. Environmentalists and labour leaders in the Progressive Movement campaigned against the way business leaders seemed to disregard the damage to the environment and their refusal to acknowledge basic worker rights, which adversely affected family life.

In a desire to profit from the increasing demand for raw materials fuelled by industrial expansion in America, mines in places like Pennsylvania and states across the Midwest stripped the natural beauty of the mountain landscapes. Edith Wharton would perhaps have been particularly sensitive to these offences against the environment and the conservationist debates of her day, having initially established herself with articles and then a book about form and harmony in landscape.[319] In

[319]See Wharton's travel writing: *Italian Backgrounds* (1905; New York: Ecco Press, 1989). *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904; New York: De Capo Press, 1976); and *A Motor Flight Through France* (1908; London: Picador, 1995).

"Afterward" she derides the Boynes' insensitivity to the fact that they can now enjoy the beauty of the English countryside because of the wealth they earned by ravaging the American landscape as mine owners. Wharton describes how the Boynes were attracted to the "ever-recurring wonders" of Britain, how its compressed nature, as a "nest of counties," produces a pleasing effect as one viewed the many contrasts in the panorama of the landscape.[320] But Ned regards the view from their new estate with relish, as if it is a meal the English have readied for his consumption:

> "It's that," Ned had once enthusiastically explained, "that gives such depth to their effects, such relief to their contrasts. [The English have] been able to lay the butter so thick on every delicious mouthful."[321]

Wharton then goes on to tell us that "the butter had certainly been laid on thick at Lyng," the name of the estate purchased by the Boynes.[322] Usually people lay the butter on thick for someone else to mislead the other person in some way; "Afterward" is a story of how the Boynes are deceiving themselves as they pursue this pastoral experience: Ned, in the way he uses it to escape the memory of how he did, in fact, cheat someone else to get to where he is, and Mary, in the way she deceives herself to remain wilfully ignorant of the truth about her husband's business affairs. The couple are trying to be the exact opposite of what they are. They sought to buy a house with the typical "economic drawbacks which were associated, in their tradition, with unusual architectural felicities": Lyng has few modern conveniences, the plumbing is bad and there is no heat or electricity.[323] As "romantic Americans" they are charmed with the way they are roughing it and living simple, when in reality

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[320] Wharton, "Afterward," *Ghosts* 60.

[321] Ibid 61

[322] Ibid.

[323] Ibid 58.

it was their rugged materialism and Ned's double-dealing ways that earned them the money and leisure for this new contemplative life.[324]

To fill their time, Mary intends to cultivate their garden and oversee the refurbishment of the estate; Ned's plan is to write a book "he has long planned on the 'Economic Basis of Culture.'"[325] With this reference, Wharton draws readers' attention to the kinds of books, written by business leaders and economists that were popular at the turn of the century.[326] In particular, the essays and books of Simon N. Patten helped to remove the some of the negative connotations attached to notions of consumption. Though Patten himself was critical of wasteful forms of consumption, such as that focussed on conspicuous displays and luxury items, his theories were influential in shifting the American economy from nineteenth-century economic modes, which emphasised production on to consumption models that maintained America's future economic expansion relied on surpluses and on ideas of prosperity and abundance, where the consumer rather than the producer was the new focal point.[327] Patten's theories, and the popularity of them represented a significant shift away from the Victorian ideals Edith Wharton grew up with, which emphasised the Protestant work ethic, production, conservation, and personal responsibility.[328]

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[324] Ibid.

[325] Ibid 60.

[326]These books included three written by Simon N. Patten, *The Premises of Political Economy* (1880), *The Theory of Prosperity* (1902) and *The New Basis of Civilisation* (1907); *Looking Backward* (1888) and *Equality* (1897) by Edward Bellamy; *An Introduction to Political Economy* (1889) and *Outlines of Economics* 1893) by Richard T. Ely; and Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) as well as *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (1904), the latter of which provided counsel on the ways that "business methods and business principles ... influence the modern cultural situation" (21). See Kathleen G. Donohue's discussion of these books in *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: The John's Hopkins University Press, 2003) 41-74.

[327]Simon N. Patten, "The Effect of the Consumption of Wealth on the Economic Welfare of Society" (1902), *Essays in Economic Theory by Simon Nelson Patten*, ed. Rexford Guy Tugwell (Port Washington, NY and London: Kennikat Press, 1971). Also see Donohue's discussion of the impact of Patten's theories in *Freedom from Want*, 41-113 as well as David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954) 172-174.

[328]Dale Bauer discusses Wharton's later resistance (in the 1920s) to the "abundance theories" of the Christian Scientists. Christian Science maintains, according to Bauer, that some things (even vices such as champagne)

To cause further offence to public opinion, certain business leaders believed that they were somehow divinely endowed to use and direct America's resources, and in turn, that they were the best individuals to decide how the wealth generated from those resources was to be spent. Andrew Carnegie's 1899 social treatise, *The Gospel of Wealth* builds upon the ideas of social Darwinism conveyed by Herbert Spencer that support the argument that the rich become rich because they are more "fit to." Carnegie, a Scottish immigrant who made his fortune in steel, became a great philanthropist, donating $335 million in his lifetime to different charities (mostly to establish libraries, educational institutions and public recreational facilities such as swimming pools). At the turn of the century, Carnegie's level of charity (as well as that of other figures such as John Rockefeller, who gave away $175 million in his lifetime) was impressively generous. However, Wharton found this new attitude toward the display of wealth disturbing. She admired European cultures because they possessed long-standing traditions of regarding the wealthy as the guardians of wealth, and in turn, the guardians of culture. But at the turn of century in America, people such as Carnegie, Henry Frick and Rockefeller introduced a uniquely American slant to this idea that the direction of wealth and resources were linked to spending and more ostentatious levels of charitable contributions, that were not only divinely inspired, but acted as a way of inspiring others to see such charitable "spending" (and eventually all spending), as another

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are not wrong if one does not think they are wrong, however such a permissive view also supports abundance theory, narcissism and unregulated consumption. Bauer explains how Wharton was sceptical of the use of abundance theories to fend off the socialist threat. Though Wharton abhorred socialism, she also deeply distrusted the way abundance rhetoric was used to cultivate off-balance capitalist consumption. Bauer 55 and 65.

competitive act. Wharton was disturbed by the emphasis on outward expenditure versus inward examination.[329]

This new relationship between having wealth and then spending wealth in order to generate more wealth was a development Wharton felt uneasy about, particularly because the parvenu members of society she witnessed around her, who, like the Boynes in "Afterward," had wealth, but wealth earned through deceptive means. Thus, not only were they illegitimately wealthy, they were also ill-equipped to administer that wealth ethically. Much less were they in the position to write books such as the "Economic Basis of Culture," which advised other parvenus how to do it. Wharton delivers her criticism again by punning with names. One of the characters who advises Mary Boyne on matters of her estate after her husband's presumed death is the not-fully-trustworthy lawyer, Mr Parveni, who is perhaps one of the least qualified to "advise" because he is tangentially linked to the business scandal that brought about her husband's disappearance in the first place.

"Afterward" demonstrates the way Wharton was disturbed by the new breed of criminal she saw emerging in America – the white collar criminal. She was fascinated by how business ethics have become so muddy, so obfuscated by grey areas, that the new kind of criminal does not even realise he is committing a crime ...

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[329]See Lee's discussion of how "the leisure class [of Edith Wharton's parents' generation] who did nothing but 'hunting, sailing, travelling, drinking, racing horses and yachts' were being displaced by entrepreneurs with no pedigrees, but with the means and vision for an 'American Renaissance' of commerce and culture" (47). This desire to leave their imprint on American culture, with generous contributions to establish institutions such as The Metropolitan Museum, was pursued hyperactively and competitively, in the same manner in which they approached the building of that lavish houses, which Henry James would describe as "monuments of pecuniary power" rather than true stewardship of culture. Lee also notes how Wharton's third novel, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907) dealt with this troubled relationship between capitalism and philanthropy.

In a letter to William Roscoe Thayer on November 11, 1905, Wharton describes the inferior sense of responsibility attached money and how to spend it when compared to the more informed, traditional ways making expenditures in more mature European societies: "I must protest, & emphatically, against the suggestion that I have 'stripped' New York society. New York society is still amply clad & the little corner of its garment that I have lifted was meant to show only that little atrophied organ – the group of idle & dull people – that exists in any big & wealthy social body. If it seems more conspicuous in New York than in an old civilization, it is because the whole social organization with us is so much smaller & less elaborate -- & if, as I believe, it is more harmful in its influence, it is because fewer responsibilities attach to money with us than in other societies." EW to William Roscoe Thayer on November 11, 1905, *Letters* 95.

that is, until "afterward," after personal fortunes and life savings have been lost, or after someone has died, as Robert Elwell has in this story. Close reading of the text reveals how Wharton was uneasy about these grey areas, which she represents through grey symbols. When Mary Boyne first sees Elwell's ghost (who she thinks is just a man, not a ghost) she observes how he wore "loose grey clothes" and how her "short-sighted eyes had given her but a blurred impression of slightness and greyness."[330] Her husband sees the figure more distinctly, but that is because he knows more. Mary has kept herself blissfully ignorant of the true source of their income:

> Theoretically, she deprecated the American wife's detachment from her husband's professional interests, but in practice she had always found it difficult to fix her attention on Boyne's report of the transactions in which his varied interests involved him.[331]

In this comment, Wharton also reveals her unease and cynicism towards the double standard held by some women who regarded themselves as enlightened by the new feminism. Walter Lippmann in Chapter Nine of *Drift and Mastery*, entitled "Note on the Woman's Movement," complains how "the inventive minds [of some women] have been stunted by a fierce absorption in the little interests of the household;" these women are simultaneously, if unwittingly, the same women "who have egged on their husbands on to ruthless business practices."[332] Lippmann explains that to ignore the unconscious pull toward this form of individualism, which he describes "is a constant obstacle to a larger coöperative life" of the kind advocated by figures such as Charlotte Gilman Perkins, is a form of naïveté. Wharton also displays this sense of individualism, here in Mary Boyce, but perhaps

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[330] Wharton, "Afterward" 64.

[331] Ibid 70.

[332] Lippmann 129.

most famously in the character of Undine Spragg in *The Customs of the Country* (1913).

In the early days of owning the house, the Boynes are somewhat disappointed to discover that while the house has most of the other features associated with old estates of its kind, it has no ghost. But Mary remains vigilant and when she thinks she sees a ghost, again it is indistinct, "it looked like a blot of deeper grey in the greyness."[333] She then thinks back to the figure of the man she had seen in the garden two months prior, and thinks to herself that perhaps the man was not a man but rather was a ghost after all. "Her spirit sank under the impending fear of the disclosure."[334] Robert Elwell's ghost represents the disclosure of information about her husband's business practices that she has allowed to be kept secret from her. Two months *after* the first incident, she feels the anxiety.

She then reminds her husband of something a friend of theirs remarked to them that "when one sees the Lyng ghost one never knows it."[335] Wharton here conveys how it is difficult to see that certain business practices are unjust when one is immersed in them; white collar criminals can often be unaware they are committing a crime, because their unscrupulous methods have become nearly acceptable.[336] A conversation follows where Mary asks her husband has he "given

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[333] Wharton, "Afterward" 66.

[334] Ibid.

[335] Ibid.

[336] In 1907 sociologist Edward A. Ross protested how old ideas about morals no longer seemed applicable to social codes of the modern age. There were new types of sins:

> The immunity enjoyed by the perpetrator of new sins has brought into being a new class for which we may coin the term *criminaloid* ... By this we designate such as prosper by flagitious practices which have not yet come under the effective ban of public opinion. Often, indeed, they are guilty in the eyes of the law; but since they are not culpable in the eyes of the public and in their own eyes, their spiritual attitude is not that of the criminal. The lawmaker may make their misdeeds crimes, but so long as morality stands stock-still in the old tracks, they escape both punishment and ignominy. Unlike their low-browed cousins, they occupy the cabin rather than the steerage of society. [...]
>
> Fortified by his connections with 'legitimate business,' 'the regular party organization,' perhaps with orthodoxy and the *bon ton,* he may even bestride his community like a Colossus. In his sight *and in*

up trying to see the ghost?" To which he replies, "I never tried."[337] He never tried being conscientious in business so he was not even aware of when he was not. Then Mary persists with "the exasperating thing is that there's no use trying, since one can't be sure till so long afterward."[338] And thus, Wharton's title for her story provides clues as to the subject of her unease: it is not until after it emerges that bad business deals have bad consequence -- for the environment, for labour, for families -- that people realise there is something unethical or even criminal about them. And sometimes, if the bad consequences go unnoticed, no one even realises something wrong has taken place and the new, unethical business practices become the accepted norm.

The theme of corruption in business presents itself again in Wharton's 1914 story "The Triumph of Night." Although published in the first year of the War, there are no overt references to European politics; instead the story deals with more domestic concerns in the U.S. political and economic landscape. In fact, Wharton's

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> *their own sight* the old-style, square-dealing sort are grasshoppers. Do not we hail him as 'a man who does things,' make him director of our banks and railroads, trustee of our hospitals and libraries? When Prince Henry visits us, do we not put him on the committee?"
>
> [...]
>
> THE KEY OF THE CRIMINALOID IS NOT EVIL IMPLUSE BUT MORAL INSENSIBILITY.
>
> The Director who speculates in the securities of his corporation, the banker who lends his depositors' money to himself under divers [*sic*] corporate aliases, the railroad official who grants a secret rebate for his private graft, the builder who hires walking delegates to harass his rivals with causeless strikes, the labor leader who instigates a strike in order to be paid for calling it off, the publisher who bribes his text-books into the schools, these reveal in their faces nothing of wolf or vulture. Nature has not foredoomed them to evil by a double dose of lust, cruelty, malice, greed, or jealousy. They are not degenerates tormented by monstrous cravings. They want nothing more than we all want, -- money, power, consideration, -- in a word, success; but they are in a hurry and they are not particular as to the means.
>
> The criminaloid prefers to prey on an anonymous public. [...] Too squeamish and too prudent to practice treachery, brutuality, and violence himself, he takes care to work through middlemen. [...] Thus he becomes a consumer of custom-made crime, a client of criminals, oftener a maker of criminals by persuading or requiring his subordinates to break law.
>
> Edward Alsworth Ross, *Sin and Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907) 47-52.

[337] Wharton, "Afterward" 67.

[338] Ibid.

description of the landscape in "The Triumph of Night" reveals quite a lot to readers about her regard for the excesses of capitalism. Depictions of enormous homes, equipped with every comfort, are perched uncertainly on icy slopes; luxury sleighs are used to convey VIP passengers but are also at risk of getting marooned in deep snow; modern trains careen around mountain corners that are combed by cutting winds. Hostile environmental factors serve as metaphors for harsh, unforgiving economic laws which create a society of extremes and an economic class structure, where those who have achieved a level wealth remain vulnerable to slipping and thus they must persist with a paranoid consciousness that one day, they too might find themselves "out in the cold." This image of the precarious nature of the American economic system was at odds with notions at the time that maintained America's surpluses had somehow underpinned democracy and secured the "New Freedom" envisioned by President Woodrow Wilson when he was elected in 1912. That Wharton was uneasy with the excesses of capitalism is not to suggest that she was a socialist; her correspondence with Upton Sinclair demonstrates her problems with socialism.[339] Nevertheless, "The Triumph of Night" shows Wharton's ambivalence toward the much-touted "progress" of the Progressive Age and how she was uncomfortable with many aspects of unrestrained capitalism, which she animates as the harsh weather conditions described in the New Hampshire setting for the story.

The story begins with the protagonist, George Faxon, waiting for a sleigh to pick him up from the train station at Northridge Junction and convey him to the estate of "Weymore," where he is to take up a new job as secretary to the wealthy Mrs. Culme, who by all accounts has "way more" than most Americans at the time,

[339] In a letter Wharton wrote to Upton Sinclair, she describes the socialist views he espoused to be "abhorrent" to her. EW to Upton Sinclair, August 19, 1927, *Letters* 500-1.

and who certainly has more than the Harvard-educated Faxon. Faxon is portrayed as intelligent, conscientious and as someone who would be more than capable of fulfilling his role as a personal secretary, but also is a character who can evoke readers' sympathies. The new economy of the 1910s has no real value for people educated as he is, and he is literally exposed to the cold without the proper coat.[340] The 1910s were a decade that celebrated the industrial tycoon, the Wall Street financier and, with the advances in scientific management and Taylorism, a new type of worker, the middle manager. Walter Lippmann discusses the rise of the "manager" as a salaried worker who is "divorced from ownership" of the company he works for, yet a newly powerful class of worker that has been educated specifically for the role by graduate schools of business administration.[341] Wharton read the introduction of business courses at Harvard as signalling the twilight of a superior age in education.[342] She suggests that someone with Faxon's distinguished education, but perhaps not with his sensitivity, would have performed better, and with a greater sense of judgement, had he gone into business than those professionally trained for the role. But Faxon's more delicate emotional constitution and keener sense of value for the inner life resulted in his opting for a more independent, though peripatetic existence as a personal assistant.[343]

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[340]Faxon's frustrated career mirrors the same kinds of doubts Fullerton expressed to Wharton a few years earlier about his own career path. At the time Fullerton was contemplating leaving the *London Times*, but was similarly preoccupied if a world motivated by new economic realities would have a place for a generalist like himself. In a letter to Fullerton (October 25, 1910) Wharton encourages Fullerton to steel himself to the challenge and overcome the way he has let himself "drift" into a career whereby he became "a highly intelligent automaton." Wharton urges Fullerton to leave the *Times* while he is still young enough (45) to "*make [him]self over.*" *Letters* 224.

[341] Lippmann 43.

[342] EW to Sara Norton, June 23, 1907, Beinecke, qtd in Lee 172.

[343]This characterisation of Faxon is very similar to another character Wharton creates later on in *The Age of Innocence*, the impoverished writer Ned Winsett. In conversation with Newland Archer, Winsett justifies his choice of profession: "You see, Monsieur, it's worth everything isn't it, to keep one's intellectual liberty, not to enslave one's powers of appreciation, one's critical independence? It was because of that that I abandoned journalism and took to so much duller work: tutoring and private secretaryship. There is a good deal of drudgery, of course; but one preserves one's moral freedom, what we call in French one's *quat à soi.* And

Faxon represents the kind of figure Lippmann writes about who is unable to master the economics the world of trusts had introduced to American society. "Drifters" move through the world either nostalgically, clinging to a past that they believe was easier; or they position themselves rebelliously against an imagined authority (which is also no longer appropriate since all external authority has vanished); thus, in effect, "their revolt is the endless pursuit of what their own disharmony will never let them find;"[344] or they simply drift unconsciously into careers or relationships. "Mastery" involves waking oneself up to full consciousness; it involves "the substitution of conscious intention for unconscious striving."[345] Lippmann explains that "those who are really at home" in the modern world "find life more interesting as they mature. Experience for them is not an awful chance but a prize they can win and embrace."[346] Faxon is not quite at this level of mastery.

The precarious nature of his career choice is portrayed by Wharton in the way she describes him at the mercy of the frozen landscape, bracing himself against unforgiving market forces fathomed as harsh winter winds:

> The blasts that swept him came off New Hampshire snowfields and ice-hung forests. It seemed to have traversed interminable leagues of frozen silence, filling them with the same bitter black-and-white landscape. Dark, searching and swordlike, it alternately muffled and harried its victim, like a bullfighter now whirling his cloak and now planting his darts. This analogy brought home to the young man the fact that he himself had no cloak, and that the overcoat in which he had faced the relatively temperate air of Boston seemed no thicker than a sheet of paper on the bleak heights of Northridge.[347]

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when one hears good talk one can join in it without compromising any opinions but one's own; one can listen, and answer it inwardly. Ah, good conversation -- there's nothing like it, is there? The air of ideas is the only air worth breathing. And so I have never regretted giving up either diplomacy or journalism -- two forms of the same self-abnegation" (195-196).

[344] Lippmann 110.

[345] Ibid 148.

[346] Ibid 103.

[347] Wharton, "The Triumph of Night," *Ghosts* 118.

The new economy is a "black-and-white" landscape, with no appropriate position to place a generalist like Faxon. It requires individuals to have thicker skins and heavier coats to protect themselves against the vagaries of the market.

In this economy, the gap between the very rich and the very poor is wide. Places like "Weymore" and "Overdale" (the mansion he ends up staying in), where John Lavington is portrayed as a tycoon who "over does it" with extravagant furnishings, are isolated and perched high above the villages of common people.[348] But as the story unfolds, it becomes obvious that the fortunes which build fortified mansions in places such as Northridge are as susceptible to collapse and as precarious as Faxon's own financial position. Even Faxon reflects how Northridge is "uncommonly well-named" as it "clung to an exposed ledge over the valley" and the winds comb it with "teeth of steel."[349] In this description Wharton references how certain wealthy industrialists of the time made and then lost fortunes and were forced to liquidate assets to avoid bankruptcy.[350] The same phenomenon is observed in this story; the wealthy concrete industrialist John Lavington uses funds from his dying nephew's estate as leverage to keep demanding banks from foreclosing upon him.

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[348]Lee notes that part of what inspired Wharton to write *The Decoration of Houses* with Ogden Codman in 1897 as "a theory of American design" was, in effect, an effort to redress this kind of conspicuous consumption (119). Earlier, Lee notes how the period of sustained prosperity, between 1880 and 1893, coincided with Edith Wharton's coming into her own maturity in her twenties. At this time, she was becoming sensitive to the architectural changes the newly wealthy were making in the way they approached the building and the furnishing of their houses. Lee points out that at this time, America "was just beginning to be astonishing ... It has begun to reinvent everything, and especially the house" (47). The original quotation comes from the art critic Earl Shinn, writing as Edward Strahan, introduction, *Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection, 1883-4*. Wharton visited Biltmore, the mansion of George Washington Vanderbilt in 1902. Biltmore is a monstrous mansion, designed as a French chateau sitting on 150,000 acres in the Blue Ridge mountains of North Carolina, an area that with the exception of Biltmore, was a place of exceptional poverty. Lee explains how Henry James described Biltmore to Edith Wharton as a "'strange, colossal, heart-breaking house' surrounded by what he called 'a vast niggery wilderness'". Letter of Henry James to EW, February 8, 1905, qtd in Lee 47. The description of Biltmore resembles the estates of Weymore and Overdale in "The Triumph of Night."

[349] Wharton, "The Triumph of Night" 118.

[350]In particular, the "Panic of 1907" would still have been a recent memory for many New Yorkers. Also known as the "1907 Bankers' Panic," the stock market saw 50% of its value collapse and the American economy was plunged into recession as banks called in loans and forced many businesses to close. See Fraser 280-281.

The uncanny element in the story centres on the appearance of John Lavington's evil *doppelgänger*. Despite the "exuberance of Lavington's public personality" as a generous philanthropist and a gracious host, in business, John Lavington wears a vacant "pinched smile" and at critical points in the story, this second side of Lavington actually detaches in the form of an evil double, a ghost-like demon that directs Lavington's unethical behaviour in business.[351] George Faxon comes to meet Lavington through his frail and tubercular nephew Frank Rainer. Rainer is at the station to pick up two of his uncle's business colleagues and generously extends the invitation to Faxon to spend the night at this uncle's mansion until the storm passes. During his stay, Faxon accidentally walks in on a meeting, where Lavington is arranging for Rainer to sign over his estate to the custodianship of his uncle, with his uncle's two business colleagues in attendance as witnesses. During the meeting, Faxon observes Lavington's double presiding over the signing ceremony as a Mephistophelian figure. It is no accident that the ghost is visible only to Faxon, because in keeping with Wharton's theory of the ghostly instinct, it is only the rare breed of people of Faxon's character, who respect the traditions and ethics of the past, who are sensitive enough to see society's ghosts. As in "Afterward" everyone else is so inured to unscrupulous practices in business, they no longer see the ghosts.

In addition to corruption in business, there are other aspects of the socio-historical context to which Wharton makes reference in this story. Wharton was also uneasy about the way certain segments of society were frittering away their time on unproductive pursuits. In "The Triumph of Night," for example, the young Rainer confesses that he is "extremely fond of dining out, dancing and similar

[351] Wharton, "The Triumph of Night" 124 and 135.

distractions."[352] The "crowded restaurants and hot ballrooms" of New York are aggravating his recovery from tuberculosis, and so, in heeding his doctor's advice, he comes to Northridge for the occasional respite.[353] But in discussing this with Faxon, he confesses that what is really killing him is boredom. Pre-figuring the flappers of the twenties Wharton would later reveal for their shallowness in novels such as *Twilight Sleep* (1927), the young Rainer is someone who simply cannot abide to be alone with his thoughts. He is an eerie Dorian Gray figure who is living when he should be dying. Even Faxon notes in observing the young man, "It's queer – a healthy face but dying hands."[354] There is something unnatural and withering about Rainer. He is not serious about the things he should be – he is camp in his use of English and equally frivolous at the signing of his last will and testament, where his main concern is what kind of implement he will use to sign his name, frowning upon the pin-pointed pen his uncle offers, and looking for a more flamboyant quill.

Wharton argues for a greater sense of conscientiousness among the young, and particularly among the privileged classes, not only in their use of language and the way they spend their leisure, but also in their manners. All the added responsibility of "managing" higher levels of wealth has distracted the newly wealthy from attending to common decency and manners. For example, in forgetting Faxon at the station, Mrs. Culme (whose name may be a pun on anthracite clum, a waste product in the coal mining industry) does not consider how paying for a night's lodgings elsewhere will devastate Faxon's delicately balanced finances. Mrs. Culme requires numerous intermediaries to help her keep track of it all, and still, certain duties get neglected.

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[352] Ibid 122.

[353] Ibid 132.

[354] Ibid 123.

Wharton's description of the many levels of Mrs. Culme's domestic staff structure can be read as inveighing against a new phenomenon emerging in the American economy at the time: the multi-layered corporation. This new organisational structure relies on intermediary layers -- holding companies and middle-level managers -- for its very existence, yet is somehow negligent in its responsibilities to the wider community. This description of the modern corporation is similar to the way Wharton describes Mrs. Culme's manner for running her household:

> Yet to say that Mrs. Culme had forgotten him was too crude a way of putting it. Similar incidents led him to think that she had probably told her maid to tell the butler to telephone the coachman to tell one of the grooms (if no one else needed him) to drive over to Northridge to fetch the new secretary; but on the night like this, what groom who respected his rights would fail to forget the order?[355]

It is not that there is anything wrong, by itself, with the idea of more complicated corporate structures. However, here Wharton gives expression to how in the 1910s big business organised itself along these complicated lines, often to hide less forthright activities, to camouflage incompetence, or to mask monopoly positions in certain industries. Despite the reform efforts associated with the age, large conglomerates still controlled railroads, banks, insurance companies, meatpacking, and oil refining. As America grew, so did demand for resources in sectors such as the construction industry. Conglomerates emerged in the steel industry, lands were deforested for lumber, and greed also touched building sector trades such as John Lavington's concrete industry.

The modern corporation introduced a fracture with the past and traditional notions of property ownership. As Lippmann relates, "No one has ever had a more abstract relation to the thing he owned. The absentee landlord is one of the sinister

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[355] Ibid 119.

figures of history. But the modern shareholder is not only an absentee, he is a transient too."[356] In this detached and evanescent environment, it was easy to think of defrauding shareholders in impersonal terms. Moreover, the reference to the groom's "rights" in the above quote is an allusion to another pressing concern in the business environment at the time – the Progressive Party's campaign for worker's rights, which maintained that workers were entitled to shorter work weeks, better pay and safer working conditions.

"The Triumph of Night" taps into the feeling of unease that even if businesses were seen to be cooperating with government reforms, collusive practices were still taking place behind the scenes. The Clayton Antitrust Act and the Federal Trade Commission helped to rein-in some of the abusive practices that were more common earlier in the century, but they were also made less effective in Congress when powerful businessmen applied pressure to modify the Clayton bill such that the final version of the Act contained many compromises. "The Triumph of Night" conveys Wharton's empathy with this general feeling of distrust that the reforms in banking and the regulations in business were not enough; hidden centres of power still existed and were still marred by corruption. Isolated locales such as Northridge, New Hampshire, where business leaders met, almost clandestinely, represent such centres of power and secret coteries of influence. Evidence for Wharton's interest in the matter would come later, when she wrote to Minnie Jones, "It really looks from this distance as if Franklin Roosevelt were the man we needed. At any rate the bank clean-up is all to the good! [...] How does it feel to have a *man* at the helm at last?"[357]

Faxon represents the kind of character common in Wharton, who develops

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[356] Lippmann 46.

[357] EW to Minnie Jones, March 14 and March 17, 1933 Beinecke, qtd in Lee 734.

integrity in his struggle to find his way and niche in the material world and yet still preserve a sense of independence and inner life. What he lacks materially, particularly in this age, where his contemporaries are amassing shareholding stakes in companies, Faxon makes up for with spiritual abilities he would rather not have:

> That was what his rootless life had brought him to: for lack of a personal stake in things his sensibility was at the mercy of such trifles … Yes; that, and the cold and fatigue, the absence of hope and the haunting sense of starved aptitudes, all these brought him to the perilous verge over which, once or twice before, his terrified brain had hung.[358]

Here Faxon's sensitivity could be seen as symptomatic of neurasthenia, a common affliction of the time; but it could also represent how he is literally haunted by his economic vulnerability in this liminal space.[359] When Lavington's demon-double appears to Faxon a second time, Faxon flees the house and eventually suffers a nervous breakdown. He recovers by spending time in Malay Peninsula, where he reads in the papers that Lavington, in fact, was involved in a corrupt business deal and had knowingly extorted funds out of his dying nephew to bail out his own financial position.

The references to Southeast Asia in the story are significant because with them, Wharton alludes to America's trading designs in that region as well as in others. Faxon is in Malaysia accompanying a man he had known from Harvard on a "business trip."[360] At this time, in 1914, America was emerging as the key supplier of weaponry for the Allies in World War I. But with this success, big business looked to the government to help them secure new markets to trade their products abroad, particularly in Southeast Asia as well as in Central and South America. As Faxon recuperates in Southeast Asia, earlier in the story, Mr. Grisben (one of

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[358] Wharton, "The Triumph of Night" 138.

[359] Fullerton also suffered from the ailment and visited the same doctor who treated Teddy Wharton.

[360] Wharton, "The Triumph of Night" 143.

Lavington's corrupt business partners) had urged Rainer to seek convalescence with his own nephew in Santa Paz, which is near the border of Mexico where his nephew is "out there ranching on a big scale."[361] The world of big business, revolving around trusts and holding companies in exotic locations seemed far removed from the average citizen, but appeared to be where the major wealth was being generated at this time.

Despite the federal government's efforts at reform, Wharton and her community of readers felt unease over the collusive practices and imperialist designs that seemed to be critical to securing America's brand of "New Freedom" in the Progressive Era. They also felt unease over the personal sacrifices individuals were expected to make as, for example, in case of Faxon, where a once earnest personal assistant, finds his recuperation by taking his convalescence with the same class of business people who made him sick in the first place. Wharton was troubled by how life consisted of compromises as these and how one way for members of the old money class to survive in the modern world was to become complicit with the practices of the newly wealthy. These compromises could be found in business or in the marriages women make for themselves such as in "The Lady's Maid's Bell" or "Afterward." They constituted the kinds of accommodations or progressive "advances" that made Wharton feel not "at home" among the new breed of Americans and stirred her to render her social and historical context as uncanny.

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[361] Ibid 133.

Part IV – Wharton and Her Context During and After the War

It is widely acknowledged that the war affected Wharton profoundly. In a letter to her friend, Bernard Berenson, dated August 1, 1914, she asks him "Hasn't [the war] shaken all the foundations of reality for you?"[362] As Julie Olin-Ammentorp notes in her study of Wharton's writing from this period, at the beginning of the war, Wharton like so many other writers of the period, was full of idealism, believing the German invasion of France and Belgium had to be stopped, but also maintaining that the war was "thrillingly interesting" since it had the ability to transform the men who fought in it into heroes.[363] However, as Olin-Ammentorp recounts, when Wharton learned of the death of her former servant Henri in October 1915, her excitement for the war changed to disillusion and exhaustion.[364] As the war continued, she felt she was experiencing an unreal, almost uncanny dimension, where traditional laws about time and space seemed nearly suspended. In a letter to Bernard Berenson in 1917, Wharton wrote: "Really, the times *are* portentous, & everything that happens is on a gigantic scale, in space & time both. It's even bigger, & for longer, than we're used to."[365]

Wharton left America in 1907 and made Europe her home, dividing her time between England and France, but was based in France for much of the war, where she eventually settled. Although Wharton maintains in her memoir *A Backward Glance* that her writing output reduced during the war, she actually wrote a significant amount during the period. From December 1914 to November 1918, she

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[362]EW to Bernard Berenson, August 1, 1914, qtd in Olin-Ammentorp, 154.

[363] Ibid 154.

[364] Olin-Ammentorp 29.

[365] EW to Bernard Berenson, February 4, 1917, *Letters* 357.

published 37 magazine and newspaper items, which included nine war-related poems and several feature articles about the charities she established and funded. Wharton founded hostels for Belgian refugees in Paris and a sanatorium for tubercular soldiers as well as infected woman and children. For her efforts, the French government awarded her the Legion of Honour in March 1916 and permitted Wharton to be one of the few women writers who were allowed to travel to the front to cover the war. Wharton wrote two novels about the war, *The Marne* (1918) and *A Son at the Front,* which was begun in 1918 but not completed until 1922. She also wrote three short stories, "Coming Home" (1916), "The Refugees" (1919) and "Writing a War Story" (1919).

In June of 1915, in a letter to her publisher, Charles Scribner, Wharton describes how her writing would be inspired during the war years:

> May I suggest [that rather than the novel I promised] during the next six months, giving you instead four or five short stories, not precisely war stories but on subjects suggested by the war? ... So many extraordinary and dramatic situations are springing out of the huge conflict that the temptation to use a few of them is irresistible.[366]

"Kerfol," published in 1916, is one of these "not precisely war stories."[367] "Kerfol" tells the story of Anne Cornault, a woman from the seventeenth century who is effectively imprisoned in her house by her much older husband; he forbade her visitors, and, out of jealousy over a suspected suitor, spitefully murders each of his

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[366] EW to Charles Scribner, June 1915, *Letters* 357.

[367] There is confusion over whether "Kerfol" was written before or during the war. It was published in 1916; and as the discussion to follow will indicate, the story contains certain images which can be read as war references. Lee also considers "Kerfol" to be one of Wharton's most interesting stories "to come out of the war" (514). However, in a letter, Wharton mentions that all of the stories in the 1916 *Xingu* collection, except "Coming Home" were written before the war. Two of her ghost stories were included in this collection, "The Triumph of Night" and "Kerfol." EW to Gaillard Lapsley, December 21, 1916, *Letters* 385. Also, as previously noted, critic Claire M. Tylee discusses how the role of a gender-neutral narrator is used as a "disguise" in Wharton, "ironically adopted to distance the author from both the male gaze and the woman constructed by it" (337). In view of Tylee's analysis, the fact that the gender of the narrator of "Kerfol" is hard to identify makes the case for considering "Kerfol" a war story more compelling: by being purposefully vague on the subject of the narrator's gender, Wharton positions the war themes of the story to be accepted without the gender of the narrator, or her own as the writer, acting as an influence in the story's reception.

wife's beloved pet dogs. In the end, the ghosts of the dogs take revenge upon Cornault, but Anne does not reap any vindication; rather, she is blamed for his murder and put into the care of his family, who lock her up in Kerfol, where she dies years later "a harmless madwoman."[368]

The first reference Wharton makes to her unease over the war is through the voice of the story's narrator, a modern-day American woman who comes to Kerfol with a view to buying the property on the advice of her friend, Lanrivian, who tells her is it the "very place" for her.[369] Reflecting on the "sheer weight of [the] many lives and deaths which gives majesty to all old houses,"[370] the narrator, somewhat appalled at her friend's levity, observes to herself:

> I was overcome by the almost blasphemous frivolity of suggesting to any living being that Kerfol was the place for him. "Is it possible that anyone could *not* see -- ?" I wondered. I did not finish the thought: what I meant was undefinable. I stood up and wandered toward the gate. I was beginning to want to know more; not to see more -- I was by now so sure it was not a question of seeing -- but to feel more: feel all the place had to communicate.[371]

In this observation Wharton seems to suggest that the narrator has the same sensitivity to be a "ghost feeler" as George Faxon in "The Triumph of Night." Her "inner life" has been developed to the point that she, in fact, is capable of sympathy where others are not. And sympathy was something Wharton was urging Americans to feel at this time. Frustrated with America's reluctance to enter the war, Wharton

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[368]Wharton, "Kerfol," *Ghosts* 116.

[369]Lee comments that how the nationality and gender of the narrator are unspecified but she assumes that the narrator is American and male (514). Lee's assumption might be based on her insights into story Wharton wrote called, self-referentially "Writing a War Story;" Lee interprets that in "Writing a War Story" Wharton suggests that "women cannot write about the war and be taken seriously unless they turn themselves into men" (486). However it is also possible to consider the narrator American and female because the activity of examining the house for possible purchase mirrors the situation Wharton herself was in just prior to the start of the War. In 1913 Henry James and Gaillard Lapsley were trying to convince Wharton to settle in England and, similar to the narrator of "Kerfol," she considered buying a rather large old estate, "Coopersale," near Epping, in England.

[370] Wharton, "Kerfol" 93.

[371] Ibid 94.

was almost in disbelief over her own country's blindness to the horror of what she was witnessing before her: how was "it possible that anyone could not see?"[372] America would not enter the war until April the following year, in 1917, but Wharton, who had seen so much at the front, like the narrator of "Kerfol," was not satisfied with just seeing more, she wanted to know more, more about the causes of war's horrors and more about the reasons why America was refusing to help, reasons she felt sure were insufficient.[373]

Also, the narrator's dilemma of not being able to articulate what she was thinking -- that somehow words also failed in their ability to convey all that the "feeling of the place" wanted to communicate -- points to another problem many writers observed about the failure of language in wartime. As Hermione Lee observes, "Wharton was as aware of the problems as James had been ('The war has used up words') or as Hemingway would be ('Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, were hollow and obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates')."[374] In pondering the failure of language during a war, Wharton reflects a similar sentiment W.B. Yeats would later express in the war poem he contributed to *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), a volume of poetry, prose and illustrations from major writers, artists and public figures that Wharton commissioned, edited and published in an effort to raise funds for the war's refugees. The following is Yeats's submission:

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[372]On urging America to enter the war, Wharton writes to Robert Grant, "For heaven's sake, when you get home, proclaim everywhere, and as publicly as possible, and with the authority of your name, what it will mean to all that we Americans cherish if England and France go under, and Prussianism becomes the new law of life." EW to Robert Grant, August 31, 1914, Beinecke, qtd in Lee 450.

[373] In 1916 Wharton was made Chevalier of the French Legion of Honour by the French government for the articles she wrote encouraging the Americans to enter the war and for her wartime charities.

[374] Lee 490.

"A Reason for Keeping Silent"

I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter's night.[375]

Yeats's restraint, reflected in the poem's title, speaks volumes about how the war had a silencing effect.

In "Kerfol" Wharton relates the experience of war by turning to metaphor. When the ghosts of Cornault's dogs appear, the narrator remarks to herself, "These little beasts always snap and scream, and somebody will be along any minute."[376] Here Wharton provides readers with their first clue that the ghosts of the dogs are not what they appear to be, but can be read as symbolic of the victims of war, either war-ravaged refugees or shell-shocked soldiers. She had hoped that Americans would hear the cries of the people most affected by the war, and in turn, be motivated to respond with action. The only problem in these initial pages of the story, is that, rather than yelp and bark, the "The dogs stood motionless, watching me."[377] During her time in Paris in these years, Wharton was particularly disturbed by the bewildered faces of the refugees pouring into the city from Belgium. To her, the

[375]W.B. Yeats, "A Reason for Keeping Silent," *The Book of the Homeless*, ed. Edith Wharton (New York: Scribner's, 1916) 45. Note, this poem appears in the manuscripts of W.B. Yeats, held by the National Library of Ireland, as possessing two different titles: "On Being Asked for a War Poem" and "To a Friend Who Has Asked His Manifesto to Neutral Nations."

[376] Wharton, "Kerfol" 95.

[377] Ibid 97.

refugees were among the unheard victims of the war that America refused to acknowledge.[378]

Other victims were the shell-shocked soldiers or the war-ravaged civilians she witnessed in her tours of the front. In a 1915 letter to Mary Berenson, Wharton refers to the soldiers has having "young white stricken faces, with the vision of horror in their fixed eyes."[379] Two months later she writes to Henry James about how she saw "poor bandaged creatures in rag-bag clothes leaning in the doorways."[380] The narrator of "Kerfol" describes the ghost-dogs in terms that could to be applied uniformly to refugees, soldiers or civilians:

> I had a feeling that they must be horribly cowed to be so silent and inert. Yet they did not look hungry or ill-treated. Their coats were smooth and they were not thin, except the shivering greyhound. It was more as if they had lived a long time with people who never spoke to them: as though the silence of the place had gradually benumbed their busy inquisitive natures. And this strange passivity, this almost human lassitude, seemed to me sadder than the misery of starved beaten animals. I should have liked to rouse them for a minute, to coax them into a game or a scamper; but the longer I looked into their fixed and weary eyes the more preposterous the idea became. ... The dogs knew better: *they* knew what the house would tolerate and what it would not. ... The impression they produced was that of having in common one memory so deep and dark that nothing that had happened since was worth either a growl or a wag.[381]

The war did not distinguish between the classes in creating displaced people. Some of those who poured into cities like Paris were from the middle classes, people whose coats were not torn or who did not look hungry, yet the war had robbed them

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[378]In a letter to Sara Norton, Wharton writes, "The 'atrocities' one hears of *are true*. I know of many, alas, too well authenticated. Spread it abroad as much as you can. It should be known that it is to America's interest to help stem this hideous flood of savagery by opinion if it may not be by action. No civilized race can remain neutral in feeling now." EW to Sara Norton, September 2, 1914, *Letters* 335. She also writes, "Lady Gladstone, head of the Belgian refugee committee in London, told a friend of mine she had seen a Belgian woman with her ears cut off. And of course the deliberate slaughter of 'hostages' in defenceless towns is proved over & over again." EW to Sara Norton, September 24, 1914, *Letters* 340.

[379]In a letter to Marry Berenson, Wharton writes, "To go from there [Chartes] to Isch Wall's hospital, & look at the rows of young white stricken faces, with the vision of the horror in their fixed eyes, shattered me for the rest of the day. I don't know anything ghastlier & more idiotic than 'doing' hospitals en touriste, like museums!" EW to Mary Berenson, January 12, 1915, *Letters* 346.

[380] EW to Henry James, March 11, 1915, *Letters* 351.

[381] Wharton, "Kerfol" 97.

of their identities as Belgians, and for a period, the memory of the savagery that took place in their homeland also robbed them of their pride and motivation to do anything more than struggle for existence. Many of the refugees also were isolated in Paris; the locals did not try to integrate them into French society as their status and the length of their stay was uncertain.

Later, when Anne de Cornault is on trial for her husband's murder, witnesses are called to corroborate Anne's testimony that "there were no dogs at Kerfol: had been none for several months. The master of the house had taken a dislike to dogs, there was no denying it."[382] Anne's husband, Yves de Cornault, a "rich and powerful noble in his sixty-second year" is a terrorising patriarchal figure who represents the aggressive, intolerant nature of German Nationalism during the war.[383] He was a pious man, yet one full of contradictions because he treated his second wife, Anne, so brutally, just as Germany had treated its second nations, the nations it invaded and called its own during the war. In the conclusion of the story, Wharton seems hopeful about how the war will end: it is the suffering of the victims of war that comes back as a nemesis and eventually brings out about the demise of brutal dictatorial regimes.

The other story with references to the war is "Miss Mary Pask" (1925). Although as Part Two of this chapter has discussed, "Miss Mary Pask" can be read as evidence of Wharton's ambivalence toward the notion of female independence taken to the extreme, other readings suggest that the story actually was informed more by Wharton's feelings of unease after the war. Julie Olin-Ammentorp, for example, maintains that the reference Wharton makes to the "shady corner down at

[382] Ibid 116.

[383] Ibid 100.

the bottom [of Mary's garden] where the sun never bothers one," is not a reference to Mary's presumed resting place, but rather reflects Wharton's concern over the unmarked graves of Newbold Rhinelander and Ronald Simmons, a cousin and a friend of her family, whose bodies were never retrieved and given a proper burial during the war.[384] A still different reading would maintain that the extreme version of isolation Wharton depicts in the story acts as a metaphor for the isolationist stance of America after the war.

Mary and her sister Grace are described as having once been bosom buddies, but since Grace married and moved back to America six years ago, they have not visited each other. Grace, moreover, who never even writes much to her sister, is described as a bit of a hypocrite: she was "one of the sweet conscientious women who go on using the language of devotion about people whom they live happily without seeing."[385] Such false expressions of loyalty could also be used to describe how certain constituents within American society in the early twenties maintained a connection to the people of war-torn Europe, but also refused to give the support that Europe required at this time – specifically money for charities like Wharton's, monetary aid to European governments, and approval of the Treaty of Versailles, which officially ended the war with Germany and established the terms of the peace that followed.[386]

At the beginning of the 1920s there was strong isolationist sentiment in certain segments of American society. Many Americans wanted to stem the flow of immigrants into the U.S., owing to fears about the influence of foreigners on

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[384] Olin-Ammentorp 198.

[385] Wharton, "Miss Mary Pask" 148.

[386] Edith Wharton argued that the support for victims of the War continued to be necessary for years, well after the War. EW Letter to the Editor of the *Paris Herald,* December 10, 1930 and R.W.B and Nancy Lewis's discussion of it in *Letters* 531.

American culture. This was the time when many Americans were pushing for Prohibition and they considered immigrants from Catholic countries such as Ireland, for example, to be negative influences because of the popularity of drinking in those cultures. Immigrants from eastern European countries were also eyed sceptically due to fears about radical Communist elements infiltrating American society as the Bolshevists had revolted in Russia. Both sets of immigrants also introduced a new level of competition for jobs to the native-born working classes, at a time when competition for jobs was made keen by cutbacks in production after the war and returning American GIs, who were favoured for the positions.

Such nativist concerns, along with worries about inflationary pressures after the war, caused conservative groups to lobby their representatives in the Congress to support measures which they believed would return America to a less complicated time. Farmers in rural America and big business were both hurt by the collapse of prices after the war as European production was perceived to have come back on stream and both groups lobbied aggressively for Congress to take positions which not only protected American interests, but limited further engagement in international cooperation. Quite simply, after the war, many Americans had had enough of internationalism. And so, while actual fighting in the war ceased in November 1918 and peace negotiations concluded in the spring of 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was never approved by the U.S. Senate even after two votes – one in late 1919 and one in March of 1920, reflecting isolationist resistance to President Woodrow Wilson's proposed League of Nations. As well, at this time, Congress instituted some of the most aggressive international trade tariffs to protect American industries.

Wharton was again disappointed in her native country's lassitude in assuming its responsibilities of world leadership and its reluctance to assist suffering people in post-war Europe. As Julie Olin-Ammenthorp notes,

> The effects of the war did not end with the Armistice. In large and small ways, political and personal ways, the war remained with Wharton for months, even years, after its ostensible conclusion. Some of the problems, like the ongoing plight of refugees, were large-scale, public problems that, paradoxically, ran the risk of being invisible to the American donors who had helped fund Wharton's charities during the war.[387]

Wharton continues to devote her time and money to the charities she established well beyond the end of the war.[388] In a letter to Minnie Jones in 1918, Wharton explains "The real difficulty will be to make people realize that the situation of the refugees is worse than ever, as the Germans have stripped literally *everything* from the towns that are still standing & destroyed all possibility of reviving industrial life by wrecking the machinery in all the factories. People have literally died of hunger in some places, & the government will not allow any one to return to the liberated districts for months to come, because it is impossible to feed, clothe & employ them there."[389]

To Wharton, the war refugees were like ghosts and the ghost of Mary Pask represents one of those invisible, yet intractable presences. Isolated from American assistance in her "queer neglected" house on the coast of Brittany, Mary Pask is a shell of what she could be because no one looks in on her; her own sister Grace "forgets."[390] Compared to her sister in America's "plump face," Mary has the look as if "there's nothing there," as if something is wrong with her somewhere, perhaps

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[387] Olin-Ammentorp 155.

[388] Alan Price, *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996) 161-62, 169-71 and Shari Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* (New York: Scribner's, 1994) 344, 347.

[389] EW to Minnie Jones, November 29, 1918, Beinecke.

[390] Wharton, "Miss Mary Pask" 160.

with her "digestion."[391] She is "a caricature of herself;" her "round puffy, pink [hands], [...] prematurely old and useless, [...] changed and shrivelled."[392] She has an "untidy head," "bulging blue eyes," and she shuffles down the stairs in "her baggy white garments."[393]

When she asks the man visiting her to stay, he gets a fright and instead abandons her, in the same way Wharton believed her countrymen had abandoned Europe. He later feels guilty, and thinks to himself that he will "appease the ghost with a few flowers," but he never does, and even if he had, the suggestion is that token American assistance is not what Europe needs at the time.[394] Towards the end of the story, Wharton has her narrator observe that "between being dead and alive there seemed after all to be so little difference, except that of a mysterious increase in reality."[395] The number of the war-dead should have increased the reality of America's obligation to Europe after the war; however, it had the opposite effect: at the end of the story, Wharton has her male narrator admit "I felt I should never again be interested in Mary Pask, or in anything concerning her."[396] While some readers interpret "Miss Mary Pask" as a sentimental tale of an old maid's loneliness, it can also be read as referencing Wharton's wider political context.

In "Bewitched" (1925), readers find another story about an unmarried woman stalked by loneliness, who gains powers of female agency not when she is alive, but when she is dead. "Bewitched" tells the demon-lover story of Saul

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[391] Ibid 160 and 151.

[392] Ibid 153.

[393] Ibid 152.

[394] Ibid 159.

[395] Ibid 161.

[396] Ibid 162.

Rutledge, who is haunted by the ghost of Ora, a woman whom he used to love before he married his wife Prudence. Saul describes how Ora draws him to her, as if in death the young woman summons the powers she lacked in life. The subtle twist in this tale is how the most devious character is revealed to be the living wife rather than the dead woman. Prudence can remind readers of the hypocrisy depicted in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Condemning the way her husband has been spiritually corrupted by the ghost, Prudence luridly desires to see the dead girl's grave disinterred so that she can witness a stake being driven through the corpse's heart. Through this story Wharton reveals unease toward the moralism that continues in America from its repressive Puritan past as well as a cynicism about the promises feminism makes for America's future. Despite the activism of the suffragettes, women are still the most interesting when they are on the cusp, occupying liminal states, such as right before marriage, during engagements, on wedding nights, having just moved into new homes, or in the uncanny state of being dead, but undead.

However, there is more socio-historical context to "Bewitched" than this ambiguous message on feminism. In "Bewitched" Wharton continues to explore the nativist arguments that resulted in the troublesome American isolationism depicted in "Miss Mary Pask." Nevertheless, in "Bewitched" her concern is not with the repercussions in the international arena, but rather with the "dis-eased" elements in the domestic side of the American experience. In "Bewitched" Wharton demonstrates that extreme nativism can warp into deviant movements such as those represented by the "witch-hunt" atmosphere associated with the most zealous figures in the hysteria over the "Red Scare," the Eugenics Movement, religious fundamentalism, and nativism. Besides the obvious references to Hawthorne's

work, Wharton leaves another clue to readers that she seeks to conjure a witch-hunt atmosphere by setting the story in a place called "Hemlock County."[397]

In the early twenties, communism was considered to be a very real, living threat in America. By 1920 there were three different American Communist parties who helped workers demonstrate for the pay rises they were denied during the war. The resulting strikes in the steel and coal industries were viewed by many Americans as evidence of a worrying level of communist infiltration in America, instead of being recognised as a more indigenous response to the uneven class conditions in the economy after the war.[398] By the time Wharton published "Bewitched" in 1925, fears surrounding a "Red Scare" had proved to be exaggerated and thus had subsided, yet the totalitarian manner in which individual freedoms had been violated remained vivid in the minds of many Americans. In addition to widespread xenophobia, there were debates on immigration in Congress, when the National Origins Act of 1924 was passed, which capped European immigration in response to domestic concerns about the validity of maintaining America as a "melting pot" of cultures. Many Americans sought to link the preservation of American democracy to ideas of more, not less, racial homogeneity within the nation's bounds.[399] Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the American Legion emerged pursuing platforms of "comprehensive Americanism," where they defined

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[397] Wharton, "Bewitched," *Ghosts* 163.

[398] The Communist movement grew to be perceived as having become more radical in April 1919 when thirty-six government officials received "May Day" mail bombs. One of the recipients was Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who afterwards actively pursued a policy of "100% Americanism," when, in January 1920 with the "Palmer Raids," he apprehended and arrested over 4,000 alleged radicals, often without the proper warrants, in thirty-three cities across America. Those without the requisite citizenship papers were deported. See Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955) 68-73 and 212-217.

[399] Robert A. Divine, *American Immigration Policy, 1924-1952* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) 14-18.

American as white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant and targeted groups such as immigrants, Catholics, Jews and poor whites.[400]

Urban sophisticates regarded the mere existence of groups like the Klan as emblematic of an intolerance they linked with a provincialism and a religious fundamentalism associated with small-town and rural America. Where images of the Klan are often evoked as symptomatic of a North-South divide, religious fundamentalism, intolerance, and hypocrisy were also pervasive within the North, and throughout the mid-West more broadly, particularly in indigent "mountain" communities such as those Wharton features in "Bewitched" and in her earlier novel, *Summer* (1917), where a "pious" father ends up marrying his adopted daughter and, after, has what could be labelled as an incestuous relationship with her. Much has been written about Wharton's own (embarrassing) attitudes of racial and cultural superiority; she has been accused of anti-Semitism, but also of harbouring a belief that those who lived in the Midwest and in mountain communities or the back woods of New England were intellectually and cultural deficient.[401]

Wharton was also interested in the field of eugenics and studies in the field in the previous decade fortified the general view that the lower, less educated classes were reproducing at a faster rate than 100% Americans and that this was somehow leading to a kind of degeneration in American society.[402] Henry H. Goddard's study

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[400]Murray 87-92; also David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1981); U.S. Congress, House Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan Hearings, October 11-17, 1921, 67th Congress,* First Session (Washington, DC, 1921).

[401] Bauer 52. Also see Elizabeth Ammons "Edith Wharton and the Issue of Race," *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton,* ed. Millicent Bell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 68-86. Also Carol J. Singley, "Race Culture, Nation: Edith Wharton and Ernest Renan," *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 49.1 (Spring 2003): 32-45; Stuart Hutchinson, "Sex, Race and Class in Edith Wharton," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 42.4 (Winter 2000): 431-44; and Hildegard Hoeller, "'The Impossible Rosedale': 'Race' and the Reading of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth,*" *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 13 (1994): 14-20.

[402]In a letter to Fullerton, Wharton she tells him how she is reading E. Selliere's "Les Mystiques du Neo-romantisme," "In this chapter on the Pan-German idea, built up on Gobineau & Vacher de Laponge (whom I used to talk to you about) would interest you, I know." See EW to William Morton Fullerton, September 22,

on *The Kallikak Family* in 1912, for example, considered heredity to be the source of alcoholism, crime, poverty, sexual promiscuity and polygamy and the report "How to Make a Eugenical Family Study," in 1913 by The Eugenics Records Office contributed to this sense that people could actually track down degeneration in their own communities.[403] It is this hunt for the degenerate and sexually aberrant that Wharton renders uncanny in "Bewitched." Though she may have had a similar curiosity with theories of racial degeneracy, she has also consistently illustrated in her fiction that repressing sexual drives, by emphasising rigid and out-dated rules on sexual behaviour, creates tragic consequences for all characters involved.[404]

The three men who converge upon Rutledge house at the request of Mrs. Rutledge have the resignated air of Klansmen performing ministerial duties in their district. How they have come to be endowed with their authority is not clear, but one of them is a church deacon, who while investigating this case of unnatural adultery, exhibits worrying symptoms of a sexually transmitted disease himself. Deacon Hibben, with his "queerly blotched and moldy-looking face," could very well be suffering from syphilis.[405] The community portrayed is so far away from Wharton's world, intellectually, culturally and socially. Deacon Hibben notes how he "never knew a place … as seem as far away from humanity. And yet it ain't so in

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1911, *Letters* 257. In a note to this letter, Lewis describes Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882) as "a diplomat, novelist, and historian who spoke forthrightly about 'the inequality of the races' and the need for 'racial aristocracy,' chiefly Teutonic." Lewis describes how "*Gobinisme*, so-called, was favoured by Pan-Germanics. Its theories coincided to some extent with those of Georges Vacher Laponge (1854-1936), a French anthropologist and student of the Aryan race" (257).

[403] Bauer 28-29.

[404] For example, one of the conflicts in *The Age of Innocence* is the difficulty other characters have over accepting Ellen Olenska's sense of bohemianism and sexual passion, qualities that are taboos in the nearly tribal atmosphere of the sexually repressed members of upper-class "old New York."

[405] Wharton, *Ghosts* 164. To further underscore the socio-historical context of "Bewitched," Gerard M. Sweeney notes how Wharton wrote the story in France in the early 1920s, in a place and time when the fear of syphilis was rife. Sweeney refers to Claude Quetel's *History of Syphilis:* "By intermixing populations on a huge scale, the First World War produced (amongst other misfortunes) such an increase in the incidence of syphilis -- not to mention gonorrhoea -- that the disease once more assumed epidemic proportions." Gerard M. Sweeney, "Wharton's Bewitched," *The Explicator* 56.4 (Summer 1988): 198-201.

miles." To which Orrin Bosworth responds, "Miles ain't the only distance."[406] Not only is there a wide gulf in understanding between urban and rural America, but within rural America there are more extreme cases of isolated views. The party proceed to "hunt" for Saul Routledge's demon lover, but they are blind to the degenerated elements in their own community. Sylvester Brand, though a dim and quiet member of their righteous number, is also a drinker in these times of Prohibition. There is also a suggestion that his own other daughter Vanessa, who "was too wild and ignorant," may have the same problem of "bad blood" that causes Orrin Bosworth's crazy Aunt Cressidora to remain locked behind barred windows as another genetic embarrassment in their mountain community.[407]

Mrs. Rutledge, a fundamentalist who quotes from Exodus, believes a spell has been cast over her husband and is determined to rout out its cause, which she believes will be achieved by disinterring the grave of her husband's deceased lover and impaling the corpse with a phallic stake. The men are intrigued, but first want evidence of the affair and insist on "spying" on the lovers. The reference to spying here could be an attempt by Wharton to refer to the work of federal agents in Palmer Raids, but is also a reference to the way sexual behaviours were observed and controlled in Fordian American business culture. As Dale Bauer discusses with respect to Antonio Gramsci's essay on "Americanism and Fordism," in the post-war period some business leaders, like Ford, believed that it was necessary to repress and regulate sexual instincts in order to conserve energies for new methods of work.[408] Wharton suggests that to try to drive out a human desire for sex is like trying to rid oneself of a ghost haunting. Such a repression is driven by autocratic elements in

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[406] Wharton, "Bewitched" 164.

[407] Ibid 179.

[408] Bauer 54. As well, see Antonio Gramsci, "Americanism and Fordism," *Prison Notebooks,* ed. and tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1980) 279-318, 299-300.

society, yet hypocritically, it is those same elements of society who lasciviously relish in the prurient details.

The theme of autocratic repression is picked up again by Wharton in her next ghost story "Mr. Jones" (1928), though in "Mr. Jones" Wharton returns to the international arena for sources of unease. Ostensibly, "Mr. Jones" is another story about a persecuted wife who suffers the equivalent of imprisonment in her own house. Similar to "The Lady's Maid's Bell" and "Kerfol," "Mr. Jones" is a kind of "second-wife/woman" tale in that it tells the story of Lady Jane, who comes to the estate of Bells and while there learns of the fate of the first woman, the Viscountess Thudeney. The ghost in the story is not the first wife however, but rather is her husband's secretary, Mr. Jones, who administered the estate efficiently for Viscount Thudeney from 1800-1840, which included insuring that his wife did not leave the estate or receive any visitors. Over a hundred years later, Mr. Jones's ghost still presides as a terrorising figure, who violently subjects the other servants to his rule, kills intruders, and controls the movements of Lady Jane.

There is a temptation to read this story as yet another tale of protest against patriarchal figures in the domestic sphere. For example, Wharton evokes pity for the unequal power relations between the Viscount and his wife in the scene where Lady Jane comes upon their portraits. Under the portrait of the husband appears a comprehensive, four-line commentary, however, under the portrait of the wife, "in small cramped characters, as if crowded as an afterthought into an insufficient space: 'Also His Wife.' That was all. No names, dates, honors, epithets, for the Viscountess Thudeney."[409] However, it could be argued that Wharton instead is

[409] Wharton, "Mr. Jones," *Ghosts* 190.

expressing a resentment she harboured over the media's continued portrayal of her as "the wife" of Teddy Wharton in their coverage of her work with charities during the War, even though she and Teddy had been living separate lives for years and her war efforts were executed in complete independence of him. As Hermione Lee notes, "Surveys of Americans working in France made much of her achievements, though they were not always accurate: one newspaper, under a photograph of Teddy Wharton, dated 1917, described 'an American and his wife' doing splendid things over in France.'"[410]

However, Wharton targets her criticism more broadly than merely making a comment on gender politics. In the story she addresses her feelings of unease about the Fascist movement that was emerging in Italy as well as the dictatorial regime of Adolf Hitler in Germany.[411] Wharton was uneasy about the centralisation of authority in both Italy and Germany at the time. In 1921 Hitler was elected chairman and absolute dictator of the Nazi Party in Munich and later, in 1924, he published the first volume of *Mein Kampf*, where he set out his frightening plans for German Nationalism. In 1919 Benito Mussolini founded the Fascist Party in Italy, which through aggressive militaristic action came to power officially in 1922. Against this background, the autocratic terror wielded by the ghost of Mr. Jones can be read as relating to more than a feminist protest against domestic patriarchy; Wharton is referring more broadly to worrying political trends in Europe.

Wharton's last two ghost stories, "The Looking Glass" (1935) and "All Souls'" (1937) are written in the 1930s at time when American was in grip of the

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[410] Lee 500.

[411] For discussions on Wharton's attitudes toward fascism in Italy and Hitler's rise in Germany, see Lee 733-734; Bauer 126, 151; and *Letters* 505.

Great Depression and struggling to adjust the capitalism of the prosperous 1920s into a system less vulnerable to shocks. After the war, the American economy shifted from an industrial to a consumer-based model. Businessmen and political leaders saw mass production and mass consumption as the best remedies to ward off the threat of bolshevism. In fact, throughout the twenties, the federal government's deliberate *laissez faire* policy of not interfering with market forces was seen as the most favourable way of insuring that the prosperity of the twenties continued into the future.

As corporate ideology emphasised abundance theories that encouraged mass consumption of goods, there was a new role for industries such as advertising in communicating to consumers that the way to secure individual "freedom" was by making informed choices about what goods and services to consume. Edith Wharton saw the influences of mass marketing as inimical to the development of an authentic inner life.[412] While the economy may have benefited through advertisers' promotions of the consumer products that accompanied flapperhood, the cult of youth, and the cult of the personality, Wharton railed against such influences as having the effect of distracting people from themselves, who they really were, rather than who they thought themselves to be in narcissistic terms. Wharton's story, "The Looking Glass" communicates her unease about this trend. It tells the story of a

[412]Wharton's 1929 novel *Hudson River Bracketed* provides a number of examples of how she saw the idea of an authentic inner life under assault by forces in mass culture – from the mass marketing of Grandma Scrimser's motivational spiritual talks to the way works of fiction were promoted. Bunty Hayes's store, "Storecraft" serves as a microcosm for Wharton's satiric examination of the American marketplace. The store's motto is that it "Supplies Taste and saves Money" (311). Hayes books Grandma Scrimser in his department store for a series of talks, which Vance Weston refers to as "another form or bootlegging" that appealed to Americans' appetite for "immediate results;" the talks serve as a "get-rich-quick system applied to the spiritual life" (496). Hayes sees no contradiction between shopping and religion because, as he explains, "'Storecraft' aims to handle all the human interests. We can't leave out religion, any more'n we could art or plumbing. And the minute I heard about this grand new religious movement of Mrs. Scrimser's, I said: 'That's exactly our line of goods, and there's nobody but 'Storecraft' can do it justice" (505). Bunty Hayes also shares with Vance his ideas about setting up a publishing department in Storecraft so that "'translations of the snappiest foreign fiction' could provide yet another way to draw his customers' attention to goods in 'our Foreign Fashions Dept' " (508). Also see Bauer's discussion of Wharton's attitudes on advertising culture, 54.

woman in her fifties who, in a desperate attempt to recapture the attention that accompanied the good looks of her youth, gets a facelift but with disastrous results: she ends up "looking like a ghost with a pouch under one eye, where they'd begun the treatment."[413] "The Looking Glass" is another story where it is unclear whether Wharton's concern is to relate a story of a supernatural event or rather to suggest that real people turn into ghosts when they neglect the development of the inner self.

"The Looking Glass" was written in 1935, but draws on a theme first communicated by Wharton in an earlier work, her 1925 novel *The Mother's Recompense*, in which Kate Clephane, the novel's protagonist, returns to New York after eighteen years abroad to find that the new "American Face" has become homogenised in the "mannerless age" of mass culture.[414] As Dale Bauer discusses in *The Mother's Recompense*, Wharton critiques how twenties culture encouraged New Women to see liberation as a kind of "corporate psychic-sexual power" that encouraged spending habits, which mitigated the Bolshevik threat.[415] All spending which preserved youth was seen as good, but Wharton protests that such an emphasis on youth culture erases the real individuality that can be cultivated by acknowledging and honouring the richness of the more mature woman's experience. According to her friend Mary Berenson, Wharton once said that growing older was "the most interesting thing that ever happened to her;" she felt she had "wasted her youth trying to be beautiful, but now that she has given up all hope she feels freer."[416]

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[413] Wharton, "The Looking Glass," *Ghosts* 262.

[414] Wharton, *The Mother's Recompense* (1925; London: Virago, 1986) 71 and 52.

[415] Bauer 66.

[416] Eleanor Dwight, *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994) 11.

Dale Bauer points out that Wharton's novel has much in common with another best-seller of the time, Gertrude Atherton's 1923 novel *Black Oxen*, where the heroine, Mary Zattiany, undergoes X-ray treatments to her ovaries in an effort to regain the energy and sexual attractiveness of her youth.[417] Unfortunately, like the misguided facelift Mrs. Clingsland has in "The Looking Glass," in *The Black Oxen* Mary Zattiany undergoes the Steinach Treatment, which involved x-raying a woman's ovaries in the hope that such a treatment would revitalise sexuality libido and fertility, but in practice, it actually had the opposite effect. In "The Looking Glass" the procedure that Mrs Clingsland has makes her less attractive, and in reality, the Steinach treatment featured in *The Black Oxen* actually made women infertile. Written in the thirties, "The Looking Glass" laments how not much has changed in terms of the cultural options available to middle-aged women; in fact, Mrs. Clingsland's procedure looks even more pathetic because it demonstrates how unenlightened and deluded the mature women of the twenties were ten years on in the thirties as they still sought to fetishise the body instead of gracefully submitting to the ageing process and developing into older, wiser women.

The other disturbing theme dealt with in "The Looking Glass" is the way the wealthy spend their time and money while others, less fortunate, are suffering, and in some cases dying, due to their state of poverty during the Depression years. On the surface "The Looking Glass" tells the story of how rich women like Mrs. Clingsland, in addition to facelifts, spend their money fatuously by getting massages and visiting fortune tellers. Desperate for flattering news about the extent of a lost love's affections for her, Mrs. Clingsland confers with her Irish masseuse, Cora Attlee, whose Celtic origins are believed to endow her with uncanny powers for contacting

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[417] Bauer 83.

the dead. Cora Attlee, the story's narrator, while seemingly in possession of a vague clairvoyant ability, is, in the main, a fraud. However Cora offers her services with the best intentions because she does not want to see her client defrauded for even more extortionate sums by other frauds plying their trade. Not having had a proper education, Cora feels self-conscious about her own ability to produce the letters from the ghost in the standard of English Mrs. Clingsland would have expected from her suitor, who drowned on the Titanic. Cora gets lucky, however, when she makes the acquaintance of a man who can do the job for her, an out-of-work teacher, who was formerly a tutor to the children of another one of her clients. The teacher has the vocabulary and imagination to write the flattering letters Mrs. Clingsland requires for the continuation of her narcissistic fantasy, but unfortunately, when Cora goes to collect the last letter from him, she discovers that he is dead. Cora wonders if he expired because he really had been in touch with the other side and then she feels guilty for having exploited and wasted him, intellectually and physically.

The back-story to this uncanny event is that, in reality, the poor, depressed and alcoholic teacher may have, in fact, died ignominiously in his rooming house from starvation, which was not uncommon in urban centres such as New York during the Depression years. Educated to a high standard, though economically displaced by the new consumer-based economy, this man is similar to George Faxon of Wharton's earlier story "The Triumph of Night," who would have found himself adrift and perhaps too proud to accept one of the manual jobs, sales jobs or advertising jobs available in the New Deal capitalist system. He is another victim of the shift in economic paradigms, who succumbs to the "drift" identified by Walter Lippmann. Interestingly, the woman who used to employ him as the tutor for her children can no longer afford him in the economy required by the more austere times

of the Depression years, but she can still afford to get massages. The Depression often is recalled in American history as a time when communities in the nation pitched in and helped each other. But in "The Looking Glass" Wharton communicates her unease over how such altruism was not as widespread among the wealthy, who continued, for example, to employ masseuses while letting educated individuals perish simply because they could not provide a service that was considered as valued as one which indulged in the fetishisation of youthful looks and the body. She also identified forms of "occultism" and the activity of visiting mediums, which Wharton believed was "third-rate flashy rubbish, of the kind that most enervates the mental muscles."[418] By 1932 the Depression had posed serious challenges to Wharton's own financial position; she wrote to Berenson that "we are all nervously sitting on the thin crust of some volcano;"[419] she felt that members of her own class, particularly women, needed to be paying closer attention to more important matters than massages and mediums.

"The Looking Glass" also taps into another aspect that Wharton was uneasy about in her social context and that is how immigrants such as Cora Attlee, who arrived with very little twenty years earlier, at the height of the immigration wave of the 1910s, were now comfortably installed in American society, and were displacing more Yankee-stock Americans in their willingness to survive by doing jobs native born, upper and middle class Americans would not do. The Irish masseuse is not as "simple" as Wharton's style of narration might suggest; indeed, the woman displays a distinctly canny sense in the way she profits handsomely from the stock tips she picked up from wealthy clients and the way she shrewdly navigates those investments through the Depression years to land herself a "little house in

[418] EW to Bernard Berenson, February 12, 1922, *Letters* 450.

[419] EW to Bernard Berenson, January 23, 1932, *Letters* 544.

Montclair" (256), which was no small achievement at this time, considering many other Americans were struggling to pay their mortgages and fend off bank foreclosures on their homes. Montclair is adjacent to wealthy New Jersey suburbs such as Llewellyn Park and Morristown, where, Fullerton relates somewhat enviously, "favorites of American fortune have organized a life of warm and rich comfort which only England's aristocracy had anticipated."[420] To expatriates who had been away from America, the idea that those who would have traditionally been servants to the rich are now able to live beside them, while more educated, pedigreed Americans were struggling to make ends meet, proved how much America had changed.[421]

The "conniving" simplicity of immigrants, particularly those from the "Celtic Fringe,"[422] is dealt with again perhaps most disturbingly in "All Souls'" (1937). By the 1930s there was even more fear of foreigners in certain segments of society than there were within nativist movements in the 1920s because by the thirties, it was obvious that a certain cultural transformation had indeed taken place: America was becoming more plural and power had been redistributed more evenly to include the working classes. This cultural change was a real threat to the Yankee-stock members of Edith Wharton's class, who were white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant and felt themselves to be more legitimately American.[423] Ethnic Americans had

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[420] Fullerton 20.

[421] In *Problems of Power* Fullerton writes, "The Americans have been so astonishingly transformed that even one who has been absent from their shores for a period of only twenty years must inevitably, upon his return, find his compatriots almost unrecognizable" (12).

[422] As discussed in Chapter One, people and literature from what Darryl Jones what is commonly perceived as the "Celtic Fringe" (Scotland, Ireland and Wales) has problematically led to the belief that such remote locations almost fester with conditions especially conducive to producing "literary forms belonging to the cultural margins, the disenfranchised, the voiceless, or even the culturally 'backward'" (18).

[423] In discussing Fullerton's 1916 book, *Hesitations: The American Crisis and the War*, Lee points out how Fullerton complains about the way America had "lost its racial purity, 'selling her birthright for a mess of

more political power than they had previously; they provided the workforce behind many of the public works projects of the New Deal and they were represented in huge numbers in the new consumer and communications industries that were emerging at the time. In part, the new attitude of inclusiveness in American society was attributed to a kind of vigilance to not be like the totalitarian and fascist regimes of German, Italy and Spain. In New Deal America, "all souls" presumably counted.[424] The benefits of inclusiveness did not, however, accrue to African Americans, who suffered disproportionately in the Depression years as they were discriminated against in their competition for low-skilled jobs with white workers; nevertheless the culture of inclusiveness did benefit first and second generation immigrants, particularly for immigrants from Ireland and Scotland as well as Southern and Eastern European countries.

It is the new power of these groups and the decline of the old-guard members of "old New York" that Wharton communicates unease toward in "All Souls.'" In this story, Sara Clayburn, an older woman who lives alone in her remote Connecticut house with her staff of ethnic servants, suffers a disturbing 24-hour period that could be described as an inexplicable uncanny blackout. The blackout can be read as symptomatic of Wharton's general despondency toward, what she saw as, a decline in her social, culture and political environment. In a letter to Gaillard Lapsley Wharton writes, "But what an age of mental darkness we are living in! We know how many bottles of champagne & brandy 'Jim' Mollison consumes after an ocean flight, but not what voices speak to the poets."[425] As well, her concern over more

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pottage,' in which 'Irish stew,' 'mulligatawny soup,' 'corn bread,' 'sauerkraut' and 'lager beer' were staple ingredients.'" Lee 324.

[424] However, Lee notes how Fullerton's *Problems of Power* is replete with quotes like "Equality is an absurd and dangerous lie." Lee 500.

[425] EW to Gaillard Lapsley, November 1, 1936, *Letters* 599.

international issues -- such as how "Spain [had] gone red!"[426]; the threat of communism spreading to France, along with Mussolini's Fascist Regime in Italy, Hitler's radio speeches in Germany and the riots in Paris in 1934 -- filled Wharton with a sense of apocalyptic doom.[427]

In "All Souls'" there are also obvious anxieties Wharton expresses about getting older, particularly for a woman alone, in the way she describes Clayburn as helpless after a fall on the ice outside her home, which could be a reference to her own personal anxieties at this time. In the last two years of her life, Wharton suffered a series of debilitating illnesses before her death in 1937. Following doctor's orders, Clayburn takes to her bed for rest, but when she wakes up she finds all her domestic staff missing along with the absence of any electrical power or working phone lines. The old woman feels frightened at the suspension of normality, but the normality truly lamented in this story is the declining power base of her class. The Clayburns had been landowners and profitable farmers in the area for generations and when her husband was alive, "he played an active part in state politics."[428] While the Clayburns were described as a "'good influence' in the county," and their home was associated with a "sort of reassuring orderliness and dignity,"[429] the idea that old-guard Americans like the Clayburns embodied higher moral ideals was revealed as a myth that came to be unravelled by scandals in the

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[426] EW to Gaillard Lapsley, February 19, 1936, *Letters* 591.

[427] See Lewis's discussion of these factors in *Letters* 510. Also in a 1932 letter to John Hugh Smith, Wharton refers to news Bernard Berenson had received from his contacts with Washington that "made his hair stand on end with prophecies of ruin & revolution là bas!" EW to John Hugh Smith May 23, 1932, *Letters* 549.

[428] Wharton, "All Souls,'" *Ghosts* 277.

[429] Ibid.

1930s involving businessmen such as J.P. Morgan, Andrew W. Mellon, Richard Whitney, Charles E. Mitchell, and Samuel Insull.[430]

However, Clayburn, like many others of her class refused to consider the extent of their own culpability in their declining power base, and instead maintained that the threat came from an invading foreign presence. Significantly, the enemy was believed to be within the confines of the familiar and the domestic. In the initial hours of her blackout period, Clayburn goes in search of the source of the problem and comes to the conclusion that the uncanny presence in her house had "its source and centre in the kitchen."[431] The voice she hears is coming from the radio in the kitchen, which as Hermione Lee has noted could be a reference to the radio speeches of Hitler, which were transmitted in a foreign tongue.[432] But the foreign voices in the kitchen could also be referring to an influence inside America's borders: the kitchen is associated with the domain of "Her Scottish cook, Agnes," who provides a link to the other domestic staff who spoke in "a modern multiplicity of tongues."[433] It is Agnes's Hebrides background that accustoms her to ghostly presences; Clayburn regards her as "the channel through which communications from the other side of the veil reached the submissive household at Whitegates."[434] She believes her domestic staff have conspired in a plot against her because when she awakens for real, they deny that anything was ever amiss, and the reader is left wondering, like Clayburn herself, did the uncanny event really happen at all, or was it just a product of her ageing and unreliable imagination? The real threat to the older woman is the

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[430]Fraser 372-384.

[431] Wharton, "All Souls,'" 290.

[432] Lee 740.

[433] Wharton, "All Souls,'" 278.

[434] Ibid 299.

idea that the mysterious coven leader who comes to visit Agnes, who twice came up the drive at Whitegates, might represent a multiplying force.

When the woman approaches, dark clouds cover the twilight sky. Clayburn remarks how "mysterious things -- dreadful things -- were associated with darkness."[435] It unnerves Clayburn to find that the "whiteness" of the following snowy morning and the "prosaic light of day" have lost their ability to banish the dark forces, foreign voices and sallow complexions inside her home. The unease in the story is not only about the inability to defend "Whitegates" from the forces of darkness, but how certain Yankee-stock Americans were anxious to fortify the gates of white America from the invading tides of immigrants. While immigration quotas were imposed in 1924, those immigrants that had arrived before that time were now developing into an influential force with real political and economic power by the 1930s. The twist in the tale turns on the fact that in New Deal America, old-guard Americans like Sara Clayburn (and Wharton herself), were "dependent on them, and felt at home with them," but also were unnerved when the immigrant classes gained legitimate power and ceased to behave in an "efficient, devoted, respectful and respectable" manner because now, these classes were genuinely part of the backbone of America, leaving Wharton's generation and her class feeling disempowered and adrift.[436]

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[435] Ibid 283.

[436] Ibid 295.

Part V – Conclusion

Though much of Wharton's work and her ghost stories in particular, are often misapprehended as pieces of "ladylike" fiction,[437] the discussion in this chapter has tried to demonstrate how Wharton clearly deals with more issues than female protests under patriarchy, unresolved mother-daughter conflicts or the unique afflictions of "female experience." To reiterate her Preface, through ghost stories Wharton accesses a level of artistic design "far below our conscious reason" where she chooses to write about topics of unease. The fact that this level of artistic creation might be "below conscious reason" should not suggest to readers that Wharton's process for writing is completely without her wilful control over it, as if she were uncanny herself and a mere vessel through which topics of unease are suggested to her from "beyond." Through a conscious and creative use of metaphor, Wharton provides readers with closer views of "the ghosts" more overt methods might alienate them from seeing, because a more explicit approach would go against her commitment to not being "pantingly didactic" as other writers in her context were.[438] Instead, Wharton chooses to be oblique in her methods, not because she was muzzled in some way by her context because she was a woman, but because she was firmly committed to the belief that writers and artists should be indirect and because she respected the indeterminate nature of the reading (and writing) process that valued the individual's role in figuring things out for themselves.

The social and historical references in her work were not always obvious to her readers, and Wharton questioned whether her themes were rendered perhaps too obtusely, which prevented an over-confidence on her part. In a reply to Margaret

[437] Joyce Carol Oates, "Afterward," *Haunted* 304.

[438] Wharton, Preface to *Ghosts* 7.

Terry Chanler, who had written to Wharton to tell her how much she enjoyed *The Mother's Recompense* and why she enjoyed it, Wharton thanked her, acknowledging that sometimes critics did not understand her work and she was trying not to take their criticism to heart. Significantly, Wharton adds, "... but as my work reaches its close, I feel so sure that it is either nothing, or far more than they know ... And I wonder, a little desolately, which?"[439] Such observations demonstrate Wharton's respect for the sometimes mysterious, indeterminate nature of the writing process.

This chapter has suggested some interpretations for the wider socio-historical phenomena more cursory readings of her ghost stories might miss. As discussed, while many of her readers concluded that her principal concerns related to romance, wealth and class, and that her writing became more concerned with her context after the First World War, this chapter has shown how difficult marriages in her fiction often serve as metaphors for that which Wharton felt uneasy about in modern America. As well, it has shown that her feeling of not being quite "at-home" in the world related to Wharton's discomfort over the shift in values she detected in culture and that this shift was a subject she engaged with from the very start of her career at the turn of the century. As this thesis moves on to the work of Jackson, the discussion will centre on how the form of the uncanny changes, but yet is still motivated by a core feeling of unease.

[439]EW to Margaret Terry Chanler, June 9, 1925, *Letters* 483.

As outlined in the Introduction and as demonstrated in the chapter on Edith Wharton, when the twentieth century began the uncanny was taken to refer almost exclusively to ghost stories. In the work of Shirley Jackson, the uncanny takes on a broader scope. Several of her short stories and her novella, *The Haunting of Hill House* (hereafter referred to as "*Hill House*") (1959), are versions of ghost stories, but many of her other stories deal with madness or "the weird." Weird stories are stories where unseen, extraordinary cosmic forces are shown to intrude upon everyday reality, thereby suspending laws of time and space as well as calling into question the reliability of the subject's ability to make sense out of reality. In weird stories, readers are unsure whether the author seeks to legitimate a cosmic reality or to show how believing in such a reality is a symptom of a mad mind.

Weird stories contain an uncanny effect in the way the author explores the manipulation of cognitive frames and shows the mental disorientation characters experience when they encounter reality as not quite as it "ought" to be. There are ghosts in Jackson; but more broadly, there are also illogical elements that disrupt the subject's concept of human nature as essentially good. People and inanimate objects do not behave in the normal way: nice people snap from kind to cruel; teddy bears and rocking horses develop powers for movement and speech are revealed to have personalities of their own; letters become numbers, and systems normally employed to understand and organise reality are disregarded as superfluous. Notions of identity are upset as characters cannot recognise their own children, spouses or homes; a character can meet a version of her future self or work hard to convince others that she either is or is not who people imagine her to be; and the devil himself

becomes a "charming young man."[440] In disrupting reality in this way, Jackson undermines the fixity of identities as well as the classifications of good and evil. Sometimes the collapse in boundaries is stark and obvious; at other times the co-existence of evil with good operates more subtly. Similarly, in Jackson there are different measures of uncanniness; some of her stories are more overtly uncanny, while others retain only a dimension that upsets cognitive frames.

In addition to illustrating how uncanny themes are expanded in Jackson, a principal aim of this chapter is to interrogate the meaning of "uncanny madness" in Jackson's writing. This effort seeks to depart from critical views which conflate women and madness and which see women's writing about madness as reflective either of the inner disturbed state of the author or as a feminist response to the constraints a patriarchal society imposes on female subjects. Instead, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that women's uncanny writing refers to more than the disorganised thoughts of a madwoman. This chapter hopes to support the more general claim of this thesis that female uncanny fiction can exist as a body of writing that does not require that "the female" be "uncanny" herself—either as a female author or as a female protagonist.

Too often, Jackson's portraits of madness are described as bearing some kind of cosmic relation to her own interest in occult matters and her own bouts of disturbed mental states. It is as if Jackson's hobbies and own mental fragility possess clues about themes in her fiction and, thus, that the fruits of Jackson's labour represent the kind of "women's fiction" critics such as Alfred Kazin refer to when they explain that "'women's fiction' exists not as writing by women but as inordinate defensiveness against a society conceived as the special enemy of the

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[440]Jackson, "The Smoking Room," *Just An Ordinary Day* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998) 3.

sensitive."[441] Kazin explains that in Jackson the female protagonist falls victim to hostile forces assailing her. This tendency to see female authors as somehow *more* sensitive to a callous society, and to see their female protagonists as victims of this insensitivity, sets up a reading position that suggests the female author's lack of control over her writing process. The suggestion is that madness itself is some kind of enlightened state, whereby the sensitive author or female protagonist serves as an uncanny receptacle for detecting all that is wrong in society.

This conflation of women and madness is unhelpful to the post-feminist perspective of this thesis, which argues for a different reading position, one that explores the way Jackson's interest in madness and the occult is a more deliberate reflection. In Jackson, uncanny manifestations of madness are used as intentional tropes to make oblique references to general subjects, not limited to gender, about which the author sought to express unease. This reading position may sound similar to Kazin's, in that, by making references to the insensitivity in her society, Jackson was somehow showing a heightened susceptibility to society's problems. However, an important distinction needs to be fore-grounded—Jackson was an author who was engaged with her social and historical context; in this way she was similar to other authors who were equally sensitive. She is not somehow *more* sensitive to the ills of her society simply because she is a woman author writing stories, usually with female protagonists, for an audience with a high percentage of female readers.

Even though Jackson was debilitated by mental illness in the last two years of her life, this chapter argues that her writing should be viewed as separate from that personal experience. Interestingly, both Edith Wharton and Joyce Carol Oates also suffered episodes of mental fragility. In Jackson's case, her attention to issues

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[441] Alfred Kazin, *Bright Book of Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973) 174.

of mental fragmentation came at a time when other writers, artists, social scientists, and psychologists were also interested in the "disordered mind [...] as a topic for popular consumption" as Jackson critic Marta Caminero-Santangelo notes.[442] Caminero-Santangelo observes how "[America] seemed to turn to a science of individual psychology at just the point when the international situation had become particularly bewildering and frightening."[443] Where Caminero-Santangelo goes on to articulate a highly theoretical argument about multiple personality disorder and the post-modern subject in Jackson's work, this chapter will avoid theories of post-modernism and instead examine events and aesthetic trends in Jackson's historical period to see how they are referred to in her writing.

In terms of outline, this chapter will be divided into four parts. Part One will provide a brief overview of Jackson's work and a closer examination of her aesthetic method. In this section, the definition of weird literature will be elaborated and the relationship between the weird and the uncanny in Jackson's work will be discussed. The criticism of H.P. Lovecraft will be considered for how his definition of weird fiction contains three features: the presence of unseen cosmic forces; a suspension of the natural laws of time and space; and a "vivid picture of certain types of human mood."[444] Lovecraft explains how these elements are most successfully conveyed when the author evokes a "certain atmosphere" in the story.[445] Part One provides a

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[442] Marta Caminero-Santangelo, "Multiple Personality and Postmodern Subject: Theorizing Agency," *Shirley Jackson: Essays on The Literary* Legacy, ed. Bernice M. Murphy (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005) 52. Originally published in *Lit: Literaturel Interpretational/Theory 7-3* April 1996.

[443] Ibid.

[444] H.P. Lovecraft, "Notes On Writing Weird Fiction," published posthumously in June 1937 in *Amateur Correspondent.* Http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Cafe/1131/14notes.ht, accessed on March 3, 2003.

[445] Lovecraft explains that "Atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction. Indeed, all that a wonder story can ever be is *a vivid picture of a certain types of human mood.* The moment it tries to be anything else it becomes cheap, puerile, and unconvincing. Prime emphasis should be given to subtle suggestion – imperceptible hints and touches of selective associative detail which expresses shadings of moods and build up a vague illusion of the strange reality of the unreal." Ibid.

discussion with references to textual examples of the way Jackson manipulates a story's atmosphere to achieve the weird/uncanny effect.

Part Two will examine Jackson's relationship to feminism. Substantial feminist criticism has already provided testament to Jackson's fictional representations of female experience, patriarchal protest and unresolved mother-daughter separation anxiety, and so, comment on Jackson from these second-wave feminist perspectives will not specifically be provided. For examples of these reading positions, readers can refer to the scholarship of Lynette Carpenter, Tricia Lootens, Judie Newman, Roberta Rubenstein, Lorna Ellen Drew and Clare Kahane.[446] Instead, readings will be provided on how different stories, and in some instances the same story, can also be read as delivering ambiguous messages feminism. The important point to note here is not that Jackson was conservative or somehow "anti-feminist" but that, like Wharton and Oates, Jackson is often most interesting as a writer when she explores the difficulty of internalising imposed cultural norms on how women ought to be. In terms of feminism, Jackson's period in America in the 1950s saw major shifts in gender relations in the aftermath of the WWII; Jackson's uncanny fiction shows how adjusting to these shifts was not always a smooth or easy process.

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[446]See Lynette Carpenter, "The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle," Frontiers* 8.1 (1984): 32-38 and "Domestic Comedy, Black Comedy and Real Life: Shirley Jackson, a Woman Writer," *Faith of a (Woman) Writer,* ed. Alice Kessler-Harris and William McBrien (New York and Westport: Greenwood, 1988) 143-48; Tricia Lootens, "'Whose Hand Was I Holding?' Familial and Sexual Politics in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House" Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women,* ed. Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee, 1991) 166-92; Judie Newman, "Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering: The Haunting of Hill House," *American Horror Fiction: from Brockden Brown to Stephen King,* ed. Brian Docherty (London: Macmillan, 1990); Dale Frederick Bailey, *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1992); Roberta Rubenstein, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and Female Gothic," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 15.2 (Fall 1996): 309-331; Lorna Ellen Drew, "The Mysteries of the Gothic: Psychoanalysis/Feminism/'The Female Gothic'," Diss. University of New Brunswick, 1993; and Claire Kahane, "The Gothic Mirror," *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation,* ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) 334-51.

Part Three will discuss Jackson's persona as a writer and will demonstrate how this image mirrors her social and historical context and influenced her handling of the uncanny. Specific comment will be devoted to how Jackson reflects her artistic milieu and the concepts of Abstract Expressionism. A significant moment in the history of American art is the period just after the Second World War when the full horror of Hitler's regime came to light. Amidst a counter-reaction of renewed enthusiasm for positive thinking movements and the perfectibility of man, social critics, humanist philosophers, and Surrealist artists (the immediate predecessors to Abstract Expressionists) began to explore the elemental nature of evil—how extraordinary evil could co-exist with the good and with the everyday. By admitting this possibility, a new level of anxiety was introduced to the age. Former allies like Stalin and even elements within America's own government were eyed suspiciously as capable of immense evil. Among the artistic elite this translated into a lack of faith in mass political movements, a disillusionment that coincided with disenchantment with the mass culture American prosperity delivered after the war. In response, many artists turned away from mythopoeic portraits of man and society to art forms that contemplated abstract principles, which were ostensibly apolitical. Jackson's work will be considered for the way it reflects this milieu.

Part Four will address the broader social and cultural issues referred to in her work. Although Jackson's work may appear to be apolitical, Jackson's stories can be read in a new way. By taking a closer look at the metaphors used, readers can detect oblique references to specific social and political concerns. These include uneasy feelings toward revelations about the Holocaust; the Cold War, McCarthyism and the pressure to conform and contain difference; the arms race and the nuclear age; race relations and the nascent Civil Rights movement; the birth of suburbia and

decaying life in the cities; the Korean and Vietnam Wars; and questions about the strength of social bonds and culture within American society.

The discussion in this chapter will include an examination of one of Jackson's best-known works, *Hill House,* but comment on *Hill House* will aim to be brief principally because it has already received much critical attention as it is readily recognised as uncanny – it features a house which the characters speculate is haunted by a ghostly presence. To appreciate the unique contribution Jackson makes to the shaping of the uncanny genre, it is necessary to read a range of her short stories in order to see Jackson drawing on the concept of unease and broadening the uncanny aesthetic from its beginnings as a ghost story in the fashion written by Edith Wharton to take in stories about madness and the weird.

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Part I – Jackson and the Uncanny Weird Tale

In her lifetime, Shirley Jackson wrote five novels and three collections of short stories. *The Road Through the Wall* (1948), Jackson's first novel, is about growing up in the suburbs and about the distinct sense of un-neighbourliness to be found in suburban life. *Hangsaman* (1951) and *The Bird's Nest* (1954) are two novels about madness, and though not uncanny, are more thorough psychological studies of how madness presents itself in the minds of two female characters. *The Sundial* (1958), almost unclassifiable in genre terms, is a bizarre story of a family who selfishly prepares to survive an apocalypse, not caring about the fate of their neighbours, or much about each other, for that matter. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) is another story about mental fragility, social alienation and the unfriendly aspects to

be found in one's "community." While each of Jackson's novels is very different, they share a concern for madness, dysfunctional families and communities and reflect what S.T. Joshi refers to as Jackson's world view: a "cheerless and nihilistic misanthropy."[447] One could not really classify the above novels as uncanny, in part, because the novel form itself is too long to deliver the uncanny effect, as discussed in Chapter One.[448] In addition to her novels, Jackson wrote a book-length study on witchcraft, *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* (1956), though this is primarily a history book on the subject written for children.

The uncanny effect is best seen in Jackson's short fiction, in her novella *Hill House* and in so many of her short stories. Not all of her short story collections include uncanny tales. Two of her collections, *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957), are farcical tales about her children and describe the peculiar dimensions of her own family life. The bulk of her uncanny fiction is to be found in *The Lottery and Other Stories or, The Adventures of James Harris* (1949) and in two collections published posthumously, *Come Along with Me: Part of a Novel, Sixteen Stories and Three Lectures* (1968), edited by her husband, Stanley Hyman, and *Just an Ordinary Day* (1996), edited by two of her children, Laurence Jackson Hyman and Sarah Hyman Stewart. Several of her short stories and her novella, *Hill House,* are versions of ghost stories, however other stories deal with madness more generally, and specifically, man's loose grip on "reality," particularly when that reality and human nature is presumed to be consistently beneficent.

As discussed in Chapter One, the research of Terry Castle has demonstrated

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[447]S.T. Joshi, *The Modern Weird Tale* (Jefferson, NC; London: McFarland & Company, 2001) 13.

[448]Chapter One discussed how the uncanny effect is best conveyed through fiction that can be read in one sitting – as in the case of the short story or the novella. Also see Briggs 13.

how the uncanny represents the reciprocal side of eighteenth-century reason in the way it refers to all that is irrational and unpredictable about human nature and the laws of the cosmos. Interestingly, Shirley Jackson was passionate about eighteenth-century novels, such as those of Fielding and Richardson, for their "preservation of and insistence on a pattern superimposed precariously on the chaos of human development."[449] It is the breach in the pattern of order that Jackson pursues when she portrays madness as uncanny or employs magic in her stories. Jackson explains,

> I think it is the combination of these two forms [the impulse for the irrational and the instinct to want to control it] that forms the background of everything I write—the sense which I feel, of a human and not very rational order struggling inadequately to keep in check forces of great destruction, which may be the devil and may be intellectual enlightenment.[450]

In congruous ways, societal pressures to conform in the 1950s operated in the same way as Enlightenment theories of reason: both aimed to control so-called irrational impulses and appetites. Though the serious part of Jackson's writing career began in 1944 and continued until Jackson's early death at the age of forty-eight in 1965, from the point of view of literary periodicity, the fifties is largely considered to span from 1948 to the early sixties; Jackson sits comfortably within that time band, and, as will be shown, represents writers of that period very well.

In expanding the uncanny to include more than ghost stories, Jackson helped to continue a trend that emerged in the 1920s with *Weird Tales,* a periodical that was published in America from 1923 to 1954. For a definition of the weird in literature, many scholars refer to H.P. Lovecraft's 1945 study *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, where Lovecraft explains that the true weird tale contains "a certain atmosphere of breathlessness and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces" and that there "must be a hint" that somehow "those fixed laws of Nature which are

[449] Oppenheimer 125.

[450] Ibid.

our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos" have become suspended.[451] Jackson's stories about madness and inanimate objects coming to life create this feeling of reality under assault. In *Hill House*, for example, doors swing shut as if by will and the walls have the power to write secret messages to the occupants. So alive is Hill House that it "seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern under the hands of its builders, fitting itself into its own construction lines and angles."[452]

In other stories, the line between toys, mannequins and real people is blurred. In "The Dummy" (1949), a ventriloquist's dummy acts as the man's alter ego, saying nasty things about the man's wife; but when the wife rises to care for the dummy, readers are left wondering if the dummy is the doll or the wife. In "Nightmare" (1996) a woman's fragile mental state is made worse as she observes a parade with floats, advertising prizes in a consumer contest. The narrator tells readers, "all the performers were children in tiny dress suits" who behave like music-box figurines; on another float a "grinning mannequin" dips her hand into a barrel full of dollars "and ate them, then dipped into the barrel again."[453] And in "My Life with R.H. Macy" (1941) a new sales trainee convivially relates how she "enjoyed meeting the time clock" as if this automated feature of her work environment were a living colleague.[454] Through these and other examples, Jackson reveals how, viewed from a certain perspective, aspects of everyday physical "reality" are madder than the "mad" subjects who behold them.

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[451] Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1945; New York: Dover Publications, 1973) 15.

[452] Jackson, *Hill House* in *The Masterpieces of Shirley Jackson* (London: Robinson Publishing Ltd, 1996) 248; includes *Hill House*, originally published in 1959; hereafter referred to as "*Hill House*."

[453] Jackson, "Nightmare" *Just An Ordinary Day* 48-49.

[454] Jackson, "My Life with R.H. Macy," *The Masterpieces of Shirley Jackson.* London: Robinson Publishing Ltd, 1996, 44; includes the *The Lottery: Or the Adventures of James Harris*, originally published in 1949; hereafter this collection is referred to as "*The Lottery.*"

H.P. Lovecraft also emphasises the importance of atmosphere in the weird story and explains that by creating a certain atmosphere, a writer goes beyond merely the facts of plot and creates a "given sensation."[455] As explained in Chapter One, the uncanny often evokes a feeling of cognitive uncertainty in the subject, and in the reader as well, as the strange commingles with the familiar. A story's atmosphere helps convey this sensation through an abundance of unrelenting details that build up to a crescendo effect such that validity of the alternative reality is hard to ignore. Through what Lovecraft describes as "imperceptible hints and touches of selective associative detail,"[456] three key elements in a weird story are conveyed: the presence of unseen cosmic forces; a suspension of the natural laws of time and space; and a "vivid picture of certain types of human mood."[457]

In Lovecraft cosmic forces emerge from a dark, gory other-world and create a feeling of a certain dread. In Jackson, the unseen cosmic forces reside in the more familiar world of the everyday, and while they often acknowledge the possibility of evil, at other times they are quite friendly. For example, in "One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts" (1955) Johnson gives a $10 tip to a cabdriver, so that he can place a bet on a horse named "Vulcan," but then remembers that the cosmic forces would not look favourably on placing a bet on a "fire sign on Wednesday;" and so, he advises the cabdriver to place his bet on Thursday on "any horse that has a name indicating … grain. Or growing food."[458] By showing cosmic forces as not always fear-producing, but sometimes fortune-producing, Jackson creates openings for their acceptance, by other characters in the story and by the reader. In other words,

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[455] Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Fiction* 16.

[456] Lovecraft "Notes On Writing Weird Fiction," published posthumously in June 1937 in *Amateur Correspondent.* Http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Cafe/1131/14notes.ht, accessed on March 3, 2003.

[457] Ibid.

[458] Jackson, "One Ordinary Day with Peanuts," *Just an Ordinary Day* 334.

cosmic forces are not always threatening. For example, in a different story, "The Smoking Room" (1996), the devil is presented as "a good-looking guy" as well as modest.[459] On appearing before a female college student, his entrance is not frightening, but comical, "all of the sudden there was this terrific crash and sort of sizzle;" abashed, the devil, "just stood there, with smoke rolling off his head. 'This is as quietly as I can do it,' he said apologetically. 'It takes a lot of explosive power [to manifest] you know.'"[460]

To accommodate the weird, the natural laws of time and space need to be suspended. For example, in "Pillar of Salt" (1948), a story about the uneasy aspects of city life, Jackson conveys how the fast pace of city living practically alters the conventional rules on time: "people seemed hurled on in a frantic action that made every hour forty-five minutes long, every day nine hours, every year fourteen days."[461] Conventional rules on space and distance are also jettisoned. Even though New Yorkers have traditionally gone to weekend homes on Long Island for a change of scene, Manhattan trends on interior design still dictate and make people feel like they have never left:

> On Long Island, their hostess led them into a new piece of New York, a house filled with New York furniture as though on rubber bands, pulled this far, stretched taut, and ready to snap back to the city, to an apartment, as soon as the door was opened and the lease, fully paid, had expired.[462]

In addition to the presence of cosmic forces and the suspension of natural laws, Lovecraft emphasises the importance of communicating a vivid human mood. He explains that in writing his own weird stories, he starts with "a mood or idea or image" and turns it over in his mind until he can "think of a good way of embodying

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[459] Jackson, "The Smoking Room," *Just an Ordinary Day* 4.

[460] Ibid 3.

[461] Jackson, "Pillar of Salt," *The Lottery* 179.

[462] Ibid 180.

it in some chain of dramatic occurrences capable of being recorded in concrete terms."[463] For Jackson, the "mood or idea or image" is often the source of the story's unease. Lovecraft explains that it is important for a weird tale to excite "proper sensations" at a "high spot" in the story.[464] To communicate effectively the unease, the mood-idea-image is needs to be conveyed with a sense of poignancy without being mawkishly sentimental. A good example of how Jackson succeeds in this standard can be observed in how she sensitively relates her unease over the sense of meagreness associated with city living.

Stories such as "The Daemon Lover" (1949), "Trial By Combat" (1944), "Elizabeth" (c1949), and "When Things Get Dark" (1944) show women struggling alone and desperately seeking a human connection that cannot be found in the city. By creating a mood of scarcity, Jackson evokes the impression that something has gone terribly wrong in urban communities. Life is not as it "should" be and certainly bears no relation to the sense of abundance evoked in paintings such as Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* that appeared on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1943 (See Figure 1).[465] Though Rockwell's image appeared years earlier, it was popularised throughout the forties and fifties as nearly a justification of the American way of life. People were encouraged to think of themselves as living in a land of plenty and genial community. In fact, this portrait of America is what made America specifically different from countries like the Soviet Union and China;

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[463]Lovecraft "Notes On Writing Weird Fiction."

[464] Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* 16.

[465]Norman Rockwell painted *Freedom from Want* in 1942, as well as with three other paintings *Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship and Freedom from Fear,* in response to a speech that President Franklin Delano which celebrated these values. The paintings were exhibited throughout America and helped to promote the sale of war bonds. "Viewed by more than a million people, their popularity was considered an important part of the war effort at home." Source:

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/rockwell_n.html, accessed on March 29, 2007. *Freedom from Want* appeared in the pages of *The Saturday Evening Post* (March 6, 1943): 11. This picture is taken from Office of War Information poster OWI Poster Number 46 O-511887. See Figure 1.

defending this image nearly became a defence against Communism itself. But the reality for some Americans was quite different. Many people did not have comfortable homes in the suburbs or well-stocked tables; poverty and social isolation in cities, as well as in rural areas, was still an intractable issue. Jackson manipulates the uncanny effect of the "me" and the "not me" by writing stories about meagre city living against a cultural context that promoted images of America as a land of plenty and as a land of community.

In stories such as "The Daemon Lover," "Elizabeth" and "Trial By Combat" (all published in 1950), Jackson targets the idea of cities as large anonymous zones where people have no sense of shared experience. By emphasising details about the smallness and sense of sacrifice, Jackson suggests that the "natural laws" of what was considered to be "naturally American" have been usurped or interrupted in some way such that subject can feel as if she were in the presence of something uncanny. Many of her stories are concerned with disturbed notions of home and the limited choices available to women who, forced either through circumstance or limited alternatives, eke a substitute sense of home in urban accommodation. Lodgings are cramped, but are all the women can afford, leaving them few resources leftover to enjoy life. Such deprivation leads them to turn inward psychologically and to grow delusional.

"The Daemon Lover" opens with a picture of the woman trying to get dressed while negotiating her way around her tiny quarters:

> She hung the dresses side by side on the outside of her closet door and opened the glass doors carefully closed upon the small closet that was her kitchenette. She turned on the burner under the coffeepot, and went to the window; it was sunny.[466]

[466] Jackson, "The Daemon Lover," *The Lottery* 7.

She soon finds herself day-dreaming how marriage will liberate her from the confinement of city living into a "golden house-in-the-country future;" but the man she plans to marry never shows up.[467] Readers wonder if the narrow constraints of city living have somehow interfered with the woman's mental capacity to discriminate the real from the unreal. Perhaps city life has contributed to her becoming either delusional or weak-willed to take up with a man who would betray her. The rest of the story continues as an uncanny detective story, where the woman wanders through her neighbourhood desperately trying to re-trace his steps, only to leave readers wondering whether the man ever existed at all or was some kind of supernatural visitor. She asks people on the street if they have seen a man that meets her lover's description; they say they have and give her new information to continue her search. But the reader is never clear whether the information given is trustworthy. As discussed in Chapter One, details which convey a sense of untrustworthiness are central to creating the uncanny effect; as with uncanny ghost stories, readers have to figure out the plot for themselves, a process that includes deciding whether the facts given are reliable. In "The Daemon Lover" it is questionable whether the other characters are deliberately misleading the woman or their eagerness to supply information arises from a similarly unhinged sense of reality: in an effort to make the city feel like more of a community, people pretend they can relate to what is being discussed, even if they cannot; even casual exchanges are not reliable.

By providing details on the constraints of space and of the woman's hunger – in her bodily person, spirit and financial situation -- Jackson contributes to the poignant mood of the story that this is a weird tale about a woman's doomed and

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[467] Ibid 9.

desperate quest to escape what she sees as a pathetic fate. The sunny scene outside her apartment stands in contrast to the inner surroundings of her one-room bed-sit. She thinks to herself:

> There was nothing to eat in the apartment except the food she had carefully stocked up for their life beginning together: the unopened package of bacon, the dozen of eggs in their box, the unopened bread and the unopened butter; they were for breakfast tomorrow.[468]

The way the woman rations her supplies so that she can appear to be generous when her imagined lover arrives is strikingly similar to the approach taken by another woman Jackson writes about who also lives alone in the city. In "Elizabeth," readers see how the woman spends her last few dollars on a bottle of rye, ginger ale, potato chips, crackers and liverwurst spread so that she has something to offer her male guest when he arrives at her apartment. Similar to the woman in "The Daemon Lover," the woman in "Elizabeth" reflects how "the apartment was created and planned" for people just like her:

> ... with little ability to make things gracious, the nights spent in one chair with one book and one ashtray, the nights spent dreaming of hot grass and heavy sunlight. There was no possible arrangement of these things that would permit a casual grouping of three or four people, sitting easily around a room holding glasses, talking lightly. In the early evening, with one lamp on and the shadows in the corners, it looked warm and soft, but you had only to sit down in the one armchair, or touch a hand to the grey wood end table that looked polished, to see that the armchair was hard and cheap, the grey paint chipping.[469]

In "Trial By Combat" there is a similar emphasis on limitations conveyed through the details of physical space. When Mrs. Allen is paid a visit by her younger neighbour Emily, she cheerfully invites Emily to take a seat, "You stay there. I'll sit on the bed."[470] The simplicity of her offer lays bare the cramped

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[468] Ibid 10.

[469] Jackson, "Elizabeth," *The Lottery* 141.

[470] Jackson, "Trial by Combat," *The Lottery* 32.

conditions city living has imposed on her. Emily calls in on Mrs. Allen because she suspects the older woman has been stealing inexpensive items from her. However, rather than meet her visitor defensively, Mrs. Allen is genuinely thrilled that one of her neighbours would take the time to visit her. In a sad comment on the failure of communal life, Mrs. Allen remarks how "it's so seldom one really meets anyone really."[471] Readers sense that it is, in fact, city living and the social isolation that accompanies it that causes Mrs. Allen to breakdown mentally and become a kleptomaniac. Cities are not places with high levels of social connection. In "The Daemon Lover," when the woman searches different apartment buildings looking for the lover who abandoned her, she finds mostly dim abandoned spaces, "The apartment doors lined up, four on the floor, uncommunicative and silent."[472] By including details like these, Jackson conjures a distinctive atmosphere in her stories that creates a certain feeling in her characters and in her readers that the world has become claustrophobic and unhinged in someway from how it was supposed to be, and is therefore vulnerable to damage when cosmic forces shift and turn unfriendly.

Unfriendly forces, unseen as elements in the cosmos or dormant as the evil possibilities in human nature, are constant preoccupations of Jackson's. The cosmic in Jackson acts chiefly as a metaphor for her grim view of mankind. This is also typical of the weird tale. As S.T. Joshi explains, "During the early part of the twentieth century, weird fiction was not so much a genre as the consequence of a world view."[473] Jackson was fascinated by how little it took for humanity, and individual people, to go from order to chaos and from kindness to base cruelty.

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[471] Ibid.

[472] Jackson, "Daemon Lover" 12.

[473] S.T. Joshi, *The Modern Weird Tale* 1.

Further disturbing to Jackson is the fact that no one else seems to be upset by how evil coexists with the good, and how evil is tolerated as everyday. For example, the husband in "The Good Wife" (1996), pours "himself a third cup of coffee" and drinks it "peacefully" over breakfast; as he glances over the broadsheets, he is unphased by how "the department store advertisements [were] superimposed upon the horrors of the morning paper."[474] Jackson also conveys how evil passes for good and is tolerated with a kind of insouciance, even by its victims. In "The Good Wife" the story opens with the husband inquiring lovingly of his maid about the condition of his wife; he asks if she has had her breakfast yet, and then he thoughtfully gathers up the mail and morning papers for her review. However, as the story continues, readers realise that this "good" husband is in fact keeping his wife under lock and key in their bedroom. More disturbing, however, is how his wife goes along with it; the wife even reminds her husband when he is leaving the room, "Don't forget to lock the door!" and continues reading her book.[475] The twist in the tale comes at the end when readers discover Mr. Benjamin writing a letter to his wife as if he were the man she was having the affair with; revealing that he is, in fact, mad and that the affair, which has made him "jealous," is all in his head. But Jackson suggests that the wife may be madder than he is. However, Jackson leaves readers doubting their own sense of what is mad and what is sane: perhaps the wife is enjoying more freedom in her imprisonment because she is relieved of her marital duties. She can get a good night's sleep again in a bed of her own; she does not have to bother to get up and get dressed, and she does not have to tolerate tedious social visits from friends and family.

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[474] Jackson, "The Good Wife," *Just An Ordinary Day* 137.

[475] Ibid 141.

In addition to incorporating aspects of the weird, Jackson's unique contribution to the uncanny lies in how she conveys to readers that there are degrees of uncanniness. Some of the stories Jackson writes are not wholly uncanny but incorporate weird dimensions that make them have graduated uncanny effects. For example, many stories possess the weird idea that people are not who one thinks they are, and sometimes, who one *really* is is not believed by other people. In using this technique Jackson taps into the paranoia some people felt during that McCarthy era over the sense that they were being tracked down by pursuers, who falsely accused them of being Communists. In stories such as "Nightmare" (1996) an entire city is looking for a woman called "Miss X"; the female protagonist fits the description but has to keep insisting that she is not who they are looking for. The theme of identity is played with in Jackson; by having her characters constantly question other characters' identities, and even their own, an uncanny effect is created as it leads a character to feel that his/her mental framework for dealing with the world is unreliable. For instance, in another story, "The Witch" (1949), a little boy and his mother begin to fear that the kind old gentleman sitting beside them on the train is not a kind man pretending to be a witch, but a mean old man and a real witch.

Similarly, in "Come Dance with Me in Ireland" (1943) and "Whistler's Grandmother" (1945) a lost old man and well-mannered old lady are, respectively, portrayed as people one might want to look after and protect from vulnerability, but in the end, they reveal themselves as something quite different with flashes of mean-spiritedness. In "Come Dance with Me in Ireland," the lost old man turns out to be a drunk who takes advantage of a woman's hospitality and then criticises her for the quality of her whiskey. In "Whistler's Grandmother" a grandmother travelling to

see her grandson, home on leave from the army, at first seems to be full of good intentions; but, in fact, she is a home-wrecker. She is on her way to tell him that the woman he has married is cheating on him, even though she has very little real evidence; she just wants her grandson all to herself. A woman beside her on the train remarks, "It's so easy to make a mistake about people." To which the old woman replies, "True is true."[476] And in "Little Old Lady In Great Need" (1944) a great-grandmother on the way to the butcher's is described as not dainty and faint in appetite as one might expect, but rather like the vicious wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood" she remarks, "I hope he has something tender. Young meat for old teeth."[477]

In "Charles" (1948) a family's son comes home from school with wild stories of a boy named Charles who gets up to all kinds of trouble, but the mother is filled with horror when she learns from the teacher that there is no Charles in school, and deduces that it is her own son who is causing the trouble. The mother and the reader are left with the unnerving idea that he may be displaying early signs of childhood schizophrenia. And in "Louisa Please Come Home" (1960) a girl who has run away from home is unsuccessful in convincing her family, on her return, that she is really their daughter; her own family is not able to recognise the real thing because too many other girls have shown up who have looked exactly like her.

In manipulating notions of identity, Jackson highlights the question of the "proper" in proper names, titles and roles, which can also be approached as a veiled criticism of her political environment. On the 20th of February of 1950 Senate majority leader, Democrat Scott Lucas challenged McCarthy about his alleged list of 205 Communist-party members in the State Department to "name them all." But McCarthy responded that "it would be improper to make the names public until the

[476] Jackson, "Whistler's Grandmother" *Just an Ordinary Day* 234.

[477] Jackson, "Little Old Lady in Great Need," *Just An Ordinary Day* 223.

appropriate Senate committee can meet in executive session and get them ... If we should label a man a Communist when he is not a Communist, I think that would be too bad."[478] Jackson was not alone in feeling uneasy about such hypocrisy coming from a man who would go on to ruin careers by circulating false rumours about identities.

Jackson keenly relates the feeling of being violated, and interfered with, when one's identity is toyed with and manipulated. Her unease over this issue is rendered uncanny when she has her characters believe that they are either going mad or experiencing something supernatural. In *Hill House* for example, when Eleanor and the others sit around and discuss what makes them most afraid, Eleanor contributes to the reflection by describing how no one else knows what it feels like to see the letters of their own name written on the walls, as hers are:

> "Those letters spelled out my name and none of you know what that feels like – it's so *familiar.*" [...] "Try to *see,*" she said. "It's my own dear name, and it belongs to me, something is using it and writing it and calling me with it and my own name."[479]

Here, Eleanor can be seen as experiencing the uncanny as a "crisis of the proper" in the terms Nicholas Royle describes.[480] Jackson refers to how decidedly improper Senator McCarthy's tactics were; the accused, whose identities were misused, felt that they were inhabiting a society gone mad. She also prefigures a theme seen later in Oates: ultimately the most estranging experience of all is to be divested of what one once regarded as most intimate and familiar -- one's identity -- and that this experience is one so disturbing because it is one which is borne ultimately alone.

In another story, "Lovers Meeting" (1996), a paranoid woman believes she

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[478] Senator Joe McCarthy, *Major Speeches & Debates of Senator Joe McCarthy Delivered in the United States Senate, 1950-1951* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953) 17.

[479] Jackson, *Hill House* 334.

[480] Royle 1.

is being pursued when she is followed by a stranger, only to go home and find him waiting for her in her apartment. Readers of the story are not sure if the woman is mad and imagining it all, or if it is the madness of the situation itself that makes her wonder if "it could not have been an accident, or a dream or *the quick small betrayal of the mind.*"[481] By playing on this notion of a slip in cognitive powers and perceptive abilities, Jackson uses the uncanny to convey how mental strategies, employed to make sense out of her social, cultural and political environment, were similarly unreliable.

Several of Jackson's stories deal with the theme of meeting one's *doppelgänger*, usually as a version of one's future self. This theme in seen in stories such as "Trial by Combat," where Emily's confrontation with Mrs. Allen presents an eerie portrait of what Emily herself might become one day, a single woman, with limited resources still living in a bed-sit. The theme of the double features again in the story "Men with their Big Shoes" (1950), where a newly pregnant housewife, who has moved into her ideal home in the country, realises her "faint small uneasiness was justified;" as she listens to her maid talk about how her husband mistreats her, the younger woman realises that one day she too may have the same problems and that marriage and children were going to be much harder than she thought.[482] In "The Little House" (1962) a woman takes up residence in a house she inherited from her aunt, but in a strange way figuratively starts living the same life of her aunt, who lived alone and whose death was surrounded by dubious circumstances. Two gossiping neighbours come by to pay her a visit and warn her that her aunt's attacker might return to the house to commit another murder. As living spirits from the underworld, they tell her ominously, "You will see us again in

[481] Jackson, "Lovers Meeting," *Just An Ordinary Day* 160.

[482] Jackson, "Men with Their Big Shoes," *The Lottery* 188.

three days."[483] The young woman will meet the same fate as her aunt; perhaps they were her aunt's murderers, and their promise of future hospitality is really a threat that they will return to murder her. Throughout Jackson's work, characters who are meant to be polar opposites are, in fact, revealed either as doubles or reciprocal sides of the same person. Those who are "neighbourly" are revealed as distinctly "unneighbourly" in the same way the uncanny implies that which is "homely," is, in fact, "unhomely."

While not all of Jackson's stories may be wholly uncanny, by evaluating a good sample of them, readers can understand the unique contribution she makes to the evolution of the genre: she broadens the uncanny from its roots as a ghost story to take in aspects of the weird, and she demonstrates that there are degrees of the uncanny. Weird tales are more than ghost stories; as S.T. Joshi discusses, the "*primary* purpose of weird fiction should not be to send a tingle up one's spine; that is merely, as it were, an epiphenomenon of the weird. [...] If weird fiction is to be a legitimate literary mode, it must touch the depths of human significance in a way that other literary modes do not; and its principal means of doing so is the utilisation of the supernatural as a metaphor for various conceptions regarding the universe and human life."[484] Jackson's concept is to see the universe and human nature as essentially hostile; underlying polite manners and smoothly functioning economic systems are impulses that are chaotic and pure evil.

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[483] Jackson, "The Little House," *Come Along with Me: Part of a Novel, Sixteen Stories, and Three Lectures,* ed. Stanley Edgar Hyman (London: Michael Joseph, 1969) 177; hereafter this collection is referred to as "*Come Along with Me.*")

[484] S.T. Joshi, *The Modern Weird Tale* 2.

Part II – Relationship to Feminism

Jackson's relationship to feminism and the Women's movement also reveals her as a transitional figure. After the Second World War, the dominant ideology proclaimed that American society desired a return to tradition. Despite the fact that women had attained some level of independence through occupational opportunities during the war, when great numbers of men returned home from the war, the prevailing view was that women were expected to return to their roles in the home as mothers, nurturers and domestic supports for men and children.[485] A cartoon from *The New Yorker* magazine, featured in Figure 2, illustrates how female power was reinterpreted after the war to comply with this view. Doe-eyed with blank expressions, the women are portrayed as having their individual consciousnesses erased and replaced with the dominant view that a woman's chief role after World War II was to look after her husband's needs and be his support.

The cartoon was, in fact, an advertisement for the *Ladies' Home Journal*, which was placed in *The New Yorker* on 25 August 1945. The two magazines had very different markets. *Ladies Home Journal* was targeted at mothers and housewives, while *The New Yorker* had a broader, higher-brow readership that included both women and men. That Jackson wrote for both demonstrates how she often negotiated two different value systems. The advertisement touts how the *Ladies Home Journal* "has the largest audited circulation of ANY magazine given it exclusively by women" and is captioned as "the magazine women believe in." The advertisement is meant to appeal to savvy *New Yorker* readers who were responsible for placing advertising as corporate heads and who had consumer products to sell to

[485] Joseph R. Conlin, *The American Past Part 2: A Survey of American History since 1865* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1997; 1984) 835-836.

women. As an example of hegemonic thought-control in operation, the cartoon illustrates how magazines for the powerful elite distanced themselves from, yet still controlled, the value systems of the mass. Jackson's writing appealed to these two very different audiences.

The legacy of the anthropological studies of Margaret Mead suggested that women had become selfish in their assumption of independence and that the healthy development of children was now endangered.[486] In fact, it was believed that too much female power unbalanced delicate relationships in the home and actually contributed to the perceived rise in juvenile delinquency. Women who had reached middle age without fulfilling their "natural" role in giving birth and nurturing children were perceived to be emotionally imbalanced and a threat. Motherhood was considered to be a full-time job and the children of working mothers were seen as at risk of becoming, as Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak observe, "juvenile delinquents, atheists, communists or worse.[487] Attention to youth culture (as a new social phenomenon and as well as a new market) was on the rise and prescriptive books such as Dr. Spock's manual *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946) became widely read for their advice on raising children.

When Jackson assembled her stories about mischief-making among children into a book entitled *Raising Demons* (1957), the irony was not lost on readers. Jackson had a way of expertly harmonising ferocious female power with the role of caregiver and disciplinarian in very funny tales such as "Alone in a Den of Cubs" (1953), where, in an autobiographical portrait, Jackson relates of how one mother overcomes her intimidation at finding the proper way to control a group of unruly

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[486]Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique,* Chapter 6. Also see Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 8-9.

[487]Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 165.

children. Jackson obtains command, again by portraying herself as madder than mad, when she hurls an egg at her young son Laurie in front of his Cub scout troop as a way to get them to be quiet and is met with a stunned response of absolute awe. Other stories that Jackson wrote also related to the theme of juvenile delinquency include "Arch-Criminal" (1996), "IOU" (1965), "When Barry Was Seven" (1996) and "Party of Boys" (1996), but these are not specifically uncanny. However, as discussed in Part One, it is unfortunate, from a post-feminist perspective, that often uncanny madness in Jackson is portrayed as the vehicle through which women can attain power.

Jackson's fiction can also disappoint feminist readers who wish to see positive role models of female independence. Women who are alone in Jackson's stories are often pathetic figures who display symptoms of being unhinged precisely because they are alone. For example, in *Hill House*, Eleanor sits around humming the tune "Journeys end in lovers meeting" and she prays to St. Anne to send her a man. She fantasises about romantic unions with other guests in the house, with Luke and with Theodora, as she waits for something, life, to happen to her. Part of the reason she is driven mad is that society has failed her somehow: she is a "victim" because she has not yet met someone and developed a family of her own. Jackson goes to great lengths to display the sad lot of a woman alone in other stories, almost too numerous to list.[488] In a fashion similar to the theme Wharton relates in "Miss Mary Pask," in Jackson, women who are faced with living an independent life alone succumb to madness; and some start imagining ghosts as in "The Rock" (1968) and

[488]Variously, this theme can be seen in *The Lottery* stories such as "Trial by Combat" (1944), "Men With Their Big Shoes" (1947), "The Daemon Lover" (1949), "Elizabeth" (c1949); in *Come Along with Me* in "The Beautiful Stranger" (1946), "A Day in the Jungle" (1952), "Island" (1950), "The Little House" (1962), "The Bus" (1965), "The Rock" (c1968); and in *Just An Ordinary Day* in "Nightmare" (1996), "When Things Get Dark" (1944), "The Order of Charlotte's Going" (1954), and "The Possibility of Evil" (1968).

"The Beautiful Stranger." This theme is dealt with again by Oates in stories such as the "The Dream-catcher."

In "The Rock" a lonely unmarried woman goes to an island retreat so that her sick, married brother might be cured. While there, however, she is the one who is revealed as having a nervous condition and in need of attention; she is visited by a ghost who appears only to her and to the other unmarried woman on the island, the landlady. In this story, the single woman is portrayed as "at sea," both emotionally and economically. Being so dispossessed, she becomes possessed. In "The Beautiful Stranger" it is less clear whether the man who visits the woman is a ghost or an actual person (her husband or, again, someone who is playing with identity and only pretending to be her husband). Jackson shows the woman's confusion to illustrate how cognitive frames are manipulated in the presence of the uncanny; equally, it is unclear whether the woman is alone because her husband has died (and the apparition is his ghost come back) or whether he is as a good as dead because he does nothing around the house, whereas this ghost (or the mentally disturbed woman's projection) stands waiting for her at the foot of her stairs, smiling with a cocktail in hand prepared just for her.

In both of these stories, being a woman alone is related as an experience out of kilter with how reality was meant to be for these women; and so, reality is disrupted by the interception of something uncanny. In these stories Jackson gives voice to a general impression that was felt in society at the time, which is commented on by Wini Breines in her book *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (1992). Breines begins her chapter on women "Alone in the Fifties" with the following quote from contemporary mental health experts: "The unmarried individual occupies a position in society generally considered by social

theorists as dysfunctional in the societal structure, a position that is out of step with the normative patterns of living."[489] This chapter goes on to describe the tortured, lonely life of Anne Parsons, who committed herself to a scholarly career studying mental health and anthropology at the expense of meeting a man, a fate which her society told her was incongruous with the way things were supposed to be for her. Although Parsons was astute enough to recognise that finding love depends as much on fortune as opportunity, she did not feel she had enough inner independence to stand apart from oppressive standards of 1950s America, and she committed suicide. In an unsent letter to Betty Friedan, Parsons writes:

> Life for the unmarried person after 25 or so is simply not very easy because by this fact one is thrown out of all the better-worn social grooves so that even relatively simple things as what to do on Sunday become impossibly difficult. Probably the worst of the unpleasant results the situation creates is that it becomes difficult to remember that love is an intimate personal emotion that depends purely on chance, not a social obligation (as proof of one's normalcy) or an abstract search for an 'object.'[490]

Another social observer, Barbara Ehrenreich, also describes how in 1950s America if a person, particularly a woman, was not married with children by a certain age, society regarded such single and childless status as symptomatic of arrested emotional development.[491] Jackson's work reflects a similar view. Eleanor particularly, with her reverie on "red shoes," displays this kind of immaturity; and like Anne Parsons, Eleanor lacks the internal strength to continue her life amidst such societal pressure. Others critics, however, interpret Eleanor's suicide, controversially, as a sign of her positive resistance. Oppenheimer, for example,

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[489]Gerald Gurin, Joseph Veroff, and Sheila Feld, *Americans View Their Mental Health* (New York: Basic Books, 1960) 231 qtd in Breines 167.

[490] Anne Parsons Letter to Betty Friedan qtd in Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 171-172.

[491]Barbara Ehrenreich, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of Experts' Advice to Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989; 1979) 270. Also as Miller and Nowak discuss, there was a widely held perception in the 1950s that unmarried, childless people of both sexes were considered "warped and defective" 154.

explains that "Eleanor in *Hill House* kills herself rather than accept a lesser, saner reality" and that readers are to take this as a sign that Jackson "had no patience with the idea of victimization or passivity."[492] Regarding madness or suicide as a vindicating option and evaluating life alone as "a *lesser*, albeit saner reality" (italics mine) hardly sounds feminist; in fact, such ideas of female redemption would appear to be at odds with the values of self-sufficiency the Women's Movement first emphasised.

"The Bus" (1965) provides another haunting story of a woman alone and relates the horror some women can feel when they realise their fading fecundity, a theme that is repeated by Oates in "The Sepulchre." In "The Bus" the woman spends the night in a ramshackle old roadhouse, where she tries to ignore the imagined shame of her situation. By going to bed early, she tries to put out of her mind the smells and sounds of sexual couplings from adjacent rooms. Instead, she thinks the noises are coming from her old toys that have come to life. However, the items that used to comfort her, no longer do; they are deranged and sick: "a small doll ran madly from side to side, the animals paraded solemnly down the gang-plank of Noah's ark, a stuffed bear wheezed asthmatically."[493] Again, the single woman, despite her physical age, is portrayed as either mad or emotionally immature.

The woman has mistaken the roadhouse for the house in which she was raised. On approaching it, Miss Harper felt a sudden "warm recognition, of welcome; it's the house, she thought, thinking it is her own house."[494] Miss Harper is taken in by what she perceives as the elegance of her former of the house. But on closer inspection she is appalled as she wonders, "what are they doing to our old

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[492] Oppenheimer 165.

[493] Jackson, "The Bus," *Come Along with Me* 191.

[494] Ibid 183.

houses?"[495] The house is strikingly familiar yet distinctly unfamiliar. Similar to her failing body, "Where there had certainly once been comfortable rooms, high-ceilinged and square, with tall doors and polished floors, there was now one large dirty room, with a counter running along one side and half a dozen battered tables."[496] Bewildered and horrified at what has become of the once beautiful room, a metaphor for her aging body, Miss Harper simply mutters, "Oh no."[497]

This idea of not being able to recognise one's own body has been rendered uncanny before; readers will recall how Wharton in her story "The Looking Glass" similarly relates how an aging woman does not recognise her own face in the mirror because, after meddling with plastic surgery, she now looks like a ghost. As well, in Jackson's story "The Tooth" (1949) a woman, alone, does not recognise her face in the mirror, when, after being heavily sedated at a dentist appointment, she imagines a demon lover has come to whisk her away from her real life.

Jackson's relationship to feminism is interesting to study for the way it reveals her as an ambivalent figure and as a writer very much of her time. During the war, American women had gained access to positions of responsibility, both at a home and in industry. In the fifties, men re-assumed the roles they had before the war and women were encouraged to oblige by returning to positions of support. This shift in value systems accounts for part of the reason why issues of gender were experienced as confusing. On one hand, women knew they could survive on their own and lead independent lives; on the other, images in popular culture encouraged women to internalise romanticised notions that their "proper" place was to be rescued by a man, marry and have a family. While some of Jackson's uncanny

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[495] Ibid 186.

[496] Ibid 187.

[497] Ibid.

stories contain moments that deliver a subversive message against patriarchy, more often, they reinforce the status quo.

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Part III – Persona and Abstract Expressionism

A trend in Jackson scholarship, and particularly in the public's reception of her work, is to see Jackson as an odd character—she was a wife, a mother, a witch and a writer. Unable to reconcile these diverse roles, reviewers of her work often exploit one or two and fashion Jackson as someone who is entranced by the supernatural, or as someone who, through madness, was only loosely clinging to reality. Variously Jackson is reported as mad and as believing in magic, as dependent on alcohol, doped-up on barbiturates, and kept going on pep pills.[498] The idea that her writing was the product of madness, or some chemically altered state, tends to create the perception that Jackson herself was some kind of mystical receptacle for the uncanny.

In addition, her biographer Judy Oppenheimer explains that Jackson's writing was almost supernatural, "It was not unlike witchcraft—you mixed a brew, threw in the people and incidents you decided on, and used your darker powers to charge the atmosphere with tension, control mood, set destiny."[499] The antecedent to the pronoun "you" here is unclear, but one assumes Oppenheimer is referring to either Jackson herself or the reader in his or her response to the text. Oppenheimer continues by suggesting that Jackson's writing provided her with "a powerful

[498]For a discussion of Jackson's use of alcohol, amphetamines and tranquillizers, see Oppenheimer 147-148.

[499] Oppenheimer 101.

medium for revenge, a way to control the final outcome."[500] This portrait of Jackson needs to be contextualised however. Oppenheimer's biography of Jackson was published in 1988, at a time when certain second wave-feminist critics were eager to see female writing as an other-worldly *écriture* used to re-imagine power relations.

More recently, Jackson's other biographer Darryl Hattenhauer, notes that to associate Jackson consistently with madness "is to sentimentalise her. Jackson was neurotic, not psychotic. In her life as in her fiction, the ideology that masked reality broke down and enabled a clearer view of reality. She didn't break down and separate from reality."[501] By contextualising Jackson and seeing her as a part of, and not separate from, the artistic movements of her time, one can better appreciate the method of her craft and how it allowed her to make oblique references to wider social, cultural and political concerns.

Moreover, the view that Jackson was mad or mystical coincides with another flawed perception of her as wholly apolitical. Oppenheimer documents that Jackson joined the Young Communist League while she was in college at Syracuse University and that she also co-founded with Hyman a literary magazine called *The Spectre,* so-named after the first line of *The Communist Manifesto.*[502] To this magazine, Jackson contributed a sonnet about a lynching and complained about the low level of admissions among black students. She also gave her support for the NAACP's efforts to correct the problem. By the second issue of the magazine, Jackson complained openly about the University's attempts to censor the magazine

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[500] Ibid.

[501] Darryl Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003) 9.

[502] As Oppenheimer notes, Jackson and Hyman claimed the magazine's title was taken from William Blake's line, "My Spectre before me night and day / Like a wild beast guards my way." -- but the title was really a reference to the first line of *The Communist Manifesto*, "A spectre is haunting Europe -- the spectre of communism." Oppenheimer 76.

and how those efforts pointed to "Repression, or Dictatorship, or Reaction, or whatever you want to call it. It is the stuff Fascism fattens on."[503] Oppenheimer also reported that Jackson made close friends with a young French woman, Jeanou, who later went back to France to become involved radical socialist causes. This affiliation with politically-minded people and causes, however, was presumed to end when Jackson settled into married life with Hyman, with whom she enjoyed a degree of bourgeois comfort of her own. Her interest in politics is painted as a passing phase, something she did merely to keep Hyman's attention in the early days of their relationship. As Walter Bernstein notes, "Shirley was not political at all, it was all Stanley ... she was as close to a non-political member of the YCL as they ever had."[504] And then later, Oppenheimer notes how, "her old friend Y, on the other hand, saw it more clearly. 'My feeling was she was not a person who developed political ideas of her own. She didn't think about them. When I first knew her, her outlook was exactly like her father's," which Oppenheimer earlier glosses as similar to "the Reagan type Republican"]. After she met Stanley, her outlook was exactly like his [Stanley, in his early life, was a committed Marxist].'"[505]

Oppenheimer concludes by explaining that Jackson's "brief fling with radical politics at college had been totally Stanley-induced, and left no marks."[506] Oppenheimer reports that after Jackson had settled into married life later on in New York, conversations about political and cultural movements would bore her, and how she would either leave the room or sit and sulk when topical issues were discussed by Stanley and his friends.

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[503] Ibid 78.

[504] Ibid 64.

[505] Ibid.

[506] Ibid 90.

What critics up to now may have failed to recognise, or underestimated, is the extent to which Jackson was ironic, or at least coy, in the way she fashioned herself as mad, or even indeed as a witch. In one sense, she had to be coy; she was writing in the fifties. During this time, one of the reasons many writers avoided being overtly political in their work was because they were afraid of being labelled as subversive in the McCarthy years. In this atmosphere of domestic witch-hunting -- where Senate interviews began with the question, "Are you or were you ever a member of the Communist Party?" (which Jackson *was,* however uninvolved she was or not) -- how better to resist the dominant ideology and openly flout communist witch-hunts than to actually proclaim oneself a domesticated witch?

It was Jackson's husband who first referred to his wife as a witch when he supplied the copy for the book jacket to Jackson's first novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948). The novel was published in the same year that accusations of communist infiltrations were rife in America.[507] Their own friend Walter Bernstein was blacklisted as a Hollywood screenwriter for being a suspected communist. In an era that demonised people for being different, one way to remain under the radar of surveillance was to proclaim yourself (or your wife) as almost too weird for weird. But the label of Jackson as a witch stuck with her writerly persona long after the enthusiasm for finding and outing communists had died down. After the Rosenbergs were executed in 1953, no cases of spies were identified and the nation grew sceptical of Senator McCarthy's agenda. So then, one might ask why Jackson, or those who promoted her work, persisted with the witch label? For example, in the October 1956 issue of *Woman's Day* magazine both Jackson and her writing are

[507]In 1948, Whittaker Chambers alleged that Alger Hiss was a communist spy working inside the State Department, and the Rosenbergs were executed in 1950 on charges that they passed nuclear bomb making secrets to the Soviets.

referred to as "Supernatural."[508] With her interest in witchcraft featured almost too prominently, critics today can begin to ask questions about how this label served her.

A historicised view of Jackson might suggest that she did not deal directly with these issues either because she could not or because she chose not to as an aesthetic decision. The era of conformity in which she lived discouraged any overt reference to controversial issues that might suggest democracy was not delivering the American dream it promised. Thus, in one sense, Jackson had to be coy. In quite another sense, it can also be suggested that she chose to be oblique in her references and enigmatic in her persona as an aesthetic decision; in this way Jackson both reflected and was a product of the age in which she wrote.

Like other artists of her time, not only writers, but artists from the visual arts, Jackson was influenced by a new movement that was present in the late 1940s—Abstract Expressionism. Abstract Expressionism is recognised as the first truly American movement in the visual arts. Up to the 1930s, American painters had largely responded to and adapted European movements. With Abstract Expressionism, there was the feeling that something uniquely American was being created. Abstract Expressionism had origins in Germany as well, but the chief difference between American and European Expressionism is the emphasis on spiritual and psychological values in American Abstract Expressionism.[509] American Expressionists certainly drew from European Modernism, and Surrealism in particular, but the emphasis shifted away from the notion that an artist was operating within a school of similarly-minded artists, who all employed common techniques, on to an awareness of the talent of the artist as an individual. As

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[508] *Woman's Day* (October 1956): 4.

[509] Bram Dijkstra, *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change 1920-1950* (New York: Harry Abrams, 2003) 44.

individuals, artists like Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock all had very different styles. (See Figures 3-5.) The hope was that by breaking from the constraints of established modes and patterns of thought, American artists had emptied form of its heavy narratives and were free either to contemplate pure form or consider the possibilities for how form could be re-filled with something new.

The movement in the visual arts also influenced and was influenced by a similar impetus towards the original in literary production and criticism. Inspired by T.S. Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920), artists believed they were taking their place in tradition by being unique in their individual mode of creative expression. Shirley Jackson was part of this tide. On August 23, 1965 an obituary of Jackson describes her as follows:

> Jackson was an absolute original. She belonged to no literary movement and was a member of "no school." She listened to her own voice, kept her own counsel, and isolated herself from all fashionable intellectual and literary currents. She was not urban, or existential, or "new" or "anti-novelist". She was unique.[510]

The irony of this eulogy, that the editors at *Newsweek* failed to take into account, was that being "unique" actually went with being part of the Abstract Expressionist age. Being unique was indeed intellectually and artistically fashionable. William Faulkner won the Nobel Prize in 1949 because his writing was considered so unique and difficult in the way it was laden with internal symbolism, so much so, that he actually was not widely read by Americans at the time and was out of print in America just four years prior to receiving international recognition. But Faulkner was nevertheless recognised as an artist. The problem for Jackson was that she was not. She was recognised as eccentric, but just shy of possessing the status of full artist.

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[510] "School of One," *Newsweek,* LXVI (August 23, 1965): 83B.

Moreover, it is simply inaccurate to portray Jackson as intellectually isolated. Her husband and his circle of colleagues from liberal Bennington College, where he lectured in myth and folklore, brought an active intellectual life into their home. Their home included a library of over 700 books; and Hyman reportedly charged Jackson with the responsibility of keeping his library organised. J.D. Salinger lived nearby their home in Vermont and played baseball with Jackson's children. Ralph Ellison, a close friend of Stanley's, was a frequent visitor and the godfather to one of her children. Titan literary figures such as Dylan Thomas and Gore Vidal came to their house for dinner parties. At one period, when they were in-between residences, they rented a house from the famous psychologist Erich Fromm. Many of Stanley's friends were poets and painters, and Hyman himself wrote art and literary criticism. Jackson and Hyman were known for their socialising, and though Jackson may have had her private, reclusive moments of neurosis, her life with Hyman was very active intellectually. Given the company they kept, where Jackson was always remembered as a participating hostess, not just for refreshments but for her cutting wit, it is difficult to imagine that Jackson would remain completely uninfluenced by contemporary ideas on aesthetic methods and philosophies.

At the time, artists were encouraged to probe their individual psyches, examining spiritual and psychological values. In fact, Abstract Expressionism was a movement whose themes specifically included alienation, neurosis, and examination of the psyche. By these criteria, Jackson surely was a member— her novels *Hangsaman* (1951) and *The Bird's Nest* (1954) address the dual themes of isolation and mental illness. Interestingly, two of Jackson's female contemporaries, Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers, also produced literary explorations of sojourns into madness, but they too are placed as into a category that marginalises them to

some degree; they tended to be regarded as regional writers of southern gothic fiction in a similar way that Jackson is peripheralised as just plain weird. Serious questions need to be asked about how when male authors explore the tenuous threads of man's ability or inability to assemble meaning from life and its social relations, the texts are regarded as existential, but when female writers investigate the same themes, their writing is too readily dismissed as "emotional," "mad," "Gothic," or as "psychological thrillers." Instead, it is important to recognise how female writers, in a discerning way, may be using gothic modes to exaggerate the futility of conventional meaning-making modalities. Rather than reading female-authored texts myopically as necessarily carrying a subversive message about gender power relations, writers like Jackson, O'Connor and McCullers could be interpreted as employing tropes of the bizarre in a way that makes a wider statement about *human* abilities to make meaning and use language.

In a 1949 interview with an Associated Press reporter, W.G. Rogers, Jackson reveals how she allowed other modalities and meaning-making systems to exist, and how she used the occult as a metaphor to make a broader statement about modern epistemological methods. W.G. Rogers reports on Jackson's views:

> Magic, she is convinced, is better than science. Most people are tired of a world which eternally goes on the assumption that one and one make two, a world which places no credence on anything that can't be seen or touched. She thinks we would all be happier with a "different rationale." We "lost our notion of human dignity" when we lost the devil and the soul she wants it and them back again.[511]

In the fifties, government and mass culture placed great trust that faith in science would necessarily lead to progress. But by then, the progress delivered by science had also produced nuclear weapons and overly mechanised ways of working, producing and merchandising. What was left was the rather dull, quotidian existence

[511] Oppenheimer 139-140.

that was depicted in best sellers such as Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955). Artists associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement sought to distance themselves from the outwardly "advanced" achievements of science and business, often ironically, by emphasising the mechanisation of modern life.

Shirley Jackson provides a superb example of this new approach in "My Day with R.H. Macy." By providing extensive detail about how the modern retail sales process has become managed, in an impersonal way, through a system of numbers and codes, Jackson shows how not only has the sales process become dehumanised, but also how it has dehumanising *effect* on all the persons involved with it. Jackson interrogates the dominant ideology, which saw such changes as fundamental to American prosperity and as delivering new kinds of "gainful" employment, particularly for women. All of the sales people at Macy's are women and in the opening line of the story, Jackson reveals how indoctrinating new hires on the efficiency of the system involved the same tactics used in brainwashing. Jackson describes how "the first thing they did was segregate me."[512] Her colleagues all lose their individuality and begin to resemble each other; they all have "tailored suits and with short-clipped hair" and all the women she meets on her first day were all named "Miss Cooper."[513] Eventually names are replaced with numbers, and the system, in the end, is revealed as not terribly efficient after all: "The counter head was named 13-2246; [...] She sent me to lunch three times, because she got me confused with 13-6454 and 13-3141."[514]

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[512] Jackson, "My Day with R.H. Macy" 43.

[513] Ibid 43.

[514] Ibid 44.

Further, in contrast to the outgoing sales approach promoted by contemporary sales coach and spiritual guru Norman Vincent Peale, the young woman, hilariously, becomes very like the character of the book she is meant to promote on "the special sales counter:" Jackson describes how she "stood in the corner of a counter with one hand possessively on *The Stage-Struck Seal,* waiting for customers."[515] When one approaches her to buy one of the books, Jackson's character is flummoxed; even the customer is *au fait* with the mad language of the department store. In typical Jackson style, Jackson has the "mad" protagonist bewildered as she tries to come to terms with a system that seems to make sense to everyone else:

> She came over and took one of my stagestruck seals, and said, "How much is this?" I opened my mouth and the customer said, "I have a D.A. I will pay for with a book dividend of 32 cents, and the rest of course will be on my account. Is this book price-fixed?" That's as near as I can remember what she said. I smiled confidently, and said, "Certainly; will you just wait a moment?" I found a little piece of paper in a drawer under the counter: it had "Duplicate Triplicate" printed across the front in big letters, I took down the customer's name and address, her aunt's name and address, and wrote carefully across the front of the duplicate triplicate "1 Stg. Strk. Sl." Then I smiled at the customer and said carelessly: "That will be seventy-five cents." She said, "But I have a D.A." I told her that all D.A.'s were suspended for the Christmas rush, and she gave me seventy-five cents, which I kept. Then I rang up a "No Sale" on the cash register and I tore up the duplicate triplicate because I didn't know what else to do with it.[516]

By showing how the strange is so readily accepted as normal and by showing the normal as strange, Jackson's work reveals how not all of human behaviour could accurately be captured in the management science of her time.

Abstract Expressionism emphasised sincere, uninhibited self-expression. It was about rejecting boundaries and using ordinary materials to explore and express the extraordinary ranges of experience by exaggerating the limits of pure

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[515] Ibid 44.

[516] Ibid 44-45.

form. In the same way that artists like Robert Rauschenberg used everyday objects to make a statement about the arbitrary limits between life and art, so too did Shirley Jackson take the material closest to her hand to develop a mature artistic expression about "all the borderline evil and darkness in the world."[517] (See Figure 6.) Interestingly, in the same way that Jackson "had no idea" what her writing was about, in a *Life* magazine interview Jackson Pollock also explains, "When I am in my painting I'm not aware of what I'm doing."[518] Action painters like Pollock describe their methods as employing a kind automatism. With this context mind, the fact that Hyman described his wife's writing as a kind of automatic writing suggests less about how the writing itself was supernatural and more about how Jackson fits in with other Abstract Expressionists of her time.[519] Also noteworthy is how Willem de Kooning's *Woman* paintings were applauded for the way they exaggerated the female form into grotesque effigies of femininity, regarded in 1953 by art critic Harry Gaugh as a "coven of sympathetic witches."[520] (See Figure 7.) Against this background for what was considered trendy at the time, it is entirely appropriate to question the extent to which Jackson was isolated and uncontaminated by cultural currents. To be considered so involved in her work that she was not aware of what she was doing, and even to be seen as a witch, carried a kind of eccentric authority in artistic circles, such that it is plausible to suggest that Jackson's efforts to present herself and her characters as something excessive may have been more self-conscious attempts to facilitate her own positioning as an artist of her time.

Modernism as a movement had been present in Europe since the turn of the

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[517] Oppenheimer 68.

[518] "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?" *Life* (8 August 1949): 42-43, 45.

[519] Walter Bernstein once remembered Hyman telling him that "a lot of the things Shirley wrote she had no real idea what they the hell they meant. It was the closest thing to automatic writing. She would go to [Hyman] for explanations – what does this really mean?" Oppenheimer 121.

[520] Harry F. Gaugh, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: Abbeville, Press, 1983) 41.

century, but in America its influence was felt much later. Up until the 1930s, American arts and letters were still heavily influenced by regional and realist modes, which extolled the virtues of science and technology, along with the value of work and a faith, that through collective effort, mass movements could lead to progress. These themes can be seen in the wall murals commissioned by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s, including those of Thomas Hart Benton and other New Deal artists, many of which were displayed in public buildings in cities and state capitals. (See Figures 8-10.) Life in the city, communal projects, publicly-funded facilities, and government-supported artists were celebrated. As Jacques Barzun notes, "Intellectuals were being acknowledged as a working part of the nation, not individually but collectively. This was new and it communicated something of the American tradition that had never been congenial to artists before – the get-together, corn-husking democracy of mutual help."[521]

But as Communism was increasingly perceived as a threat to freedom in America (and government support for art projects fell), there rose a growing scepticism toward mass movements which caused Abstract Expressionists in the late 1940s and 50s to turn away from notions of the collective, and instead emphasise and explore the subjectivity of the individual talent. Where in the thirties, artists were interested in painting big murals that could communicate with the common man, with Abstract Expressionism artists abandoned the common man and became elitist, or at least introverted. The popularity of Freudian and Jungian psychology contributed to this exploration of the psychological responses of the individual, and in general, in the visual arts and literature, there was a turning inward and a turning away from the collective power of communal and city life.

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[521] Jacques Barzun, "Our Country and Our Culture," *Partisan Review* 14.4 (July-August 1952): 424-431, 426.

In fact, Jackson's story "The Lottery" can be read as exemplifying the Abstract Expressionist view of the failure of communal rites. In an earlier period, communal rites had been celebrated, as for example, in paintings such as John Stewart Curry's *Baptism in Kansas* (1928). (See Figure 11.) Joshi discusses how "The Lottery" provides "Another instance ... of ritual gone to seed."[522] In this story, members of a farming community sacrifice one of their own so that with the "Lottery in June, corn will be heavy soon."[523] Joshi discusses how this quote helps Jackson reveal communal rituals, and the unthinking participation in them, as forms of madness when the rituals had lost track of their original purpose. This reading is quite accurate, but Joshi does not connect how Jackson's view on communal rites was not so much unique, but rather reflected a view shared by many Abstract Expressionists. Abstract Expressionist artists turned to the abstract specifically because they had tired of humanity and distrusted optimistic notions of the collective.

In the same way that paintings of Abstract Expressionist contemplate pure form and distance themselves from the humanity to be found in cities (one only has to think of Rothko or Mondrian's paintings of rectangular or circular shapes to recognise the promotion of abstract ideas over portraits of city life), so many of Jackson's stories demonstrate an equivalent movement away from celebrating city life to illustrating this retreat into a deeper, more individual psychological space. For example, in "When Things Get Dark" a young woman, who lives alone (because her husband is fighting in the war), takes comfort in a letter she receives from an older woman she met one day in the city. The old woman had taken her address and written her a letter of encouragement, to keep beside her as a reminder that "when

[522] Joshi, *The Modern Weird Tale*, 32. Also see Jackson, *Hangasman* 62.

[523] Jackson, "The Lottery," *The Lottery* 220.

things get dark" there people are still full of goodwill and that someone cares about her, even if they live in a big anonymous city. However, when the young woman discovers that she now has the added anxiety of being pregnant, she decides to pay a visit to the older woman for some comfort. On arriving at the older woman's apartment, she realises that the older woman has no idea who she is. The lack of any real social connection in the city has driven this old woman mad; she keeps correspondence with strangers as a way to console herself that she has friends. Such deprivation causes her to turn inward psychologically and to grow delusional. She even writes to Hitler:

> "This is one I wrote to Mr. Adolf Hitler. When he first started killing and rampaging, that was. I said for him to look into his heart and find love." She touched the letter pasted on the page. "I don't very often write like that, but some people are in so much need of a thoughtful word."[524]

The other interesting aspect of the time was that many American cities were, in fact, in decline. Cities were literally falling apart as the predominantly white, working and middle classes abandoned cities for the suburbs, leaving the cities in neglect and in need of structural repairs. One of the few books to criticise the uneven distribution of America's much-lauded prosperity was John Kenneth Galbraith's renowned economic study, *The Affluent Society* (1958). Galbraith observes how American cities were "badly paved, made hideous by litter, blighted buildings, and posts for wires that should long since have been put underground."[525] Cities became frightening places with high crime rates that devolved into ghettos populated by poorer minorities. Jackson's stories "Pillar of Salt" and "A Day in the Jungle" present surreal images of the structural elements in the city as on the verge of collapse—fires breakout, sides of buildings collapse, loose wires from neon signs

[524] Jackson, "When Things Get Dark," *Just An Ordinary Day* 230-231.

[525] John Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962) 192.

dangle perilously close to pedestrian walkways, and snipers hang from windows. In one sense, this portrait of the city falling apart can be seen as figurative of the character's mental state coming undone. In another, it can be seen as expression of Jackson's personal mental fears. According to her friend, Philip Hamburger, Jackson "was convinced she was going to be killed by something dropping from a building. She pretty much convinced me it was dangerous to walk down the street."[526] However, it might be more elucidating to resist this personalised view, and consider a more historicised perspective that can suggest a firmer sense of design in Jackson's method. In these images, Jackson is both reflecting the Abstract Expressionist surreal view of the city *and* presenting a portrait of the actual desolation and decay that was taking place in American cities as people opted for life in the suburbs.

Jackson's work has also been criticized as not overtly political. And, as will be discussed more fully in Part Four, Jackson's work is not without references to politics; they are just not direct references. This too is consonant with the aesthetic methods of the period. After learning about the terrors and mass murders associated with fascist regimes such as Hitler's and Stalin's, along with the nuclear devastation caused by their own American government at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in particular, American artists chose not to engage directly with politics, but instead sought to explore and understand the baser human instincts that could bring about apocalypse in civilisation and evil in man. This was also Shirley Jackson's subject. For example, in stories such as "One Ordinary Day with Peanuts" and the "The Good Wife" Jackson explores the strangeness of the individual personality that seems to snap for no reason from being kind to cruelly sinister. In pursuing this theme,

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[526] Oppenheimer 109.

Jackson was not alone in inquiring about how truly naked evil can be committed by someone who, by all other criteria, is a fully functioning person, or as in the case of Hitler, was capable of leading countries.

Where murals of the earlier age emphasised the collective myths and rituals of man as well as the origins of man, by the late 1930s collective narratives had been revealed as thin illusions. Abstract Expressionism looks underneath these illusions and considers the baser impulses of man that could lead to death, destruction and profound alienation. As art scholar Stephen Polaris notes, this shift was also detectable in the literary themes of the time:

> The change in thought in America from the thirties to the war period is sharply delineated by comparing Thornton Wilder's famous plays, *Our Town* of 1938 and *The Skin of Our Teeth* of 1942. A classic of thirties culture, *Our Town* celebrates the continuity of life and custom in Smalltown U.S.A., where generations of American families, representing Everyman, follow the same routines, work, and social customs. Wilder presents this life cycle as an endless simple rhythm of countless lives re-enacting allegorical rituals of birth, initiation, courtship, marriage, and death. Typically, the local is universalised and mythologized in an epic of the cosmic rhythms and everlastingness of life. [...]
>
> Life is very different four years later. The protagonists of *The Skin of Our Teeth* are once again members of an American family, but now the family represents the twenty-thousand-year-old human race, as the play takes place simultaneously in layers of primordial and modern, geological and biblical time. ... Cataclysmic events take place. Mammoths and dinosaurs, a biblical flood, the Ice Age, and war approach. ... Man survives these cosmic disasters, and civilisation is saved, but the *evil within is now apparent* [italics mine]. Antrobus's son, symbolically representing Cain, has proved to be an uncontrollable killer, evil incarnate. [527]

The idea of an art that explores evil within could be interpreted as homologous to the paranoia that was to take hold of the nation later in the 1940s and into the early 50s as people feared that "evil" might be living amongst them as a communist threat. But the more interesting vein that Jackson considers is how ordinary, outwardly

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[527] Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 16-17.

decent individuals might also harbour the capacity for extraordinary evil in themselves. Jackson shares the Surrealists' interest in "humanity's inner life, elemental instincts, formative and destructive forces, and the concept of change through internal transformation that made them seem newly relevant to Americans' needs."[528] Popular at the time was the idea that despite total devastation by war, Holocaust, or nuclear devastation, there still was the potential to remake the world anew. This hope did not so much justify violence as provide an insight into the minds of those who, in a warped way, fervently believed that such Edenic renewal could be achieved through violent sacrifices.

Although Jackson's story "The Lottery" (1948) has been interpreted variously as referring to the victims of the Jewish Holocaust and/or as a tale about the pressures of conformity in 1950s America, the story can also be appreciated more broadly as referring to this detached, abstract idea that through horrific violence communities might be somehow renewed. This idea recurs again in Jackson in *The Sundial* (1958), a novel where millenarian themes of the world coming to an end only to be re-populated by a selected community takes on biblical tones of the rapture and Judgement Day. It is hard to read *The Sundial* without considering its cultural context. Many of Jackson's readers would have believed that well-provisioned bomb shelters could make a devastating nuclear attack an acceptable, survivable inconvenience that was justified if evil was purged from the world in the process.

One challenge to understand is how writers and artists of this time achieved engagement with political issues, as Jackson does in the above examples, while at the same time appearing to be apolitical. It is important to remember that because of

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[528] Ibid 23.

the scepticism toward mass movements, appearing apolitical was in vogue. Stephen Polcari reports how the artist Robert Motherwell maintained that, "One of the things that characterizes people who came to be the best-known Abstract Expressionists was a deep reaction against anything that had any political content whatsoever."[529] He also reports how Pollock once said that "those artists who painted politics were not artists."[530] There was almost a kind of snobbery towards artistic works that were overtly political. The reader has to gauge the extent to which Jackson was apolitical or "a witch" because that was the pose her cultural environment made available to her against the degree to which she disguises subject matters that were at the core of her unease because she did not wish to be seen as directly engaging with political and cultural subject matter.

It is worth recalling how the aspect of the surreal is very strong within Abstract Expressionism. Surrealist art aimed to subvert everyday reality by incorporating irrational and fantastic images in among the prosaic. Jackson does the same in her stories when she uses uncanny devices to disturb and disorient the cognitive senses to clear the way to enable a new insight into the human character. For Jackson, the form suited the material. The gravity of the horrors that had been witnessed by this mid-point in the twentieth century caused artists like her to depend on unrealistic forms and settings to depict "incredible realities."[531] Probably the most revealing comment about Jackson and her use of the uncanny can be found in

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[529] Polcari 32.

[530] Ibid.

[531] Darryl Hattenhauer discusses the observations of other writers, such as John Barth and Philip Roth, who also felt bewildered by the times as if they were unreal. Hattenhauer explains "both the gargantuan horrors of the twentieth century and the morass of petty absurdities in politics and mass culture have revealed not only that some events and people are really unbelievable and simple but also that such incredible realities cannot be represented with realism" (3).

an unpublished statement she wrote after she published her first novel *The Road Through the Wall* in 1948:

> I have had for many years a consuming interest in magic and the supernatural. I think this is because I find there so convenient a shorthand statement of the possibilities of human adjustment to what seems to be at best an inhuman world.[532]

Appreciating the ways Jackson uses the uncanny as a handy metaphor for expressing her unease over situations in her social and political environment makes historicising Jackson's stories all the more essential.

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Part IV – Social and Cultural Concerns in Jackson's Uncanny Stories

During the fifties, many intellectuals saw themselves as defensively reacting to unpredictable world events and government leaders were anxious to keep control over irrational or non-conforming elements. Communism was spreading throughout Eastern Europe, and was already present in China and North Korea, as well as on America's own doorstep in Cuba. In 1949 the Soviets exploded their own nuclear weapon, and in 1957 they beat America into space with the launch of Sputnik, the world's first satellite. In his book, *The Vital Center* (1949) Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. notes how these events made people feel in flux:

> Western man in the middle of the twentieth century is tense, uncertain, adrift. We look upon our epoch as a time of trouble, an age of anxiety. The grounds of our civilization, of our certitude, are breaking up under our feet.[533]

In response to this incertitude, many Americans sought security in religion, homogenisation, consensus and in groups. Ironically, in this climate of fear, they

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[532] Oppenheimer 125.

[533] Arthur Schelesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center* (1949; London: Deustch, 1970) 1.

were also willing to accept without debate or question a proliferation of nuclear weapons that caused even more fear. Fear was used to fend off fear and somehow this made sense to people. In her stories, Jackson exploits this feeling of an almost psychological vertigo at the illogical way her fellow Americans conformed to and assimilated shifts in social and economic value systems.

In Jackson's time fundamental changes in the country's economic structure were applauded for the way they seemed to contribute to America's ability to control and be economically superior in the world. But it was quite unnerving at the same time, when President Eisenhower, warned in his exit speech that the same force which built up America, the "military-industrial complex," could lead to the destruction of its freedom; again, the evil was within. On January 17, 1961, in a nationally televised address, Eisenhower explained how Americans "face a hostile ideology, global in scope, atheistic in character, ruthless in purpose, and insidious in method."[534] The threat was to last for an "indefinite duration" and many people would think that it could be kept at bay by spending more on new weapons. But Eisenhower warned,

> This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. [...] The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government. [...] In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition whether it is sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. [The military-industrial complex should never be allowed to] endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted.[535]

The idea of an evil collusion between heads of government, military and

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[534]Qtd in Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President, Volume Two* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1984) 612.

[535] Ibid 612.

business, in fact, was not new; the same idea had been articulated by C. Wright Mills when he published *The Power Elite* in 1956. Also, earlier in 1952, Norman Mailer complained about the lack of protest among writers over the way "the prosperity of America depends upon the production of means of destruction."[536] The new dimension with Eisenhower's speech was that the warning was being issued by an outgoing President, who commanded real authority precisely because he had nothing to lose. As well, the threat that would last for an "indefinite duration" was not just the global spread of Communism, but also referred to a new value system -- economic, political and social in scope -- that would encourage Americans to remain on "high-alert." The evil was within and there was no end in sight. In "One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts" when Johnson asks a man on the street how much he makes an hour, the young man asks whether he is a Communist or selling something. In the fifties, people looked at each other distrustfully as they perceived only two modes: communist or capitalist; anyone with an alternative outlook was labelled either as a radical sympathiser or an over-zealous salesperson.

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr captures some of these same feelings of distrust, fear of the enemy within, and uneasiness over political and economic contradictions when he describes the intellectual state of America in 1952:

> ... we are almost in greater peril from foes within than from the foe without. The foes within are the spirits of hysteria, hatred, mistrust, and pride. We are engaged in a perpetual liturgy of self-congratulations about the vaunted virtues and achievements of the "American way of life" that we not only make ourselves odious to the world, but also rob ourselves of the political wisdom required to wield power in a world which refuses to be made over into the image of America. Furthermore our frustrations and hatred of the foe have created an [sic] hysteria through which public discussion of foreign policy has practically ceased, the foreign policy has been frozen into inflexible rigidity, and our cherished liberties are being engulfed.[537]

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[536] Norman Mailer, "Our Country and Our Culture," *Partisan Review* 14.3 (May-June 1952): 298-301, 300.

[537] Rienhold Niebuhr. "Our Country and Our Culture," *Partisan Review* 14.3 (May-June 1952): 301-310, 302.

While Jackson's uncanny stories may not explicitly identify the troubling issues of foreign policy Niebuhr refers to, her stories rather examine the larger question of Americans' refusal to consider the troubling, and how this laxity to consider real issues mutates into a free-floating anxiety and hysteria, where the enemy is indeed within because Americans can only hold themselves responsible for tolerating, or patently refusing to examine, that which was genuinely disturbing.

The period contained many mixed messages, which were hard to absorb. As Miller and Nowak note, Americans were encouraged both to love and fear the nuclear age; they were taught to trust American bombs but fear Soviet ones.[538] In a chapter entitled "Learning to Love the Bomb" Miller and Nowak include many hilarious, yet deeply disturbing, pieces of journalism and references to cultural trends which demonstrate the absurdity of the age, which was precisely what Jackson hoped to render in some of her novels and uncanny stories. For example, Miller and Nowak record how in 1952, *Reader's Digest* reports the following observations of one woman:

> My son and his family, who live in California not too far from atomic-bomb testing grounds in Nevada, are becoming used to seeing a flash and some minutes later feeling the house rock. ... One night recently he woke from a sound sleep and asked, 'What's that?' 'Oh, go back to sleep,' said his wife. 'It's only an atomic bomb.' My son settled back, 'All right. I was afraid one of the kids had fallen out of bed.'[539]

Jackson was similarly captivated by this blasé attitude towards evil and the

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[538] Miller and Nowak 46.

[539] Miller and Nowak 43. In a footnote they explain that this story came from "Life in These United States," *Reader's Digest* (October 1952) 52. They also note that the same story in "different trappings" appears in other sources. For example, *Time* magazine included an article about people from a mining town in Nevada, who after recalled the following:

> "There was a kinda flash lit up the window – a real big flash it was. With it comes a bang – bingo, just like that. I thought two cars must have hit into one another on the road outside. This white flash started on the ground and sort of swooshed up into the air. [...] I reckoned there wasn't much I could do about it. So I just sat down and ate my breakfast. What did you want me to do?"

The same article reports the reactions of a all-night gambler in a Las Vegas casino, who heard the same "rumble": "'Must be an A-bomb,' he remarked, and turned back to the dice table." See "The Atom: 'A Kinda Flash'" *Time* (February 5, 1951): 11..

nonchalant tolerance of an unhinged dimensions to a person's or indeed society's character. "One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts" (1955) tells the story of a couple who take turns being kind and cruel to the people they meet during the day. The man goes around the city helping people, while his wife has accused someone of shoplifting and sent three dogs to the pound. Later at home, they discuss their respective days, and decide, in a matter of fact way, to switch roles the following day. In the story actually entitled "The Possibility of Evil" (1968) Jackson tells the story of a woman, who lives alone but comes from a well-regarded family; the woman sends anonymous letters to people of the town alerting them to the "evil that existed unchecked" in their world.[540] However, the true evil in the town is that which resides in this ostensibly nice, little old lady who is circulating false rumours. "The Possibility of Evil" is especially interesting because, on the one hand, it could be read apolitically as an examination of a person's capacity for evil in the abstract; but on the other it may carry an oblique reference to the atmosphere of accusation, suspicion and false rumours over identity that described the McCarthy era.

That Jackson was interested in evil and the devil was also symptomatic of the time. Although membership in religious organisations and interest in spiritual movements, generally, was on the rise, many people were also preoccupied with the forces of evil in the fifties. The April 19, 1954 issue of *Time* magazine includes a picture of Reinhold Niebuhr with the caption, "Sin is back in fashion."[541] Niebuhr wrote about how contemporary history has taught modern man about the co-existence of evil with good, and how "every enlargement of man's freedom over

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[540]Shirley Jackson, "The Possibility of Evil" 424.

[541] Anon, "Religion," *Time* (April 19, 1954): 63, 66; 63.

nature would make for both good and evil consequences."[542] Not dwelling morosely on the very real horrors of what had been truly demonic by that point in the century, Jackson takes a lighter tone and pricks the very absurdity of those horrors by writing two comic stories about consorting with the devil, "The Smoking Room" and "Devil of a Tale." In these stories the devil is represented as a reasonable man. In "The Smoking Room" a woman signs a contract with the devil, where the devil gives *his* soul instead of taking hers. In "Devil of a Tale" a woman's negotiates with the devil again; this time agreeing in a resigned way to have his son because the devil tells her she will be worshipped if she does so. By flirting with the devil, Jackson is also attempting to convey or understand how easy it is for people to commit, or at least go along with, the truly horrific. In "Nightmare" Jackson portrays how people unthinkingly carry out instructions. The man driving the sound truck can not tell Miss Morgan why the whole city is looking for a woman who fits her description; he explains that "People hire this truck, I drive where they say. I don't have nothing to do with what happens back there."[543]

By exploring this theme, Jackson anticipates a work, assembled later on, in 1964, by Hannah Arendt, who also worked for *The New Yorker,* but as a journalist. Like Jackson, Arendt became fascinated with how so-called "normal" people could be capable of, and complicit with, extraordinary evil. In 1961, as a reporter, she wrote articles about her observations of Nazi Adolf Eichmann, who was on trial in Jerusalem for his role in the Holocaust. In a book entitled, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964), Arendt, controversially, explains that Eichmann was not a "monster" but rather that his problem was one of

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[542]Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Cause and Cure of the American Psychosis," *The American Scholar* 25 (Winter 1955-56) 13. Also see "Varieties of Religious Revival," *New Republic* (June 6, 1955): 13-16.

[543] Jackson, "Nightmare" 42.

thoughtlessness and self-deception; he simply did not think about the unethical dimensions of his behaviour as he carried out orders given to him.[544] Even if Eichmann did brag "I will jump into my grave laughing, because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews [or 'enemies of the Reich,' as he always claimed to have said] on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction," Arendt suggests that Eichmann's "sheer rodomontade" needs to be understood in the context of how his cultural environment promoted self-deception and that, in his mind, he had simply achieved the objective of his job efficiently and on a massive scale, because the Nazi authorities had encouraged people to think of "annihilat[ing] their enemies or be annihilated."[545] (Ironically, a decade later, America was using the same rhetoric in their effort to annihilate communism.)

Arendt's book upset many members of her Jewish audience, particularly in the New York intellectual community, for two reasons: (1) she suggests that all people are susceptible to thoughtlessness, and thereby, she was deemed, by some, to have minimised Eichmann's abnormality; and (2) she suggests that members of the Jewish leadership betrayed their own community in their negotiations with the Nazis. As Jennifer Ring explains in her book *The Political Consequences of Thinking* (1997),

> In arguing that evil can be committed thoughtlessly, [...] Arendt implied that all might be vulnerable to failure to think. This assertion is unpleasant enough, but her association of the absence of thinking with the capacity for mass murder was too profoundly upsetting for many people to bear.
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> Claiming that Eichmann was not so exceptional, but in fact dangerously 'ordinary' was much more disturbing than acquiescing in his exceptionality. Those of us who would like to believe that we are not exceptionally bad

[544] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann and the Holocaust* (London: Penguin Books, 2005) 20, 24, 27. (This book consists of excerpts from *Eichammn in Jerusaleum: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).)

[545] Ibid 16.

might have a more difficult time accepting that we don't always think, if abstaining from thinking is enough to create catastrophes.[546]

The other aspect that disturbed many was Arendt's accusations of how members of the leadership in the Jewish community, in fact, helped Eichmann to do his job. Arendt maintained that in the Jewish leadership's effort to keep the Jewish community together, they negotiated with the Nazis and, in effect, facilitated the leading of many of their own to slaughter. For example, Arendt discusses how many of the Jews in Germany were dispossessed of their financial assets and told to leave the country or go to a concentration camp, but that in order to leave Germany, they needed foreign currency so that they could provide evidence of independent financial resources and obtain visas. Arendt explains that since the German government did not want to exhaust their foreign currency reserves on the Jews, Eichmann negotiated with the leadership in the Jewish community, who fundraised from Jewish organisations internationally. Arendt reports, "these funds were then sold by the Jewish community to the prospective emigrants at a considerable profit – one dollar, for instance, was sold for 10 or 20 marks when its market value was 4.20 marks."[547]

The two dimensions of the Eichmann controversy are similar because both outline the horrific consequences that attend not thinking through the extraordinary consequences of one's ordinary behaviour. They also demonstrate the dangers of assimilation taken to extreme: Eichmann was assimilating in his efforts to please his superiors and Arendt implies that the Jewish leadership had assimilated in their relations with the Nazis. Arendt suggests that if there had been less conformity to group codes and more individual thought and protest, there might have been more

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[546] Jennifer Ring, *The Political Consequences of Thinking: Gender and Judaism in the Work of Hannah Arendt* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997) 22-23.

[547] Arendt 16.

chaos in the early stages of displacing Jews and the Holocaust would not have been executed so efficiently and on such a massive scale. Against the context of the environment Arendt describes, Jackson's story "The Lottery" can indeed be read more politically as inveighing against the Jews and how they might have, through "thoughtlessness," participated in or at least co-operated with the project of sacrificing their own.[548] More generally, throughout her work, Jackson shows a fascination, similar to Arendt's, for how people divorce themselves from any thought that what they go about doing as "everyday" might be extraordinarily wrong.

In returning to the subject of attitudes toward the nuclear threat, Jackson's work can also be examined for its reflection of indifferent attitudes toward danger and evil that were disturbing, but on some level, also risible and widespread. Miller and Nowak discuss how the February 1957 issue of *Reader's Digest* featured a cartoon about a perfume sales counter, captioned "The first whiff is good, but it's the fallout that gets 'em."[549] The *Saturday Evening Post* ran a cartoon depicting an atomic high chair for babies that had the added feature of "no fall-out.""[550] In this period, the bikini swimsuit was named after the Bikini islands, where nuclear tests were held. There was even nuclear tourism. *The New York Times* travel section included a feature entitled "Watching the Bombs Go Off;"[551] postcards were made of the Southwest displaying the beauty of nuclear blasts; and *Life* magazine ran an article about how "Uranium Makes a Wilder West."[552] Miller and Nowak also

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[548] As previously pointed out, Jackson is recorded as having mentioned to a friend that "The Lottery" is "of course, about the Jews." See Oppenheimer 75.

[549] *Reader's Digest* (February 1957) qtd in Miller and Nowak 43.

[550] *Saturday Evening Post* (January 11, 1958): 48, qtd in Miller and Nowak 43.

[551] Gladwin Hill, "Watching the Bombs Go Off," *The New York Times* (June 9, 1957): 353.

[552] Jim Peck, *We Who Would Not Kill* (New York: L. Stuart, 1958), 120. Also "Uranium Makes a Wilder West," *Life* (July 19, 1954): 12-13, qtd in Miller and Nowak, 47.

report how "*Look* magazine tried to make the bomb seem *familiar and cosy* [italics mine] by comparing its size to that of the average living room. *Look* magazine also showed the bomb as considerate and thrifty, 'one of the cheapest forms of destruction known to man.'"[553] Miller and Nowak continue by noting how nuclear "kitten bombs" and "sunshine units" (devices to measure Strontium-90 levels) and "H-bombs," originally called "Humanitarian bombs" were so-named to make America's home-grown nuclear arsenal less intimidating.[554] In these examples, reviewers of the age can indeed recognise a "crisis of the proper" in the euphemistic renaming of genuine threats. Also, the representation of nuclear bombs and bomb shelters as familiar and cosy made the age a perfect host for the uncanny.

Shirley Jackson refers to nuclear fears in stories such as "A Day in the Jungle," when the woman leaves her husband, for a day, she experiences her new life as single as if it was "a new world with new standards and new laws."[555] As discussed earlier, the surreal images of decay on the street suggest the actual decay that was witnessed in many American cities at the time; however, the story can also be read as an allegorical critique of America's role as a superpower in the world following victory in World War II. The way the city surrealistically melts under her step and the chaos of snipers and looters also refers to the struggle for existence after a nuclear attack. In this sense the story can be read as a reminder of the anarchy and hand-to-mouth existence the citizens of Nagasaki and Hiroshima were forced to endure following the nuclear bombs America dropped on those cities. America, like Elsa, acted unilaterally and naively as if "for the first time she moved knowingly and of choice through a free world," unaware that its actions virtually changed the

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[553]"Atomic Weapons Will Save Money," *Look* (October 10, 1950) qtd in Miller and Nowak, 47.

[554]"First Picture of Atom Bomb," *Look* (May 3, 1951) qtd in Miller and Nowak, 47.

[555] Jackson, "A Day in the Jungle," *Come Along with Me* 132.

physics of world politics and introduced the nightmare of potential nuclear winters into the American imagination.[556] The rules that governed world politics had changed fundamentally with the introduction of nuclear weapons and in the fifties people were still struggling to keep up with the change in values and assess their implications.

Other stories and novels also contemplate what life is going to be like after, what is portrayed as, an almost inevitable nuclear holocaust. In "The Intoxicated" (1949) a schoolgirl casually discusses an essay she is writing for homework with a guest at one of her parents' dinner parties. The essay describes how in the future some apocalyptic event will bring about total chaos in society; buildings will crumble, people will scavenge for goods in the streets and there will be no more schools and no more rules. The absence of the latter is frightening but also promises a new beginning or at least a new modality. The adult she is talking to is shocked by the young woman's maturity and fatalistic aplomb in the face of such grave matters. But the twist in the story is not so much that *she* is revealed as the strange one, but how the immature behaviour of distracted "adults" (such as this intoxicated party guest of her parents) is the subtly pernicious neglect that has caused the world to descend into the chaos that now seems unavoidable.

The man feels discomfited by the girl's heavy, earnest manner, remarkable for a person of only seventeen. He tries to switch the subject by observing, "'In my day,' he said, overemphasising, 'girls thought of nothing but cocktails and necking.'" To which the girl answers him seriously, "That's partly the trouble. [...] If people had been really, honestly scared when you were young we wouldn't be so

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[556] Ibid 139.

badly off today."[557] As is typical with Jackson, the sane world is revealed as insane and the insane as sane. The man tries again to get the girl's mind off the subject. He says, "I think it's a little silly for you to fill your mind with all this morbid trash. Buy yourself a movie magazine and settle down."[558] But Jackson is being ironic here, and in a haunting way, she suggests to readers how enervating and wasting the diversions of mass culture in her time were. The sad realisation is how "mature" Americans had let themselves be distracted by cocktails, necking, and movie magazines; if they had more adult, they might have taken care more about the health of American culture and the viability of the planet.

The theme of Americans' concern for how the world will be like after the apocalypse appears consistently through the uncanny elements in Jackson's work. In *The Sundial* the house is portrayed as a well-provisioned bomb shelter. Bomb shelters were a preoccupation of the period but were also not available to everyone. As Miller and Nowak note "hiding in holes, not necessarily actual solid shelters, came to be expected of large portions of the population."[559] With this image in mind, a socio-historical reference can be read into Merricat and Elizabeths's nest of leaves in *We Have Always Lived in a Castle*, Jackson's novel where a child's madness is portrayed as having the same destructive force as a poltergeist. Nuclear dis-ease can also be found in *Hill House* when the character Luke offers possible reasons why the cook, Mrs Dudley, might be eyeing the property of house covetously when she has Luke remark that "oil is definitely old hat, nothing at all to

[557] Jackson, "The Intoxicated," *The Lottery* 5.

[558] Ibid.

[559] Miller and Nowak 52.

discover on the property these days. [...] The very least Mrs Dudley could murder me for in cold blood is uranium."[560]

In addition to nuclear fears, the age of McCarthyism and mechanised modes of work, Jackson felt uneasy about other socio-historical problems. For example, discrimination based on race was another contemporary issue referred to in her work. The idea that Mrs. Dudley might want to get rid of Luke in order to lay her hands on this uranium-rich property could be also be seen as a reference to the way the American government made a practice out of striking unfair deals with Native Americans so as to dispossess them of their land, which was also rich in resources like uranium.[561] Tribes were moved off their own lands onto reservations and some Native Americans were encouraged to "assimilate" by seeking new lives in the cities.[562] The theme of dispossession figures prominently in Jackson and could be a reference to a wider cultural anxiety that existed at the time, which was the fear of being ejected from one's home or of having one's home taken. During the Second World War, at the same time the Jews were being evicted from their homes in Europe, in America the government was rounding up its own citizens. Between 1942 and 1945, more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans were forcibly removed their homes and placed in "relocation" camps in an effort to prevent the infiltration of spies from Japan.[563]

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[560] Jackson, *Hill House* 270.

[561] According to Marjane Ambler, Native Americans owned 50-60% of the America's privately unranium. See Marjane Amber, *Breaking the Iron Bonds: Indian Control of Energy Development* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 29 qtd in David E. Wilkins, *American Indian Politics and the American Political System* (Lanham, MD; Oxford, U.K.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002) 175.

[562] Wilkins, 115 and 175-176. Also, Peter H. Eichstaedt, *If You Poison Us: Uranium and Native Americans* (Santa Fe: Red Crane Books, 1994) Chapter 4 – The Uranium Boom and the Cold War; also Christine Bolt, *American Indian Policy and American Reform: Case Studies of the Campaign to Assimilate the American Indians* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987) 127-128; Barry M. Pritzker, *Native Americans: An Encyclopedia of History, Culture and Peoples, Vol. I* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1998) 323.

[563] Harry H.L. Kitano, *Japanese Americans: The Evolution of a Subculture* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969) 33.

The theme of being dispossessed of land or home recurs in a number of Jackson's stories. In *Hill House* Eleanor is ejected from the house because she is too different from the others. In "Trial by Combat" the younger woman thinks twice about reporting the older woman who is stealing from her because she knows the older woman would be thrown out of the rooming house. In "Home" (1965) the ghost of an old woman tells the young boy in her care, "When the strangers are gone we can go home."[564] In "The Rock" a woman without a home of her own becomes possessed and imagines she sees people others on the island cannot. And in "Like Mother Used to Make" dispossession is portrayed as something one tolerates, without too much resistance or complaint. In that story, a man who keeps a tidy apartment invites a lady neighbour to dinner; but she has invited a guest of her own and pretends the well-kept apartment and nicely prepared dinner are her own while her host goes along with the pretence, returning at the end of the night to her messy apartment as if it is his own.

There was a lot about the fifties that many Americans tolerated and went along with; subtle and not so subtle racial prejudice were particularly troubling areas. Dr. Martin Luther King warned about the dangers of complacency, silence and conformity among white northern liberals and white southern moderates. He explained that these groups often kept too quiet and did not express enough outrage at racial injustice for fear of "social, political and economic reprisals."[565] Similar to how Arendt would later complain about the role conformist attitudes among "normal" people played in the Holocaust, Dr. King identified how white moderates were at risk of being complicit with the more extreme racist:

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[564] Jackson, "Home," *Just An Ordinary Day* 404.

[565] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958; New York and London: Harper & Row, 1977) 201.

> If the moderates of the white South fail to act now, history will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamour of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people. Our generation will have to repent not only for the acts and words of the children of darkness but also the fears and apathy of the children of light.[566]

Jackson portrays the tacit racism of the white moderates in stories such as "After You My Dear Alphonse," "The Flower Garden" (c.1949), and in "Gnarly The King of the Jungle."

The uncanny aspect in "After You My Dear Alphonse" relates to yet another situation where people are not who they appear to be; but this time, the standard is a white woman's preconception of who she thinks the black friend of her son "should be." It tells the story of a white woman, Mrs. Wilson, who entertains her son's friend Alphonse, to whom she thinks she is being generous by offering him clothes and food because he is black, but Alphonse's family does not need her donation and, in the end, the boy is revealed as having better manners than she has.

Mrs. Wilson encourages Alphonse to eat "stewed tomatoes," something her own son will not, because she assumes he is starving, "Boyd will eat *anything.*"[567] She assumes that Boyd's father is a strong factory worker, who does a lot of "lifting and carrying at the factory," but learns that he is a foreman.[568] When she presumes his mother works, her own son catches her, "'Why should she?' Johnny said through a mouthful of eggs. 'You don't work.'"[569] When Mrs. Wilson inquires about "all" of Boyd's "other brothers and sisters" her "concern" masks her real desire to see his parents as unrestrained in their attitude toward sex. Mrs. Wilson assumes Boyd's family would be grateful for a donation of her second-hand clothes, "Your mother

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[566] Ibid 202.

[567] Jackson, "After You, My Dear Alphonse," *The Lottery* 64.

[568] Ibid.

[569] Ibid.

can make them over into lots of things for all of you, [...]." Jackson describes how "Her voice trailed off as she saw Boyd's puzzled expression;" Boyd's response shows far more composure and sense of good manners, "But I have plenty of clothes, thank you, ... I don't think my mother knows how to sew very well, and anyway I guess we buy everything we need. Thank you very much, though."[570]

When both of the boys sense that Mrs. Wilson seems to be not in the right humour, Boyd says, "I didn't mean to make you mad, Mrs. Wilson," to which Mrs. Wilson replies, "Don't think I'm angry Boyd. I'm just disappointed in you, that's all."[571] She is discouraged that the boy and his family do not fulfil her expectations and are, in fact, better off than she had imagined they would be. This utterly confounds her, but as well, reveals a dimension to Mrs. Wilson that is mean-spirited, the exact opposite of the image she would have people believe is her own identity. By revealing people as not quite who one assumes they are, Jackson does two things: she delivers an uncanny effect as she shows how cognitive abilities are disrupted, and she communicates her unease over how the white moderates' false modesty and self-satisfaction at their own beneficence is simply repugnant.

Jackson delineates the same behaviour in "The Flower Garden," when she shows the women of a small town in Vermont making friendly overtures to a white woman who moves to their area, but then talk about the woman behind her back when they notice how she has befriended a black man. While not a wholly uncanny story, the un-ease in "The Flower Garden" is given an uncanny tone when the woman is portrayed as totally bewildered on realising that people, who she thought were her friends, are not. "Gnarly The King of The Jungle" is more overtly uncanny in the way that a toy comes to life. In this story, a little girl becomes jealous when

[570] Ibid 65-66.

[571] Ibid 66.

she sees that her black housemaid is able to hear her rocking-horse-lion speak in the same way that she can. The source of the uncanny can be read as a reference to the way children can sometimes become cruel -- as they did across the South in states like Mississippi, Alabama and Arkansas -- when they see marginalised groups gaining equality and access to the same privileges.[572]

By the end of the fifties, while some strides had been made in advancing civil rights,[573] by and large, the Civil Rights movement lay dormant until the sixties; nevertheless tremors of the underground resistance required for the movement were perceptible. The most stirring novel of the fifties, noteworthy because it stood out as rare for the very way it engaged with a social issue, was *The Invisible Man* by Jackson and Hyman's close friend Ralph Ellison. Originally published in 1952, the novel was widely read throughout the fifties. Like Jackson, Ellison displays a complacent white power elite, which is self-satisfied in the way it gave blacks a little bit of power, and a little bit of charity. But forces were gathering underground to organise a more concerted, self-determined effort at equal rights, a view which Ellison demonstrates when he has his protagonist express:

> The point now is that I found a home – or a hole in the ground, as you will. [...] And remember, a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring; then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell. I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of

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[572] The fifties were the era of the "Jim Crow" laws, which created the notion of "separate but equal" facilities for blacks on the basis of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1892) Supreme Court decision. In effect, Jim Crow furthered the goals of pro-segregation advocates, who sought to preserve separate facilities, such as schools and transportation, for black people. In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision was meant to prohibit the racial segregation of schools in the South, but the practice was allowed to continue until the events at Little Rock in 1957-58. During the Little Rock protests the white students were among the most vicious in their demonstration against the integration of black students into their school. See Conlin 839.

[573] In 1946, President Truman established the President's Committee on Civil Rights; in 1948 he delivered his first Presidential civil rights address and signed into law an Executive Order prohibiting segregation in the military and federal civil services. In 1944 the NAACP won a court case that made it illegal to have white-only voting in the Primaries. In 1954, the *Brown* decision forbids racial segregation of schools. And in 1958, the Brown decision was enforced with the events at Little Rock, AK. Ibid 839. Also see Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2003; 1980) 449.

> suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation.[574]

In striking ways, these lines are similar to those that can be found on the first page of *Hill House,* which can also be read as referring to the approaching, though still latent, civil rights movement about to disrupt the conformist status quo of 1950s America. The house stands alone, but also threatens with the dark chthonic forces it contains within it:

> Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against the hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.[575]

At this stage in America, oppressed groups, including blacks, women and homosexuals, remained within their circumscribed boundaries, and so they "walked alone" with their burdens. But the great sleep of the fifties in terms of social movements was about to be disturbed and cause change through the unity of these groups. The opening line of *Hill House* refers to the feeling of oppression attached to the age: "No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some to dream."[576] In this way, Jackson can be regarded not only as a transitional figure in American uncanny writing, but also as a chronicler of the wider politics and civic transitions beginning to stir in American society.

Moreover, Jackson parallels the main argument of John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958), where Galbraith complains how despite America's great prosperity, the needed investments in the structures of society that would truly

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[574] Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 6.

[575] Jackson, *Hill House* 221.

[576] Ibid.

promote lasting progress and prosperity were not being made. Galbraith explains that investments in healthcare, education and infrastructure projects such as public transportation systems were not taken more seriously because society was caught in a poverty mindset that really belonged to another age. This mentality discouraged large-scale, truly meaningful investments in education and health; and instead, in bewilderment and misdirection, Americans spent their prosperity on less fortifying outlets such as larger cars, home improvements, an abundance of consumer goods, and on leisure pursuits. All three writers, Wharton, Jackson and Oates, use the uncanny to demonstrate how this flux in value systems is a cognitively disconcerting experience. Galbraith writes about how "*we are guided, in part by ideas that are relevant to another world* (italics mine); and as a result, we do many things that are unnecessary, some that are unwise, and a few that are insane. Some are a threat to affluence itself."[577] Wharton, Jackson and Oates individually relate this discomfiting sense of characters trying to come to grips with a changing world, and more particularly, with changing value systems.

In "My Life with R.H. Macy," salesclerks become automatons of Fordism in the way they unthinkingly process new number systems for tracking sales, inventories and hours worked. The unease in this story relates not only to what happens to people in this culture, but to what happens to culture itself, particularly when it becomes commodified. Semi-autobiographical, the story describes Jackson's own bewilderment when she had a similar job at Macy's and her surprise to learn from a colleague that "philosophy, social sciences and Bertrand Russell

[577] Galbraith 2.

were all kept in dictionaries," a way of merchandising that makes sense to her colleagues because they considered it all the same anyway.[578]

Clement Greenberg's essay on "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1961) complains about the "irresistible attractiveness" of mass culture and the "virulence of kitsch" as a threat to "true culture."[579] Dwight MacDonald protested against the evaporation of all cultural distinctions in mass culture which "destroys all values, since value-judgments imply discrimination."[580] And Irving Howe reported how the commodification of culture had resulted in "culture-hunger;"[581] while Erich Fromm similarly complained about the standardization of tastes and the oversized, exceeding impulse to consume.[582] Jackson reflects these same concerns in another woman-alone story, "Island" (1950), when she has the middle-aged minder of an older woman lapse into a fantasy where she is on a beach and a bird insistently parrots to her, "Eat, eat, eat."[583] Consuming occupies this woman's every thought.

It also disturbs Jackson that there seems to be a conspiracy in society to encourage Americans to become avid consumers from an increasingly younger age. In "Pillar of Salt" the source of the woman's madness is the city-life itself, but also, the way merchandising to children is approached demonstrates powerfully how the world has gone mad:

> The toys for the children filled her with dismay; they were so obviously for New York children: hideous little parodies of adult life, cash registers, tiny pushcarts with imitation fruit, telephones that really worked [...].
> [...]

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[578] Jackson, "My Day with R.H. Macy" 45.

[579] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) 3-31, 11-12.

[580] Dwight MacDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes* 3 (Summer 1953): 1-17, 7.

[581] Irving Howe, "Our Country and Our Culture," *Partisan Review* 14.5 (Sept-Oct 1952): 575-581, 578.

[582] Erich Fromm, "The Present Human Condition," *American Scholar* 25 (Winter 1955-56): 29-35.

[583] Jackson, "Island," *Come Along with Me* 86.

> She had a picture of small children in the city dressed like their parents, following along with a miniature mechanical civilization, toy cash registers in larger and larger sizes that eased them into the real thing, millions of clattering jerking small imitations that prepared them nicely for taking over the large useless toys their parents lived by.[584]

Making adult gadgets "child-size," Jackson suggests, in the end, arrests rather than develops a child's capacity to grow and also robs children of their childhoods.

In addition to concerns about the influence of mass culture, Jackson's depiction of disused houses mirrors a concern for America's basic institutions. In Wharton, Peter L. Hays notes how marriage served as the "synecdoche for what was wrong with [American] culture;"[585] in Jackson, the house often serves as a significant image for what is warped about mainstream America's image of itself. Throughout Jackson's work houses are represented as isolated, remote, disengaged, exclusive, unrecognisable because of their homogeneity, under threat from outsiders and prone to destruction from within when people who are different trespass into its interior. As S.T. Joshi remarks, in Jackson "the house controls its inhabitants, not the inhabitants the house."[586] This contradiction could be at the heart of what Jackson sees as disingenuous about American freedom and democracy: citizens believe they are controlling the legislative houses of America, but Jackson perceived how the houses are actually controlling the citizens.

A number of Jackson's stories concern journeys home; for example, "The Bus," "Home," "The Homecoming" and "Louisa, Please Come Home." In contemporary culture there are often references to nostalgia for the fifties; however, it is important to note that the period of the fifties itself was a nostalgic time. As

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[584] Jackson, "Pillar of Salt," *The Lottery* 178.

[585] Peter L. Hays, "Undine is US: Wharton's Attack on American Greed," *Études Anglaises* 48.1 (Jan-Mar 1994): 22-31, 23.

[586] S.T. Joshi, *The Modern Weird Tale* 12.

mentioned earlier with respect to gender roles, when America's soldiers returned home from the war, there was a desire to return to traditional gender roles. There was nostalgia for another time, another "house," that people felt sure must be better, cosier, than the present time and accommodation. Vested interests created idealised pictures of homes in the suburbs; manufacturers of consumer goods advertised how homes (and bomb shelters) could be made homier with a plethora of new gadgets and goods. Jackson takes a parodic view of these new conveniences in stories such as "Family Magician" (1949) or "Dinner with a Gentleman" (1996), where a fairy god-mother, Mallie, magically appears to prepare meals, sew outfits, and clean the house in the same way new consumer products were marketed as magic time-saving devices for women.

As Miller and Nowak note, this desire for the perfect home, for example, can be seen in the novel *Go* (1952) by Beat author John Clellon Holmes, whose main character, "like many other fifties characters, mused at length about the emotional, spiritual home he lacked and so desperately needed."[587] *Go* ends with a question that would occupy cultural observers like Jackson for the rest of the decade, "'Where is our home?' he thought, for he could not see it yet."[588]

Not being able to recognise one's home or having the inhabitants of your own home not able to recognise you as belonging to it, is also an idea in Jackson that can stands as a metaphor for how intellectuals felt at the time about their own relationship to America as their home. For example, Philip Roth explained how he sympathised with Edmund Wilson when Wilson, after reading *Life* magazine, felt as if he could not recognise or belong to the America that was depicted in it.[589] Jackson

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[587] John Clellon Holmes, *Go* (1952; London: Penguin, 2006) 390.

[588] Ibid 311.

[589] Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," *Commentary* (March 1961) 223-33, 224.

conveys a similar idea when the old woman in "The Bus" feels shocked and saddened by how a younger generation has let a once grand house go to waste, and when Elizabeth in *The Bird's Nest* complains about the effect of the museum building's sagging foundation on her "personal equilibrium," Jackson relates her lack of confidence in the "progress" of her society, particularly with regard to its institutional structures and the new directions in mass culture.[590]

Jackson critic Rich Pascal writes an interesting an essay on *The Sundial* and post-war American society in which he discusses this nostalgic desire for home in a broader sense as "an impulse to retreat to communities and domestic sites that simulate a past expunged of uncertainty."[591] Pascal explains that though this desire was manifest in the post-war period, it can be identified as related to a tradition that pre-dates the post-war period and that refers to "the socially sanctioned impulse to retreat to "'American miniatures,' or small, exclusive enclaves of communal, familial, and individual refuge from the claims of the larger social universe."[592] This impulse is seen to be at the heart of the American cultural and literary tradition. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* Thoreau's *Walden's Pond,* and Whitman's *Song of Myself* are only a few examples of works, which, variously, portray retreats from a larger universe to a scaled down community, bucolic escape or individual soul. The quest of the Puritans to establish a New World community that was separate, removed and isolated from the empire they left is the premise upon which America was founded. Pascal discusses *The Sundial* and its relationship to how the

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[590] Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* (London: Michael Joseph, 1955) 8.

[591] Rich Pascal, *The Sundial* (London: Michael Joseph, 1958) 83.

[592] Rich Pascal, "New World Miniatures: Shirley Jackson's *The Sundial* and Post-war American Society," *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy* 82. Originally published in *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 233 (Fall 2000): 99-111.

suburbanisation of America in the fifties provides evidence of this continued quest for "the American miniature."

The Sundial is not the only Jackson work preoccupied with miniaturism. In stories such as "A Visit" (c1968) and "The Story We Used to Tell" (1996) Jackson also plays with this aesthetic; but in these stories the miniature is not a retreat to an isolated place providing refuge, but instead is described as a claustrophobic space. In "A Visit" by entering a house, a young woman becomes part of one of the tapestries she admires on its walls. Margaret and her young hostess Clara actually integrate into the work of art. Jackson reverses the uncanny and turns animate people into inanimate objects. She and Clara are described as only figures in the foreground of the tapestry, "models of stillness" on the lawn; they are trapped and can never leave. In "The Story We Used to Tell" a husband and a wife are trapped inside a painting to which the female narrator feels drawn but is ultimately repulsed by when she hears their screams. These two stories provide yet another example of the openness of Jackson's symbolism. On the one hand, the claustrophobic theme in both of these stories could be seen to represent the claustrophobia of the new suburbs. On the other, the trapped sense can be seen to represent the claustrophobic definition of gender roles in the period; significantly, both sexes feel constrained by their environment. In terms of the argument of this thesis, the main point to appreciate in these stories is how elastic Jackson's writing can be: it can accommodate gender concerns as well as refer to wider social and political issues.

Although Lenemaja Friedman considers Jackson a minor writer for the way

her work ostensibly neglects war, war is not entirely absent in Jackson.[593] Jackson's writing career begins during World War II; sees its full blossoming during the Korean War, a war which saw over 33,000 American casualties by 1953; and ends during the beginning of America's escalation of the war in Vietnam in the early sixties. In stories such as "When Things Get Dark" (1944) the newly married woman's husband is away as a soldier in World War II; out of loneliness and a desire for support for her condition she visits the older woman-alone and is horrified to encounter a version of her future self. "I Don't Kiss Strangers" (1996) is another story that plays with identity and anticipates meeting a future self. A young woman refuses to kiss a young man, who may be her boyfriend or may indeed be a stranger. The true identity of the man is less important than the idea that he is as good as a stranger because when he has returned from the war he will be so utterly changed, that even though he has not yet left, his new identity as a solider or as a future-returned soldier is already strange to her. Although war appears as only a backdrop in these stories, Jackson considers the more abstract idea of how war disrupts identity. In a slightly different way, in "A Beautiful Stranger," war does not figure, even as a backdrop detail, but still can be read as present nevertheless when the vista of graves that went on indefinitely is read as a disguised reference to the thousands that perished in World War II and in the Korean War. These aspects noted, it is admitted that the reader does indeed have to search for references to war in Jackson. But her lack of overt engagement with this issue does not make her less political as a writer, but rather reflects the aesthetic constraints her contemporary environment imposed upon her.

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[593]Lenemaja Friedman regards Jackson as a minor writer because she does not "deal directly with the essential problems of love, death, war, disease, poverty and insanity in its most ugly aspects." Lenemaja Friedman, *Shirley Jackson* (Boston: Twayne, 1975) 161.

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Part V – Conclusion

Formulating concluding remarks on Jackson is difficult. As Part Two of this chapter has shown, her writing can be interpreted as focussed on "female anxieties;" but at the same time, as Parts Three and Four demonstrate, the same metaphors cited as statements on gender relations can also be demonstrated as containing references to wider social and political issues. This inability to categorise Jackson is one of the reasons she is celebrated -- "she was unique" -- but at the same time may be one of the reasons why she has been neglected by literary critics who are eager to assemble linear narratives of literary history, feminist or otherwise.

According to Oppenheimer,

> [Jackson's] vision was personal, not political, and she would have strenuously resisted any effort to view her work in that way, even if she had survived into an era in which the personal had become political. The [Women's] movement itself would not have appealed to her at all for many reasons. Her conventional [mother's] side would have been appalled; her fierce pride in her own uniqueness would have made her disdainful. Certainly she had little admiration for its early rustlings in the sixties, and said so. She had no patience with the idea of victimization or passivity... Shirley did not need a political movement to tell her that women were capable of exercising power.[594]

Oppenheimer's assessment can be contested if one adopts a looser understanding of what it means to have the personal be political. When Jackson's work is historicised, one can appreciate how Jackson reflected the *zeitgeist* of her artistic milieu. Ostensibly, her work does not appear to be political because it was not in vogue at the time to deal overtly with political issues. Furthermore, similar to Wharton, her indirections did not stem from some effort to circumvent the

[594] Oppenheimer 164-165.

constraints that gender politics had uniquely imposed on her, rather she choose to be indirect as an aesthetic decision that was influenced by wider trends in her artistic and political context, a milieu that male artists and writers also navigated.

In noticing how Wharton and Jackson craft uneasy stories about women into unsettling stories about social and historical events, readers can begin to appreciate how the contours of the female can be bent to hold and accommodate what is uncanny about both female experience and gender-neutral, *human* experience. In Wharton and Jackson the female uncanny is not only about female madness as resistance to patriarchal threats, it is also about writing from the perspective of woman and using that perspective to disassemble and engage with unease about normative notions of femininity *as well as* broader social norms related to how entities (people or governments) should behave in business, in society, and in the national arena. Nevertheless, while the majority of Jackson's stories use female protagonists to convey this elemental world view of humankind, some of Jackson's stories also show how men are susceptible to the same intrusions, imagined as cosmic. Stories such as "One Ordinary Day with Peanuts," "The Witch," "The Good Wife," "The Story We Used to Tell" either show men or both men and women as similarly unbalanced and uncanny, and thereby, both can serve as figures for rendering un-easy statements about the writer's context.

The larger point to consider before moving on to Oates is that while the beginning of the century began with the uncanny recognised as purely the ghost story, in Jackson it becomes a weird tale as it engages with both specific events and elemental forces of good and evil. In Oates, to whom we now turn, the uncanny veers off into the territory of the grotesque as Oates, building on the Abstract Expressionist concept of pure form that Jackson exploits, considers the

consequences of exploding form and contemplating the excess that is created when labels or concepts such as "woman," "mother" or indeed even "father," used as abstract ideas, are no longer able to hold the traditional signification they once did. Remaining attentive to where these concepts shift, readers can detect certain topics the author wishes to express her unease over by rendering uncanny; and significantly, these subjects are not always limited to gender politics, psychoanalytic themes or female experience.

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As the author of over 76 works of fiction (including 47 novels and 29 short story collections), and sixteen volumes of poetry, and as contributor to many collections of essays on American culture and literary criticism, Joyce Carol Oates is widely acknowledged to be an immensely prolific writer. It is difficult to try to summarise her oeuvre as belonging to a particular style or as preoccupied with a set group of themes. As critic John Barth remarks, "Joyce Carol Oates writes all over the aesthetic map."[595] She publishes a new collection of stories or a novel at a rate of every six months to a year, while maintaining an active teaching post at Princeton University. The sheer pace and productive range of Joyce Carol Oates's work has made an impression among certain critics that Oates writes as a "medium possessed" and has given rise to articles such as Carol Sternhell's in *Vogue* magazine, "It's Getting Harder and Harder to Read Joyce Carol Oates. Why?"[596] In this regard, Oates's critical reception bears an "uncanny" similarity to the *sui generis* nature of Shirley Jackson, much commented on by her contemporary reviewers. As Bruce F. Michelson notes, "[Oates] is that rarest of contemporaries, the genuinely experimental writer ... What Oates is doing has been codified by no school, by no critic, not even by herself. She is willing to ask and write about the hardest aesthetic and social questions of her time, and she will not countenance the easy answer, will

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[595]John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction," *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-fiction* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984) 196.

[596]Carol Sternhell, "It's Getting Harder and Harder To Read Joyce Carol Oates. Why?" *Vogue* (August 1984): 212.

not play to the expectations of an established tradition or of an established avant-garde, however much trouble that refusal may cost her fiction."[597]

Her work makes reference to so many broad areas, in fact, that Henry Louis Gates remarks that "a future archaeologist equipped only with her oeuvre could easily piece together the whole of post-war America."[598] In her early fiction in the 1960s readers see references to the plight of the rural poor. In the 1970s, Oates refers to the struggles in the Civil Rights Movement and the lower classes in America. In the 1980s, and particularly in her novel *Bellefleur* (1980), Oates portrays a gothic representation of the American Dream as she critiques the celebrated notion of individualism and Puritan self-reliance encouraged by the American Romantic tradition. Her short story collection *Last Days* (1984) reflects on her government-sponsored tour of Eastern Europe and the last days of the Cold War. And her novella *Black Water,* published in 1992 but set in the late 1980s, refers to Senator Ted Kennedy's scandal at Chappaquiddick, which some commentators believed dually signalled the end of the liberal moment in the American Democratic party and the general shift to the right in American politics as the defeat of Presidential nominee Michael Dukakis marked the beginning of the conservative Reagan-Bush twelve-year era.[599]

Against this background, it is clear that Oates deals with more concerns in her work besides beleaguered female experience. Even if she admits that her engagement with political issues during her time at Princeton has not been what it was during her Detroit years, abundant references to the broader social and cultural

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[597]Bruce F. Michelson, Preface to *Joyce Carol Oates: An Annotated Bibliography,* ed. Francine Lercangée (New York: Garland, 1986) xix.

[598]Henry Louis Gates, "Murder She Wrote: Review of *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart,*" *Nation* 2 (July 1990): 27-29, 27.

[599]Johnson, *Joyce Carol Oates: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1994) 200.

context can still be found in her work. In fact, her immersion in nineteenth-century gothicism during the 1980s can be seen in part as an intellectual retreat, which itself could be interpreted as a political statement. As Greg Johnson notes, during the 1980s, Oates suffered from a feeling of being profoundly alienated by her political and cultural environment. One day in 1984, while Oates was visiting a grocery store and examining the magazine rack, she had admitted to being confronted by

> things entirely alien to me. Not even *Time* or *Newsweek*. Magazines about soap operas, 'daytime t.v.,' rock stars, movie stars, homemaking, guns, action comics. My sense of total disengagement; disinterest. Have I lived too long? I wondered." [...] "The Republicans, Reagan, etc. My sense of utter estrangement, as if I were from another country. An anthropologist perhaps. The God-toting name-dropping bullies. The party of privilege & 'Morality' – yes they're simply bullies. The most fearful thing is that they seem to believe in themselves.[600]

In this regard, Oates shares much in common with the acute sense of alienation Edmund Wilson and Norman Mailer felt in America in the 1950s. As discussed in the chapter on Jackson, they did not feel quite "at home" in their home country. Also, as pointed out in Chapter Two, Wharton felt similarly not "at home" in the America of her time. Oates continues to feel disturbed by cultural and political trends in America into the late 1990s, as will be shown in the following chapter.

In being discomfited by the state of her particular social and historical context, Oates is not alone, but rather reflects a wider societal unease over declining levels of social capital. As Robert D. Putnam discusses in his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), many ordinary Americans at the end of the twentieth century felt that "we were not on the right track morally or culturally."[601] Putnam's study examines the reasons for the depleted social capital and attributes it to declining levels of participation and civic

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[600] Johnson 330.

[601] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2001) 25.

and associational life in America since the 1950s, when levels of participation were at their highest.[602] As he points out, the term social capital was first used earlier in the century in 1916 by L.J. Hanifan, state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia, who referred to it as

> those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit.[603]

Putnam explains how America's intellectual tradition, built on treatises such as Emerson's "Self-Reliance," Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," and Whitman's "Song of Myself," helped to rarefy a unique concept of the truly American sense of self, which Alexis de Tocqueville defines as, "a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself."[604] As the following chapter will demonstrate, Joyce Carol Oates delineates what happens to society when distorted forms of individualism and depleted levels of social capital are ignored. For her, it is a question of trust: as the trustworthiness of our civic and, particularly most intimate social bonds are called into question, a wider sense of pervasive untrustworthiness runs throughout society, making America in the late twentieth century the perfect subject to render uncanny in the short story form.

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[602]Putnam defines the term "social capital" in the following way:

> By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital – tools and training that enhance individual productivity – the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contracts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.

Ibid 18.

[603]Lyda Judson Hanifan, "The Rural School Community Center," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 67 (1916): 130-138, 130.

[604]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* ed. J.P. Mayer, tr. George Lawrence (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969) 506, qtd in Putnam 23.

As discussed in earlier chapters, in Wharton the uncanny begins largely as ghost stories and in Jackson the uncanny expands to take in stories about madness and the weird. In Oates, the uncanny changes again to take on contours of the grotesque. The following chapter will analyse two collections of her stories, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, published in 1994 and *The Collector of Hearts: New Tales of the Grotesque*, published in 1998, and will be divided into four parts. Part One will analyse Oates's aesthetic method by defining the grotesque; discussing its relationship to the uncanny, and examining how Oates combines the grotesque and the uncanny to expand on her style of "psychological realism." Part Two provides a more focussed examination of the uncanny devices in Oates's stories. Part Three considers Oates's treatment of "Feminism." And Part Four addresses the other social, cultural, aesthetic and existential problems her uncanny stories consider.

In Wharton, readers see how the uncanny deals with Progressive Era concerns and cultural trends after the First World War; in Shirley Jackson, it is McCarthyism and the Cold War. In Oates, Feminism itself predominates as a social and cultural phenomenon that now stands ready to be critiqued. Oates uses tropes of the grotesque to form her own style of the uncanny to explore post-feminist stances on abortion, birth control, careerism, single motherhood, third-world feminism, and the lack of progress in the "movement."

Additionally, Oates uses a grotesque version of the uncanny to deal with other non-gender specific social and cultural issues. For example, subjects such as child abuse and neglect are targeted, not as a "woman's issue," but as a problem that has consequences for all of society. Oates also considers the uncanny aspects associated with ageing in America. She looks at the state of social capital, life in the suburbs, and capitalism – particularly hyper-capitalist modes of consumption and

production. She refers to issues such as the existence of an underclass in American society, human sex trafficking, Christian fundamentalism, and the rise of armed militias in America. Significantly, however, what is striking about Oates's fiction is that in addition to these trends, her fiction is also concerned with absurd everyday happenings, similar to those one might read about in the newspaper. To Oates, real life is more uncanny, in the manner in which it can be grotesque and disorienting, than anything she could fathom in an imaginative sense. This chapter will also show how she regards dimensions of the artistic process and existential dilemmas as uncanny.

Oates presents a disorienting view of America as a society in flux, where intimate relationships not only fail to fulfil, but leave characters feeling as if they have entered an eerie funhouse. Characters are caught suffering a sense of skewed social imbalance as they adapt to changing values around social capital, ageing, hyper-capitalism, the commodification of feelings and hyperactive consumption. The role of the intellectual and the writing process are also considered in Oates's world, which is not one of smooth evolution, but rather one populated by mutants, freaks, monsters and automatons, all trying to accommodate the abnormal (or at least deeply uneasy) as the new normal.

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Part I – The Grotesque, the Uncanny and Psychological Realism

Because the grotesque is associated with images of the cave -- the word literally comes from the grotto-esque -- there can be a temptation to link it closely with the female anatomy. As critic Mary Russo discusses in her 1994 book *The Female*

Grotesque, "the grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, changing," and as such, it can also be associated with the unique problems women encounter with "illness, ageing, reproduction, non-reproduction, secretions, lumps, bloating, wigs, scars, make-up, and prostheses."[605] In her introduction, Russo explains that the grotesque is associated with images of "Low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral."[606] "As bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body."[607] While this analogy may facilitate certain theoretical approaches associated with "writing the body,"[608] Oates would resist such a fetishisation of women's sexual organs.[609] A post-feminist reading position recognises how such fetishisation forms a new kind of sexual bias in women's writing. However, as discussed in Chapter One, Oates seeks to distance her writing from this female-centred point of view, even while she often utilises female protagonists in her stories to convey her themes.

In turning her gaze to the grotesque, Oates tries to do what Wolfgang Kayser describes when he discusses the effect a grotesque work of art or literature has on the receiver. In his comprehensive study *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1963), Kayser explains that on beholding a grotesque work, "We are so strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we

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[605] Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 8 and 14.

[606] Ibid ix.

[607] Ibid.

[608] See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Gender Trouble* (1990); also Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (1994) and Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of L'Écriture féminine," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986) 361-372.

[609] Greg Johnson explains that Oates "viewed herself not as a woman writer but as a '(woman) writer,' a key distinction that insisted upon invisibility – that is, the irrelevance – of gender in relationship to art" (xvii). He also records Oates as describing herself as a "mere vapour of consciousness;" she added, "I don't really identify with my physical self that much" (from an the Groebel interview in 1993, qtd in Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 175).

would be unable to live in this changed world. The grotesque instils fear of life rather than fear of death. Structurally, it presupposes that the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable."[610] This idea ties in directly with how the uncanny deals with that which is unreliable, untrustworthy, familiar yet strange, and disorienting. Kayser goes on to discuss how the grotesque is different from the merely tragic:

> We are unable to orient ourselves in the alienated world, because it is absurd. [...] Initially the tragic also harboured the absurd. We can see this in the tragic nuclei of Greek tragedy. It is absurd for a mother to kill her children, for a son to murder his father or a father his son, and for a man to eat the flesh of his sons. The Atrides myth is full of absurdities. But, first of all, these are individual deeds. Furthermore, they are deeds which endanger the principles of the moral order of the world. The grotesque is not concerned with individual actions or the destruction of the moral order (although both factors may be partly involved). It is primarily the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe.[611]

As discussed in Chapter One, part of the uncanny effects relies on the subject's (and the reader's) inability to orient themselves. In Oates, protagonists and readers struggle to make sense of horrific deeds. For example, in "Extenuating Circumstances" a mother kills her son by pouring boiling water over him because she is experiencing single parenthood as just too demanding. In "Schroeder's Stepfather" a man asphyxiates the stepfather who sexually abused him as a child. Stories like these can seem tragic and absurd, but yet they happen every day in America, and the fact that they happen every day, or that we accept them as everyday, is what makes the acts (or society's level of tolerance of the acts) absurd. Oates's fiction is often about events that are similar to those one might read about in the newspaper. In response to the question, "*Why do you write?*" Oates explains,

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[610] Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature,* tr. Das Groteske, seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung (1963; New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) 184.

[611] Ibid.

> To seek out the meanings of life, which are hidden. [...] I always take my materials from ordinary life. I am greatly interested in the newspapers and in the Ann Landers' columns and in *True Confessions* and in the anecdotes told under the guise of "gossip." Amazing revelations! The world is filled with revelations, with tragedies – go at once to the newspaper and look at page five or page nineteen and let your eye become drawn to a headline, any headline; here is a story. I can't begin to count the stories I have written that are based on the barest newspaper accounts [...].[612]

In pursuing "hidden" meanings, Oates turns to the grotesque. To understand the term better, readers can refer again to Kayser, who defines the grotesque as follows: "The grotesque is a *structure* ... it is the estranged world, [it is] our world which has been transformed."[613] Rosemary Jackson draws upon this idea in relation to her discussion of Hélène Cixous's understanding of the uncanny as a mode for apprehending that links fantasy to grotesque art: Jackson maintains that the uncanny removes structure. It empties the "real" of its "meaning;" it leaves signs without signification.[614] This conjunction between the grotesque, the uncanny and the real is especially relevant to Oates because her technique also involves emptying signs of their "traditional" meaning. Oates attends to the residual meaning that is left behind when the meaning one normally takes for granted with a sign collapses, yet leaves a material reality in its wake.

For example, Oates demonstrates the consequences that result when words like "mother," "father" or "partner" are emptied in the sense that the bonds of trust these terms normally evoke no longer apply. The changes in late twentieth-century family structures along with more liberal understandings of the codes that govern sexual relationships have, on the one hand, been regarded as emancipating; yet on

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[612]Oates, "The Nature of Short Fiction; or The Nature of My Short Fiction," in *The Writer's Digest Handbook of Short Story Writing,* eds. Frank A. Dickinson and Sandra Smythe (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1970) 125.

[613]Kayser 184.

[614]R. Jackson, *Fantasy* 68.

the other, they have also created a sense of normative chaos. In the midst of such a flux in values Oates, as Wharton and Jackson before her, turns to writing uncanny stories to help her convey the difficulty of assimilating change, when the values that replace the old are revealed to be not wholly trustworthy. It is this chaos that Oates pursues when she explores the "hidden" meaning of words and roles. For example, in "Extenuating Circumstances" Oates illustrates how the single mother, abandoned by her lover, in turn starts abusing her son. The traditional bonds of trust and commitment between mother and father, mother and son, and father and son have all been jettisoned. The twist that Oates adds to her version of the uncanny is to concentrate on the ineluctable material reality that remains long after the symbol (word or role) fails to signify. In "Extenuating Circumstances" even while the mother abuses her son, she does not ignore her responsibility to feed and take care of him in other ways; even while the man has abandoned the mother and the child, in some sense, the two will forever be linked with him as a "kind of" family, and yet the word "family" is inappropriate and can sound ridiculous in this situation.

While the word "mother" (easily replaced by words such as "father," "son," "career woman," "professor," or "stay-at-home mom") may not be the sign it once was, Oates's point is that it is still tied to a structure; it carries a material reality that is visceral. Aesthetically, mothers (as well as other roles and signs) become grotesque in her fiction because some kind of inversion, or indeed perversion, has taken place. If anything, words like "mother" and "father" are *all* structure, all material, visceral reality without the status the signs once had. They have become ambiguous symbols yet one bound by a material reality.

For example, in stories like "Death Mother" an overwhelmed mother abuses

her children by giving them "enemas" of drain-clearing liquids, and then tries to kill them by driving their car off a cliff. After, the mother is sentenced to three years in a women's prison; her daughter visits her and observes,

> *In the locked ward of the State Psychiatric Hospital at Port Oriskany. A three-year sentence to the women's prison at Red Bank ran concurrently with psychiatric treatment, so-called.* Mother? – it's Jeanette. Don't you know me? Mother? *She'd been so drugged, her eyes so puffy, the pupils retracted to pinpricks, I couldn't tell whether she recognized me, or even saw me.*[615]

Even through the punctuation of the words and their placement on the page Oates signals the instability of the labels we have come to take for granted. In the same way that the punctuation interrupts what Jeanette means to say (instead of '*so-called.* Mother?' she could have meant to refer to her "so-called Mother"), Mrs. Harth's abuse of her daughters interrupts a normal sense of motherhood.

In "Extenuating Circumstances" the mentally fragmented single mother writes an extended letter to her ex-lover, who abandoned her, to explain why she has killed their son by pouring boiling water over him:

> Because he cried, and you do not know how he cried.
> Because at such times his little face was so twisted and hot, his nose running with mucus, his eyes so hurt.
> Because in such he was his mother, and not you. Because I wanted to spare him such shame.
> Because he remembered you, he knew the word *Daddy.*
> Because watching TV he would point to a man and say, *Daddy--?*[616]

And then later the woman writes, "Because I did not want him to be *Mommy*, I wanted him to be *Daddy* in his strength."[617] In this story, not only do the roles of mother and father become confused, they fail to differentiate and therefore they fail to signify, yet remain poignant because something remains of the meaning that is all

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[615] Oates, "Death Mother," *The Collector of* Hearts: New Tales of the Grotesque (New York: Dutton, 1998) 10-11; hereafter, this collection is referred to as "*Hearts.*"

[616] Oates, "Extenuating Circumstances," *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (New York: Penguin, 1995) 147; hereafter, this collection is referred to as "*Haunted.*"

[617] Ibid 149.

corporeal yet vacant. In another story, "The Guilty Party," a single mother does not even feel able to call her boyfriend a "partner," he is merely referred to as "X," a grossly inadequate term for someone who is the father of the child she has to deal with every day. Oates draws our attention to how the labels we take to be common and "every day" fall short; the woman's ex-lover does not have a name or a role, just a letter; and yet, references like this are used and accepted all the time in society.

In a post-feminist world, the women and men in the uncanny fiction of Oates are strangers to themselves, the ultimate strangely familiar. In the same way that Jackson employs the supernatural as a convenient short-hand for communicating her unease, Oates uses the grotesque "as an instrument to experience a kind of other-worldliness, an uncanny sense that our senses cannot quite be trusted to tell us the whole truth."[618] This notion of cognitive untrustworthiness ties in directly to the central premise of this thesis that uncanny fiction (whether it is produced by a man or a woman) relates to a far more inchoate realm of experience -- intellectual uncertainty -- and cannot be rigidly associated with criticism that would have readers see the fiction as operating mechanistically.

For Oates the uncanny provides a means through which to convey consternation over the depleting levels of trustworthiness in American society. As the authors of *Habits of the Heart* point out in their 1996 introduction, in the late twentieth century, many people felt uneasy about the soundness of American society and concerned about its future:

> More and more of us doubt whether we can trust out institutions, our elected officials, our neighbors, or even our own ability to live up to our own expectations for our lives. And anxiety is always close to the surface, a haunting fear that things have somehow gone wrong. For many Americans,

[618]Sigrid Mayer and Martha Hanscom note this strategy in their assessment of a later collection of stories by Oates, *Demon and Other Tales* (1996); see *Critical Reception of the Short Fiction by Joyce Carol Oates and Gabriele Wohmann* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998) 159.

> these fears come to a head in worries about crime, moral decline, and the deepening divides of income and opportunity. There is a gnawing uncertainty about the future of our jobs, of adequate income, and of our family life, especially our children's welfare.[619]

They suggest that the traditional bonds of reciprocity and trust, which ensure the smooth functioning of social contracts in society and within the family, are coming apart. According to Robert D. Putnam's research, "of baby boomers interviewed in 1987, fifty percent thought [their fellow Americans] were becoming less trustworthy."[620] Oates takes this idea from the macro-societal level and translates it into an uncanny effect by showing what happens when those contracts of trust are abrogated in the most intimate relationships.

For example, in stories like "Death Mother," Oates illustrates how there is something untrustworthy about in the designation "loved one." Sometimes "loved ones" cause those they love the most acute forms of pain. As the mother in the story explains, "It isn't strangers who break our hearts!"[621] Often it is the people closest to us who we have to eye sceptically in order to survive. Such vigilance is required of the little girl in the story "*****." Oates does not use words in the story's title, which can be interpreted as an effort to symbolise the unspeakable or simply the idea of blankness, underscoring how a middle-aged woman's memory of the sexual abuse that happened to her at the hands of her uncle has created certain gaps in her memory. Her memory, unfortunately like her relationship with her uncle, is now not trustworthy.

Equally, in addition to intimate relationships, material appearances are not trustworthy. In "The Hand-puppet," Oates reveals the untrustworthiness of suburban

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[619] Bellach, et al. vii.

[620] Putnam 25.

[621] Oates, "Death Mother" 13.

developers and suburban place names as being a particular violation of trust for Americans:

> As she drove the several miles to town, her eyes moved over the eroding countryside without recognition. More woodland being razed for a new shopping mall, another housing subdivision, Sylvan Acres, rising out of a swamp of frozen mud. Mustard-yellow excavating vehicles were everywhere. Grinding, beeping. Flutter of wind-whipped banners advertising a new condominium complex. When Lorraine and her husband had first moved to their home, ten years before, most of this area had been farmland. Now, even the memory of that farmland was confused, eroded. A trust had been betrayed. This is America, the mother thought. Her mouth twisting. Don't tell me what I already know.[622]

The mother is disoriented; rather than delivering a bucolic city-country compromise, suburban developers are naming their sites after the very things they destroy.[623] Although the American intellectual tradition is predicated on the ideas of thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who argue that places in nature should be regarded as sacred retreats, where one might hope to commune transcendentally with, at least, the notion of an "American" soul, now Americans find condominium developments and strip-malls.

It is this aspect of the grotesque's disorienting and displacing effect that links it to the uncanny. The grotesque is a place where classes of things that traditionally are meant to be kept strictly separated -- species, plants, animals, realms of being -- find themselves blended in ways that form distorted results and are experienced as unnatural, out of sync with how reality was meant to be. For instance, in the above examples, readers see the perversion that takes place when parents are revealed not as protectors, but abusers.

In other stories, Oates goes farther by literally combining the bestial with the human. For example, "Martyrdom," is a story about a wife's most abject sexual

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[622] Oates, "The Hand-puppet," *Hearts* 43.

[623] James Howard Kunstler, interview in *The End of Suburbia and the Collapse of the American Dream*; directed by Gregory Green; produced by Barry Silverthorn (Toronto: Electric Wallpaper Co., 2004).

abuse: her husband invites his colleagues over to watch his wife being forced to have sex with a rat. In "The Dream-catcher" a career-focussed woman finds her greatest horror but also her greatest fulfilment in a violent love relationship she has with a "creature" that is half-man half-bat; she finds that love and hate blend in strange, disorienting ways. And in the story "The Temple," a menopausal childless woman imagines she hears the cries of an abandoned baby coming from an unmarked grave in her back garden and starts digging for it "like a beast on its hind legs."[624]

In order to appreciate Oates's contributions to uncanny grotesque tales, it is important to understand more about her method of "psychological realism" and her literary influences. While it is difficult to find "psychological realism" explicitly defined anywhere in Oates's writings or in the criticism of her work, if readers turn to her essay entitled "The Nature of Short Fiction; or The Nature of My Short Fiction," they can understand that Oates's writing combines both realism and a study of psychology. In terms of realism, Oates is concerned with consciously arranging and re-arranging reality for the purposes of exploring reality's "hidden meanings."[625] Oates's view of realism is related to her use of the grotesque because she hopes that by distorting or exaggerating reality, the true nature of reality will be revealed. Oates empties signs of their socially-accepted meanings and refills them with their hidden meanings, and thereby exposes hidden or repressed aspects of reality that we either take for granted or refuse to see.

For Oates, grotesque distortions of reality form her own brand of realism as

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[624] Oates, "The Temple," *Hearts* 314.

[625] Oates, "The Nature of Short Fiction; or The Nature of My Short Fiction," *Gender and Literary Voice*, ed. Janet Todd (New York and London: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980): 122-128, 125. Originally published in *The Writer's Digest Handbook of Short Story Writing,* eds. Frank A. Dickinson and Sandra Smythe. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1970): xi-xvii.

an artistic method; she uses the grotesque as an exaggerated mode to explore hidden meanings and make a statement about the uncanny dimensions of modern experience. Oates recognises that freaks, mutants and monsters are a reality in the modern world, but rather than merely keep her distance from them, she writes about them in an effort to try to understand their motivations. She explains that she writes in order to make clear certain mysteries, or "pointing out mysteries where a numbing and inaccurate simplicity has held power."[626] She continues:

> We write to be truthful to certain facts, certain emotions. We write to "explain" apparently crazy actions ... why does an intelligent young man go beserk and kill, why does a happy woman ruin her life by running away with someone, why does a well-adjusted person commit suicide? I confess that I am old-fashioned, conventional. I look and behave in a conventional manner and the stimulus behind my writing is conventional, not weird. I am fascinated by weird structures and points of view, ... I want to know the *why* behind human emotions, even if I can only say again and again that human emotions are our deepest mystery and there is no understanding them.[627]

In this way, Oates is influenced by Thomas Mann, who maintained "The grotesque is that which is excessively true and excessively real."[628] She is also influenced in her methods by Flannery O'Connor, another writer of the grotesque, who held that "writing is not an escape from reality, 'it is a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system.'"[629] Writers such as Oates, O'Connor and Mann are concerned that the reality before them is so disturbing that they have a duty to record a caricature of it to in order to stir the wider world either out of its complacency or inured sensibilities.

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[626] Ibid, 127.

[627] Ibid.

[628] Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Reflections of an Unpolitical Man), qtd in Kayer, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* 158.

[629] Joyce Carol Oates, "The Nature of Short Fiction; or The Nature of My Short Fiction" 122. Here Oates is quoting from Flannery O'Connor's posthumously collected essays, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1972; 1957) 78.

Flannery O'Connor's preoccupations are founded in more self-avowedly Christian terms than Oates's, but both writers share the belief that either beneath or beyond the surface of reality lies a deeper, richer level of meaning. Not only can the writer *not* ignore the uglier sides of existence, the writer feels compelled to *overstate* that which is ugly. O'Connor does this in censorious terms; she explains that the "fanaticism" of writers of grotesque literature "is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity."[630] She maintains that a writer has a sharper eye for perceiving "the grotesque," "the perverse," and "the unacceptable" and thereby has an obligation to remind readers how far away from the ideal of wholeness, which she refers to as a Christian state of grace, humanity has devolved. She explains that

> The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use a more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.[631]

Oates is less judgemental and less moralistic in religious terms than Flannery O'Connor, but no less bold.[632] She similarly employs the exaggerated modes of the

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[630] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 44.

[631] Ibid 33-34.

[632] In *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor, explains the role violence plays in her fiction and its relationship to her notion of grace:

> Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them. The devil's greatest wile, Baudelaire has said, is to convince us that he does not exist.
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> I suppose the reasons for the use of so much violence is modern fiction will differ with each writer who uses it, but in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world (112).

grotesque to draw readers' attention to issues which have been too readily assimilated as everyday. For example, in stories such as "Unprintable" or "An Urban Paradox," Oates demonstrates the insouciance that can exist toward the conditions of the urban poor, and underscores that what is most shocking is how these indifferent attitudes are held by figures society normally regards as liberal-minded and educated. Robert Bellach and his colleagues in their book *Habits of the Heart* (1985; 1996), discuss the emergence of a "deracinated elite," who, despite their high level of education and powerful positions, have a diminished sense of civic membership, causing them to disaffiliate from those members of society who could most benefit from their intellectual capital. Bellah and his colleagues remark how "In tandem with the growth of this knowledge/power elite has been the growth of an impoverished underclass, the people from whom the elite are most eager to secede."[633]

In "Unprintable" a feminist leader and pioneer in the pro-choice movement shrinks from the pan-handlers clamouring at the door of the limousine she uses to take her to an awards dinner in her honour:

> Strange human figures at the curbside, or wandering out into traffic -- to beg? to coerce money from intimidated drivers? Close to the car's rear windows loomed faces that were pale as bread dough, or red-boiled like lobsters, with running sores and lesions and features that seemed malformed, or incomplete; avid, hungrily glistening eyes like rodents' eyes fixed upon her -- an impossibility since, in fact, the limousine's windows were so darkly tinted no one could see inside. And even if they could, what had these

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Oates notes O'Connor's method, but suggests that her critical appreciation of O'Connor's work (and thereby Oates's own creative method) is less situated in a Christian point of view. In an essay entitled, "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor," Oates assesses O'Connor's method in the following way:

> ...her superficially reactionary attitude toward the secularized, liberal, Godless society, and her affirmation of the spontaneous, the irrational, the wisdom of the blood in which, for her, Christ somehow is revealed. Because she does believe and states clearly that her writing is an expression of her religious commitment and is itself a kind of divine distortion ('the kind that reveals, or should reveal,' as she remarks in the essay 'Novelist and Believer'), the immediate problem for most critics is how to wrench her work away from her, [...]

See Oates, "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor," *Southern Humanities Review* 7 (1973): 235-246, 240-241.

[633] Bellach, et al. xiii.

> pathetic strangers to do with *her*? Even if they were capable of recognizing her, they would have no idea who *Celeste Ward* was, nor could they have cared.
>
> She brooded about them: these casualties of a great American city – unwanted creatures, unwanted probably since birth; unwanted as pregnancies in their hapless mothers' wombs. Innocent victims of the Darwinian horror of unthinking, rampaging reproduction -- the infliction of male desire upon female acquiescence. What heartrending tragedy, unwanted babies born into this world, lacking the love and nurturing to make them fully human! This was in fact the Cause to which Celeste Ward had devoted her entire adult life -- the complex of moral issues of planned parenthood, the technology of contraception, abortion rights. The Cause for which she'd sacrificed her own personal, emotional life and for which, tonight, the night of her sixtieth birthday, she was to be publicly honored.[634]

Rather than feeling any sense of kinship with the disadvantaged, or at least empathy for the economic circumstances of the women who bore these disfigured creatures into the world, Celeste Ward is revealed not as a member of the "Liberal Left" but as an advocate of abortion who sees it as a form of eugenics. She would rather not *see* these ugly human beings and refuses to examine the reasons behind their impoverished and diseased condition.

The authors of *Habits* also discuss how the new educated power elite secede from society into "guarded and gated residential enclaves and ultra-modern offices, research centres and universities."[635] Self-absorbed, this group displays a "predatory attitude toward the rest of society," and a "willingness to pursue its own interests without regard to anyone else."[636] Oates expresses this socio-cultural trend in "An Urban Paradox," where a tenured professor just barely takes notices of the child prostitutes in his neighbourhood, less disturbed by the fact that a market for child prostitution exists than that it now has the nerve to show up in the cobblestoned, "historic" district near his university:

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[634] Oates, "Unprintable," Hearts 189-190.

[635] Bellach, et al. xii.

[636] Ibid.

> Blinking in amazement, I saw a hellish sight: a gathering of shabby, stunted figures, both male and female, pathetic as animated scarecrows, lurching on diseased legs, or stumps of legs, struggling together over scraps of garbage from an overturned trash can. It was hideous – repugnant! I had never witnessed anything like it, so close to *my* home. Subhuman faces contorted in greed, rapacity, anguish – fury gleaming in a man's eyes – a hunchbacked female scrambling to seize a smashed, rotten melon someone had kicked along the pavement – another dark-skinned woman on her knees clawing at something that appeared to be alive, and frantic to escape – a cat? a rat? a small mongrel dog? I was revolted, yet I could not bring myself to turn away. *Who are these creatures, where have they come from?*[637]

Unable to engage seriously with the idea that the grey vans who carry these "creatures" into his neighbourhood might actually be symptomatic of the underclass in his society (human traffickers involved in child prostitution), the professor determines that he must devise a "theory" to rationalise away their appearance. His theory maintains that "simply: the (unmarked) municipal vehicles do not, in the strictest sense of the term, 'exist;' just as the laws they apparently enforce do not 'exist.' *That which is not imagined as existing cannot exist.*"[638] The portraits provided in "Unprintable" and "An Urban Paradox" are damning indictments of the hypocrisy and irrelevancy of so-called "leaders" and the educated elite in the "liberal" American Left.

Similar to O'Connor, Oates is also concerned to preserve that instinct in us that is able to recognise and react to the "freak." The freak is not necessarily the abjected creature outside, but rather it is that part inside of us that refuses to see what is freakish, because there is something inured about our own sensibilities. This preoccupation in Oates may reveal a certain conservatism, which causes her to react to and to capture the visceral consequences of the changes she sees about her. Oates's conservatism can be linked to the response Flannery O'Connor gave when

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[637] Oates, "An Urban Paradox," *Hearts* 186.

[638] Ibid 188.

she was asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks. O'Connor explains, "it is because we are still able to recognize one."[639]

O'Connor continues by discussing how in the South, "the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological."[640] O'Connor realises how controversial a statement this is, and one only has to look back to the depiction of the religiosity of slave holders in narratives such as those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs to see how warped this theological foundation could be – often the cruellest slave holders were the most religious; and at the time Flannery O'Connor is writing, the Jim Crow laws were still widely in effect across the South and the Ku Klux Klan was an active presence. Nevertheless, O'Connor explains that

> it is safe to say while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. [...] The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows, particularly in our literature. In any case, it is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in literature.[641]

This idea is similar to Oates's explanation of how much of what we consider to be American gothic -- tales of the disintegration of the self, stories of unknowable, hard to control elements of one's environment (and other people) -- in fact, have their roots in the Puritan tradition which was obsessed with controlling the unknowable.[642] In these terms, the grotesque can be considered in terms very similar to Oates's description of the American gothic: the "obverse vision of American destiny; the repudiation of American-Transcendentalist optimism, in which the

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[639] O'Connor 45.

[640] Ibid.

[641] Ibid.

[642] Oates, Introduction, *American Gothic Tales* (New York: Plume, 1996) 7.

individual is somehow divine, or shares in nature's divinity."[643] If man as divine forms one part of the equation of the self in America, then writing about the less than divine in man's nature is the other half of the equation that needs to be considered if writers are serious to explore the hidden meanings of the self and one's environment. This is Oates's purpose in utilising the grotesque as an artistic method; she is concerned with discerning the meaning of *human* experience, which includes the female, but she is not specifically limited to it.

In rendering the "wholeness" of man, Oates is fascinated by how, in O'Connor's fiction, "her people are not quite whole until violence makes them whole."[644] Oates explores violent themes such as rape, child abuse, and domestic violence in an effort to understand the motives of the offenders as well as their effect on the victims, in effect, to round-out the meaning of what it is to take a serious look at humanity as a mature artist. After her novel *First Love* came out in 1996, Oates defended her portrayal of the female protagonist's victimisation by explaining that she was just trying to be honest in her methods and to get at the truth of experience. She maintained that "there's a strong element of masochism in most women," and actually, some women, consciously or unconsciously are "fascinated by, [their] own degradation."[645] Such a comment might be received as very politically incorrect by some readers; however it is in exploring the hidden impulses of why some people allow themselves to stay in abusive relationships that the psychological aspect of Oates's realism is felt.

Similarly, in relating the shame some children feel after being abused, Oates

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[643]Ibid 7.

[644] Oates, "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor," *Southern Humanities Review* 7 (1973): 235-46, 236.

[645]Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 334.

is not being gratuitously salacious, but is bearing witness to the psychological reality these victims suffer. For example, in the story "Schroeder's Stepfather," Oates lingers over the verbs the abusing father uses when he asks the boy to "take" down his pants. By realising that the boy has, on some level, participated in "tak[ing]" down his pants, some part of the abused boy's meaning now as an adult is inscribed by that verb as he measures the extent to which his volition was involved in the action, even if that volition was manipulated in the most reprehensible way. Shame is now part of his meaning as adult; justified or not, it is there. To deny these aspects of reality is to only look at half the equation, or to take for granted the meanings we understand as associated with victimhood.

Writing provides Oates with a way to give more coherence to a world that is often experienced as "confusing and terrifying and stupid as it unfolds about us."[646] Understanding the importance Oates places on discerning meaning helps readers recognise how her grotesque renderings of subjects are the existential and epistemological quests of a serious artist.

Thus, where Flannery O'Connor's observations on the grotesque can be received by readers as her "reproach," for Oates, the purpose in writing about the distorted or disgusting is a technique that she uses not merely to reproach (though sometimes that effect can be achieved by the reader's own reception of her work) but rather to explore richer sides of meaning, to probe the parts of meaning that are contained in our lives but which we try to deny. In perceiving the freak, protagonists in her fiction (as well as her readers) can recognise how reality has been defamiliarised and how they themselves are essentially displaced from a reality they

[646] Oates, "The Nature of Short Fiction; or The Nature of My Short Fiction" 123.

thought they understood. Upon realising how alienated they are, they can feel thoroughly disoriented. Wolfgang Kayser explains how

> The grotesque world is -- and is not -- own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence.[647]

Oates's writing is an attempt to take the pieces of shattered meaning, reassemble them and reveal humanity to itself in a new way.

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Part II – Uncanny Devices in the Stories

Similar to the uncanny stories of Shirley Jackson, in Joyce Carol Oates the uncanny takes in more than merely ghost stories. Readers see how the uncanny in Oates involves dolls turning into people and people turning into dolls. The concept of "home" is destabilised as it is revealed as both a cosy and a disorienting place. Characters' closest personal relationships are revealed as not trustworthy, and tidy appearances often belie a deeper chaos. In Oates, readers again are presented with a crisis of the proper: people's names and roles are either reiterated to give a sense of assurance that cannot be found, or they are misused and misappropriated by other characters with less than benevolent intentions. For example, in "Schroeder's Stepfather," the boy wonders what appellation to use for this man who abused him, "John, who'd been taught by his stepfather to call him 'Father,' and somewhat clumsily, just a day or two before, to call him 'Jack,' could summon no proper word to call him now ..."[648] In another story, "Labor Day," an old man, who is otherwise

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[647] Kayser 37.

[648] Oates, "Schroeder's Stepfather," *Hearts* 51.

neglected by the "neighbours" in his beach community, takes affront to how the "strangers" use his name "familiarly" when they come to his door inquiring about a boy who has gone missing:

> None of these folks knowing our name until now the child is missing, taking the name off our mailbox like they had a right.
> No, we keep to ourselves. We are sorry but we just can't help you. Lifting my hands which are trembling, palms up. Empty.[649]

Readers might wonder if the real reason he is irked, the real "crisis of the proper," is not so much that he feels that they are mis-using his name, but that he and his wife have lived lives where it feels appropriate to keep to themselves. Not only does he have nothing to disclose, but he feels empty, socially. It is Labor Day and these "neighbours" are about to leave again and not keep in touch until they resume their token "*H'lo*'s" next summer.[650]

Many of the stories have madness as their theme, often where characters seem to be unable to distinguish between dream states and living reality. Stories feature severed limbs, twins, and toys that come to life. Memory is shown to be unreliable and even an active inimical force in the way it plays tricks on people. As Carol Sternhell relates, "[Oates's] characters are sleepwalkers, slow, puzzled; waking they dream of the old nightmare landscape."[651] Several stories are re-makes of uncanny classics, for example, the "The White Cat" is a re-working of Poe's "The Black Cat," "Blind" is a re-make of Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Accursed House of Bly" is a re-fashioning of Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw." In the following section, a close reading will be given of the stories in these categories.

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[649] Oates, "Labor Day," *Hearts* 111.

[650] Ibid 108.

[651] Sternhell, 212.

One of Oates's most memorable ghost stories is "Posthumous," a story about the indignity of how some old people live. An old woman lives alone in wretched conditions, an existence that goes unobserved, until she dies and the authorities come to collect her body, presumably because no family members are around to attend to her. Narrated by the ghost or spirit of the dead woman, it is a story of the shame she feels as they rifle through her house and are disgusted by the filth they find there. The woman is pleading and sobbing, "*Leave me alone ... don't look at me, go away!*"[652] The state of the woman is described in grotesque terms:

> You are desperate to hide in the blanket and there is something congealed in it, sticking to your hair. And you are so cold you can't move: skin the sickly color of curdled milk, fingernails and toenails bruised from within as plums. So ashamed, so exposed, what right have these strangers in their uniforms to break into your apartment into your privacy into your thirty years' marriage into your soul now approaching you slowly, long trousered legs, gleaming leather belts, metallic studs, buckles, pistols drawn.[653]

One of the officers looks into the bathroom and remarks, "*If you think that's bad, take a look in here.*"[654] The real tragedy, the truly grotesque aspect, is not the state of the woman's home, or her corpse, but that modern America, for whatever reasons of social disintegration, has developed into a society where an old woman is left so utterly alone. The grotesque aspect Oates draws readers to is the question of how a society, fully equipped with guards in polished uniforms, operating with the adeptness of commandos, can still manage to convince itself that it is efficient and smoothly functioning when the symptoms of its diminished social capital are so blatantly on display.

In other stories, dolls come to life or people are turned into dolls. "The Doll"

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[652] Oates, "Posthumous," *Hearts* 140.

[653] Ibid 140.

[654] Ibid 141.

is perhaps the most uncanny story in *Haunted.* It tells the story of a woman in her forties, named Florence Parr, who sees an exact replica of the dollhouse she was given as a child while driving through a small town in Lancaster, Pennsylvania on her way to an academic conference. Florence is described as "as shuttered as an old Victorian house."[655] She hides behind the comfort of her professional identity, as president of a small liberal arts college. To avoid the imprints of human contact, she has become like one of her dolls, "poreless and smooth and blank," where "there was nothing secret or nasty ... no crevices for dirt to hide in, no trouble at all."[656] Similar to the dolls she used to let rest on the outside of her dollhouse, Florence refrains from going into the houses of human engagement and instead props herself up on the outside. By hiding behind her professional identity to the sacrifice of developing a personal life, Florence has avoided accessing the deeper reaches of herself, where real work on her identity could begin.

She has a dream that she enters the house and has the possibility of developing a romantic affair, or at least a friendship with the house's owner. But, to Florence, even the dream of deeper personal relationships has the power to turn people into dolls. (When the experience is first relayed, it is not apparent to the reader, or to Florence, that she is only dreaming. As is typical with the uncanny, cognitive boundaries are played with and manipulated.) The man turns into a nightmarish figure when he discovers a dark wet spot on the carpet and blames Florence for creating the mess instead of his dog. He makes a grotesque figure, he has a twitch and his physical description is freakish; he is like a doll that has come to life:

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[655] Oates, "The Doll," *Haunted* 26.

[656] Ibid 47.

> his waist was slender, for a man's – and he wore odd trousers, or jeans, tight-fitting across the thighs and without zippers or snaps, crotchless. They fit him tightly in the crotch, which was smooth and seamless. His legs were rather short for his torso and arms.[657]

Angered by the mess, the man starts clapping his hands stiffly in front of Florence's face like an automaton until he finally hits her. He shouts that she is a liar, dirty and a bad girl. Florence feels a deep sense of shame and wakes up. Oates's point is to show readers that it is this sense of self-abnegation that keeps Florence from relationships, in addition to the distractions of her time-consuming career.

The next day at the conference, Florence puts the discomfort of the night before behind her and refuses to think more about it. As she prepares to make her speech, she slips back into her professional role and reflects how "buoyed by the presence of others as by waves of applause, you forget your age, your loneliness – the very perimeters of your soul."[658] The grotesque idea is not only that human relationships can be fraught areas, but also that to go through life without them has consequences that are equally nightmarish for the mental disintegration that can result from such a deluded sense of self-alienation. The other side of her professionally confident meaning is a personal meaning, based in fear.

In "The Sepulchre" readers encounter another middle-aged woman named Laurie, who has been called home to assist her ageing mother find her father. Her father has apparently "disappeared," but readers and Laurie sense that he is probably lying dead somewhere, either in the house or on its grounds. The uncanny dimension is related to the difficulties of ageing, and of watching one's parents age and change, and become "grotesque" before one's very eyes. Laurie's mother's

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[657] Ibid 45.

[658] Ibid 48.

dishevelled state "gives her the appearance of a doll upended."[659] In describing her mother, Laurie relates how

> she is not an elderly woman but she has become an old woman, the sight of her soft-creased flaccid flesh, the deep fissures bracketing her mouth, pierces your heart. You recall your mother saying, years ago, in pitying reference to an older relative, when they're at that age, they can *go,* overnight. And curious wan snap of her fingers.[660]

Later, when Laurie asks her mother how long her father "has been missing" and the woman responds defiantly that he is only hiding, her mother draws "herself to her full height of indignation and wounded pride, stiff as an upright doll."[661] Confounded by her distraught, and nearly deranged mother, Laurie draws back to look at her mother, "whose soft-creased face, bright-glittering eyes are suddenly foreign, the visual code reversed."[662] In the uncanny dimension, intimate relationships are untrustworthy and all is topsy-turvy. As her parents are getting older, she has become the parent and they have become the children; she observes, "you and your mother have changed places."[663]

As the familiar becomes unfamiliar, Laurie realises she is in the midst of some uncanny influence. Even the home itself feels like disorienting space: "Inside, the house feels tilted, about to swerve from its foundation..."[664] As her mother searches madly for her father, she displaces all the furniture in the house, a metaphor for the state of displacement that ageing has thrust upon both her and her daughter. Her daughter reflects: "This look of furniture that should be familiar to you made unfamiliar by being out of place if only by inches, the living-room sofa yanked out

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[659] Oates, "The Sepulchre," *Hearts* 71.

[660] Ibid 72.

[661] Ibid.

[662] Ibid 73.

[663] Ibid 71.

[664] Ibid.

from the wall at an angle, the sideboard in the dining room dislodged from its place, everywhere you look doors flung open as if in a sustained rage."[665] As in Shirley Jackson's story "The Bus," the dishevelled state of the house becomes a metaphor for the disjointed mental and physical state of the ageing woman, and the effect of the mother's condition upon her daughter. Ageing is described as an uncanny because on certain levels it is mad and it is grotesque:

> Forgetfulness, vertigo, amnesia, spells of irrationality and bad temper. Malaise, depression. Suicidal wishes. Then again, strange and alarming spells of childishness, giddiness, inappropriate playfulness. Your father, through his long life a man of slightly sardonic, dry-edged dignity, a man of consummate intelligence, seems to be behaving, [...], like no father you've known.[666]

Again here readers see how the word father is emptied of its original signification and has been refilled with something unstable; he has become something mad, he has become like a misbehaving boy.

But as is typical with the uncanny, the judgement here is nothing definitive, with precise outlines; rather, it is something to be sensed: "Madness. A whiff of it. Mixed with stale-lemony Old English furniture polish."[667] This juxtaposition of the ordinary with the extraordinary is intentional. Oates would have readers see that though the phenomenon of dealing with ageing parents is common, as prosaic as an established brand of furniture polish. When the experience happens to oneself, accepting it as "common" and as "normal" can be very difficult; it feels extraordinary, like someone has interfered with one's sense of perception. Knowing that this happens in the context of the everyday multiplies the sense of encountering an uncanny event. The notion of the "common" is emptied and distorted. Readers

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[665] Ibid 72.

[666] Ibid 74.

[667] Ibid.

see this idea again in "The Hand-puppet," where a doctor tries to reassure a mother about her upcoming hysterectomy by explaining that it is a "common medical procedure," to which the mother responds, "Common for who? ... Common as death?"[668]

Oates renders "home" as a disorienting space in other stories as well. In "The Astronomer," another story about ageing and the lack of social capital, a retired radio astronomer in his eighties mistakes his hired nurse for "Death." She finds him in a confused, panic-stricken state huddled in a corner protesting, "You're Death aren't you! Death! Go away! I want to go home!"[669] His nurse, Lillian, tries to reassure the old man that he *is* home. But this is not a comfort to him because he realises that "home" is not what it used to be; he just has no where else to go but settle in to the fact that he is old, alone and waiting for death. His downward decline in health happens against a background where he has a daughter, but is reliant upon the hired care of a stranger to comfort him in his most lonely moment.

"Intensive," another story about facing death alone, also depicts "home" as uncanny. This time a woman, suffering from cancer, wanders the halls of a hospital:

> You are lost on A-level looking for Oncology. You are lost on Ground Level in a maze of corridors pushing through sets of hefty double doors with oval glass windows like startled wide-opened eyes looking for a telephone or a Women's Room or a red EXIT to take you home though you understand that 'home' has now become a concept, an idea like 'justice' and 'The Good.'[670]

The word "home" has become unstable, emptied of its meaning, and refilled only as an abstraction. "American Exceptionalism"[671] is the other concept that gets emptied

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[668] Oates, "The Hand-puppet" 44.

[669] Oates, "The Astronomer," *Hearts* 252.

[670] Oates, "Intensive," *Hearts* 204.

[671] Deborah Madsen defines American Exceptionalism as the feeling that "America and Americans are special, exceptional, because they are charged with saving the world from itself and, at the same time, America and Americans must sustain a high level of spiritual, political and moral commitment to this exceptional destiny –

of its meaning for this cancer patient. In disbelief that there may be no "solution" or "quick fix" for her condition, she reminds herself, "You are an American and it is difficult to believe that some errors are irreversible and that Time itself is irreversible."[672] In *American Exceptionalism: The Effects of Plenty on American Experience* (2002), Arnon Gutfeld discusses how Americans' unique sense of abundant resources helped them historically to bypass major social difficulties.[673] Oates here distorts the same idea and carries it, ridiculously, over to healthcare; but in the process she taps into how this sense of entitlement is so deeply ingrained in some American minds that even when they are faced with non-negotiable aspects like cancer, feelings of rights to exemption are privilege are invoked.

"Home" is once again destabilised in "The Premonition," when the brother of the abusing husband goes to check on his sister-in-law and his two nieces; acting on a diffuse "feeling of unease,"[674] he notices how something appears to be off-balance about the house. When his sister-in-law, Ellen, answers the door she was "walking hesitantly, almost swaying, as if the floor were tilting beneath her."[675] She has become like a doll come to life, but in the most disturbing way, "Her eyes were wide and moist and the pupils appeared dilated; there was a look of fatigue in her face, yet something feverish, virtually festive as well."[676] Whitney observes that the atmosphere in the kitchen was so charged, gay, frenetic, [he] halfway thought he'd

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American must be as 'a city upon the hill' exposed to the eyes of the world." Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 2.

[672] Ibid 207.

[673] Arnon Gutfeld, *American Exceptionalism: The Effects of Plenty on American Experience* (Brighton; Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2002) 42.

[674] Oates, "Premonition," *Haunted* 174.

[675] Ibid 176.

[676] Ibid 177.

stepped into a celebration of some kind."[677] The point is that he has; after the women have completed their grotesque deed – they chop up the abusing husband and wrap up his body parts into gift boxes for his family – they celebrate: the kitchen is brightly lit, there are empty coke cans and pizza boxes strewn about the place, and an empty wine bottle sits on the counter.

The manner in which the madness of the women has disturbed the atmosphere of the house provides ominous signs and makes the narrator Whitney's sense of perception unreliable. Whitney admires the newly scrubbed counter surfaces but he fails to recognise how the tidiness masks the extreme mess, both literal and metaphoric. The wife and the daughters have been victims of sustained domestic violence and they are taking their retribution not only on Quinn, the abuser, but also on his family, whose wilful blindness to the issue is almost as disturbing.

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Part III – Relationship to Feminism

As has been pointed out already, both Wharton and Jackson maintain sceptical and ambivalent attitudes toward the feminisms of their day. In *Haunted* and *The Collector of Hearts* the uncanny expresses ambivalence toward feminist politics in even more direct terms. Expressing ambivalence directly may sound like an oxymoron, however, this contradiction may account for the reason why in the hands of Oates, the uncanny passes through horror into the territory of the grotesque. By profiling women who made dubious choices through their own, liberated volition, Oates turns the gaze inward, requiring a certain introspection of feminism, its

[677] Ibid 180.

promised rewards and undelivered results. In the stories Oates provides, readers are confronted with disillusioned and delusional career women, schizophrenic single mothers, and "consenting adults," who mutate into monsters as they disassociate themselves from the responsibilities that are concomitant with new found freedoms. If, in Freudian terms, the uncanny has its seeds in deeply repressed drives resulting from natural tensions within traditional familial roles, by the time the uncanny reaches Oates, traditional familial structures are barely recognisable and the enemy is not only some terrorizing male presence, but has warped inside women (and men) themselves who can no longer look outward. The secret that must remain hidden is that they had an active role in creating their own misery. The repressed drives that surface and are experienced as uncanny are the very secret (because politically incorrect), nostalgic wishes for tradition. But, in a world that has made tradition strange beyond recognition, secret desires become twisted and grotesque.

In the story "The Sepulchre" for example, marriage, or at least the project of mythologising of marriage, is rendered as something uncanny. Wandering through the rooms of the house, a middle-aged daughter remarks to herself how odd a notion it is nowadays even to think of being married for fifty years, even to think of having to sleep with the same person in the same bed for over fifty years. When she comes across her parents "enhanced" wedding portrait, she feels disoriented. She barely recognises them; she sees the portrait as a ludicrous "wedding of mannequins:"

> It's a photograph that has been softened, idealized with pastel crayon -- your mother pertly pretty, with upswept pale hair, an unnatural glisten to her eyes effected by strategic dots of white; your father tall, grave and handsome, dark hair brushed in twin wings from his temples, his eyes too, enhanced by white dots. A stiff, somewhat ludicrous formality, a wedding of mannequins. Now, no one gets married like that. No one marries for fifty years, the very prospect is absurd. From the perspective of your generation, it seems unnatural.[678]

[678] Oates, "The Sepulchre" 75.

But as unnatural as a fifty-year marriage might seem, the form of "modern" relationship that replaces it is exposed as grossly inadequate. In "The Guilty Party," for example, a struggling single-mother cannot quite understand the extent of her ex-lover's rejection. When the woman asks for him to have a role, he responds:

> "Look: I'm truly sorry, can't we be friends?" and, "I guess there was a profound misunderstanding between us – if so, I'm sorry," and, less patiently, "Please leave me alone, will you? I can't be the father of that child so please leave me alone!"[679]

The woman feels genuinely confused even before feeling outraged.

In "The Guilty Party," the single-mother's madness stems in part from her own sense of self-castigation for being "a damn dumb bitch."[680] These are the words uttered by her toddler son, Jocko, a medical freak who has just started drinking coffee. In this story Jocko acts as an alter ego for the mother, expressing the anger she feels at her ex-lover but also at herself for getting herself into her single-mother condition in the first place. Female reticence is not overcome for the protagonist in this story, either; she relies on Jocko to say the inexpressible and to goad her on to do the unthinkable. He points out how "the company of small children is f**king fatiguing" and counsels her to get justice by going over to her ex-boyfriend's apartment on the eve before he moves town and to stab him with a knife for abandoning them.[681] Jocko is a monster who is always demanding to be fed, bruising her breasts from his "furious sucking," and using "the word 'Momma' like a weapon."[682] Here again, readers see how the word for "mother" is emptied of its traditional meaning, but it still carries a material reality that is hard to ignore. Thus

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[679] Oates, "The Guilty Party," *Haunted* 167.

[680] Ibid 161.

[681] Ibid 165.

[682] Ibid 159.

emptied, the sign warps into something grotesque. Similarly, the "sign" for the couple's so-called "relationship" is also emptied of its meaning and takes on grotesque contours:

> He'd come instead to her home, to her. He'd eaten the food she lovingly prepared for him. Like others. Like others of his sex. He'd spoken of loving her, he'd anointed her tense hopeful body with his kisses. Under his tutelage she'd become beautiful, hadn't she?
> She'd opened her woman's soul to him with no thought of how, a man's passion spent, her very soul might be returned to her soiled and crumpled – in Jocko's sneering words, "Like a Kleenex the bastard's blown his nose in."[683]

The woman's ensuing madness helps readers identify with the uneasy sense of how modern relationships can be experienced as unhinged -- the passion that results from "sexual freedom" has a brief memory and sometimes -- its material consequences "invariably make us fools."[684]

The story's title underscores the difficulty of identifying, the "guilty party;" the woman could also be seen as evading her responsibilities in not being clear about the consequences that could potentially result from their affair and for not having a keener sense to detect her boyfriend's tepidness on the issue of commitment. Oates conveys the sense of shame she feels is immense as a result. While Oates paints a picture of modern America as a society where values are in flux, almost as if besieged by abysmal forces of cultural change that seem extraneous and not under one's control, she equally, however, demonstrates how this is only half of reality; determining the extent to which individuals are either victimised or complicit in the "tragedies" of their lives forms a central part of the reading process.

Shame is a prevalent theme in much of Oates's uncanny fiction and this

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[683] Ibid 170.

[684] Ibid 160.

shame points to the role the self has in creating the uncertain, terror-filled world Oates represents. *Haunted* and *The Collector of Hearts* represent a significant shift in feminist arguments because instead of the blame being projected only outwardly onto an externally repressive force, the blame is shared by the self and thus needs a heavier disguise. The new kind of material existence feminism has introduced to many women (and men) brings new freedoms but also bears a "blunt physicality,"[685] experienced sometimes as a reality to be endured rather than celebrated.

But the further disturbing aspect in Oates's story is that the woman does not feel entitled to her rage. She numbs herself to consider her "predicament as impersonal: a symptom of contemporary times ... it was pointless and childish to assign blame, to speak of trust betrayed, love betrayed, the guilty," because her lover warned her beforehand that he did not want a serious relationship.[686] In this story, Oates foregrounds how women are not half as emancipated as the feminism of the 1970s promised they would be. Where early feminists once claimed that "the personal is political" in the sixties and seventies, by the mid-nineties the personal is now impersonal.[687] The rarefied concept has not only disappointed, but has taken on a disturbed, corporeal implication in its failure. The women in Oates's stories have become strangers to themselves and disassociated from their emotions. They bear their material realities alone, denying the role they played in creating their new oppressive condition.

As with Jackson, madness is a common vehicle for the uncanny in Oates. The more acquainted readers become with the stories of madness in Jackson and Oates, the more it is possible to discern how in their hands madness stories are not

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[685] Oates, *"Afterward," Haunted* 303.

[686] Oates, "The Guilty Party" 160.

[687] Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political," *Feminist Revolution* (March 1969): 204-205; also see Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 23.

just about the process of psychological breakdown in a character; the madness stories in Jackson and Oates are experienced as uncanny because the madness is often linked to an issue of unease as can be seen in, "Phase Change" and "The Guilty Party."

"Phase Change" tells the story of a thirty-seven year old woman who is in the process of going mad, a development triggered by two uneasy problems. The first relates to the theme of unevenly balanced domestic relations. Julia's husband, "a respected physicist" is given room to take his career seriously while she takes care of the details of their household: "*A contract between the practical and the celestial? – between the ordinary and the extraordinary.*"[688] The second deals with the more subtle idea of how some post-feminist women are still allowing themselves to be lulled into such inequality, not in response to a fierce patriarchal presence, but rather from their own lack of vigilance and commitment. Julia satisfies herself with the idea that she has a "career" as the assistant curator at the museum in town, but this largely administrative position falls short of the potential Julia could have achieved in the field of science had she more carefully husbanded her talents as student rather than settled for a less demanding position and a husband.

In one of her dreams she imagines that she is at the "Center for Advanced Study," where she listens to her husband lecture on phase changes in the early universe. The centre is described as bastion of masculinity; she doubts whether there are even women's toilets. When she does manage to find the ladies room, she meets another older woman:

> At an adjacent sink stood a plump, plain-faced woman with gray hair wrapped in braids around her head, washing her hands vigorously. Julia said, with forced vivacity, wiping her face, "I wish I could understand them, don't you? I know they hold the secrets to the universe – the real universe,

[688] Oates, "Phase Change," *Haunted* 190.

> not ours. Actually, I got A's in high school physics and calculus, I'm not an ignorant person, but I can't remember anything I've learned, and it's getting worse.[689]

Julia chuckles at the older woman, looking for a nod of sympathy, but the woman just stares at her coldly. It turns out that this woman is Elsa Heisenberg, a renowned astronomer at Palomar Observatory. The older woman stands as a reminder to the current generation of women who Julia represents, not to dupe themselves into a complacency that they have satisfied their roles as modern feminists by having "careers" like Julia's. The silver-haired Heisenberg reminds the younger generation not to squander the inheritance forerunners like her fought so hard to achieve.

The most visceral and grotesque tale in *Haunted* is "Martyrdom," the story of a woman known as "Babygirl," whose story is twinned with a parallel tale of a rat. In contrast to the rat's hard struggle for existence, Babygirl's initial period of coming of age in the world is one of relative privilege; she is raised in an incubator and fed generously on the richest mother's milk. However, Babygirl's fortune soon changes and she is treated no better than an animal. In a passage that can read as a veiled critique of Western feminism's neglect of the unfinished gains still to be achieved in Third-World feminism, Oates describes how Babygirl was readied as if for a ritual sacrifice as happens in many third-world countries today – "she was fed, then bathed, then starved, then fed some more, and her clitoris was removed."[690] In a manner less foreign to developed western societies, Babygirl also receives plastic surgery on her nose, so that it heals with "more desirable contours," and her twenty-eight-inch waist was cinched down to seventeen with a special girdle-brassiere to flatter better the curves of her bust and hips.[691] Eventually Babygirl is groomed by

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[689] Ibid 195.

[690] Oates, "Martyrdom," *Haunted* 187.

[691] Ibid.

her parents to be auctioned off to a rich white-haired gentleman, who as her husband, abuses her, and even brings home some of his business colleagues to rape her as they wish. Babygirl lulls herself into a false sense of normality through the comforts of evangelical preachers, sloe-gin fizzes, telephone conversations with female friends, and by clipping recipes out of magazines, shopping by catalogue and watching television. Because the reality of what Babygirl endures is too horrific and grotesque to engage with directly, and because the resolution of the story is imperfect (she stays with her husband), Oates sublimates the unresolved unease and madness of the situation as uncanny.

While the above discussion of Oates can demonstrate how deeply sceptical Oates is of the supposed gains of feminism, second-wave feminist preoccupations continue to be represented in her work, nevertheless. In stories such as "The White Cat," readers are presented with a cat who stands in as a metaphor for a woman, who is not victimised, but rather becomes the victimiser; she is a figure free to have sex on her own terms. The cat is beautiful, sensuous, flirtatious and she ignores amorous advances of her owner. In "The Model" the knife-packing Sybil takes revenge on the man who she believes to be her father, who murdered her mother. Protests against the sexual double standard are presented in "The Bingo Master," (a story that refers loosely to the biography of Flannery O'Conner). In "The Bingo Master" thirty-nine year old, Harvard-educated writer Rose sets out to lose her virginity to the harlequin-figured, lecherous bingo master, Joe Pye, who not only rebuffs her advances, but beats Rose for her forwardness. And finally, motherhood is thoroughly demystified in stories such as "The Hand-puppet," where a tired suburban mother looks upon her child with horror when the symptoms of childhood schizophrenia indicate how motherhood often involves taking the bad with the good.

In "Poor Bibi" another overwhelmed mother, realising that motherhood is more than she bargained for, treats her son like a dog, relegating him to a warm corner in the basement, near the furnace, before taking him to the vet to be put down. Together, these images of protest about the female condition are much more palpable than portraits of female madness produced in earlier versions of the uncanny written by Jackson or Wharton.

However, Joyce Carol Oates, like Wharton and Jackson before her, cannot be seen as fully comfortable with the feminist polemic. In Oates, readers see how certain aspects of a narrowly focussed feminism have created uncomfortable positions for women in the material reality that they carry. In "The Bingo Master" and "Don't You Trust Me" Oates depicts the dreadful consequences that can result when women allow themselves to be alienated from a genuine sense of what they want by succumbing to an over-emphasis on sexual freedom, which encourages them to be sexual before the conditions are right. In "The Guilty Party" the pill is not seen as the great emancipator as second-wave feminists portray, but rather as unreliable and toxic, yet a substance women continue to take:

> To prevent the conception of just such a presence in her life as little Jacko, she'd systematically subjected herself to a biochemical method of contraception that held the threat of stroke, blood clots, pulmonary embolus, endometrical cancer, and mental depression, and this threat she lived with uneasily for the duration of her active sexual life, which had now apparently concluded.[692]

Likewise, Oates foregrounds the issue of abortion, but not in an uncomplicated way. In "Don't You Trust Me?" the hypocrisy of certain pro-Life moralists is parodied. The doctor about to perform the illegal procedure looks "very like a member of the politically powerful PPF (Physician Friends of the Foetus). As well, the lightness with which abortion is approached by some is problematised; the

[692] Oates, "The Guilty Party" 160.

abortion is approximated to a "simple medical procedure." Like the sexual act which made her pregnant, it is described as "no big deal;" "in and out in eight minutes."[693] And single-motherhood is not portrayed as an easy choice either, but as a suffering existence, the full burden of which usually falls to women to bear alone. In "Don't You Trust Me?" the young woman reflects how "the mistake jointly theirs, she should accept as solely hers."[694]

In Oates, the uncanny dimension of female experience touches upon the realisation that there are dimensions to the choices some modern women make that is simultaneously of their own volition, but strangely not. In following new sexual codes and in watching the behaviour of other women, many modern women engage duplicitously with the "me" but "not me" and in the process can find themselves engaged in decisions and behaviour that has become alienated from their true sense of themselves. Oates gives expression to the way modern women have become strangers to themselves, responding to needs that are foisted upon them and called their own but at the same time are alien to their own. Aspects of "free will" have become unhinged, or at least deeply conflicted and adulterated.

The way some women wilfully pursue careers to the exclusion of other "distractions," such as forming healthy relationships, is displayed poignantly in stories such as "The Doll," and recurs in "The Bingo Master," where the single, middle-aged writer Rose complains how she "has nothing to show for her exile from life."[695] It is as if desiring a relationship of her own has prevented Rose from writing much anymore and likewise, wanting to pursue a career as a writer has required her to remove herself from the usual social circumstances where she might

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[693] Oates, "Don't You Trust Me?" *Haunted* 156.

[694] Ibid 154.

[695] Oates, "The Bingo Master," *Haunted* 53.

have met someone. It is not that Oates wishes to suggest a solution for Rose, who took a break from her life to also care for her ageing parents, for which, she could be admired; however the dilemma Rose faces as a character helps Oates to highlight how often women are faced with "un-easy" options, as the role of carer and nurturer usually falls to women.

One of the more nuanced and sustained critiques on feminism from Oates comes in "Unprintable," the story about a well-known feminist and pro-choice activist, "Celeste Ward," who, on the night she is receiving an award for her life's work, is attacked by the unborn foetuses from the abortions she herself has had and those her "life's work" have made possible. Oates lays bare some of the contradictions that can be explored when extreme versions of women's "choices" are made visible for examination. The title of the story itself, "Unprintable," bears testimony to the manner in which some issues, like abortion, are shrouded by a self-censoring mechanism within certain feminist circles.

Oates uses irony throughout the story. For a start, the awards dinner, organised by "the Women's Unity Force Foundation," is being held at the "Ethical Arts Center."[696] Despite late second-wave feminism's contention that there is not "Feminism" but "Feminisms," Oates highlights how there still persists a need to present a unified front on the issue of abortion; even though the dinner is hosted by a women's group known as "Unity Force," Oates conveys a sense of the need for forced unity. Also as some feminists would not be pro-choice, they might feel very conflicted about participating in an event honouring an abortion-rights activist at a venue called the "Ethical Arts Center." Celeste has written a book entitled "*The Trap of Motherhood: A Sociological Study,*" even though she herself has never

[696] Oates, "Unprintable" 190-191.

known what it is to bear the responsibilities of motherhood. The younger woman journalist, who is interviewing Celeste for a feature article in "a distinguished woman's journal" remarks obsequiously, "Only think, Celeste, if you hadn't been born! How different things would be for women in America today!"[697] The point is ironic, of course, because if Celeste's parents had had abortion available to them back at the time Celeste was born in the 1930s, Celeste would not have made the "contribution" to American women for which she is being honoured.

It is not that Oates either is or is not pro-choice; stories like "The Guilty Party," "Extenuating Circumstances," "Death Mother" and "The Hand-puppet" demonstrate how difficult motherhood can be under certain circumstances. Still, by framing one woman's story in grotesque terms, Oates invokes an uncanny dimension that mixes modes of thought generally kept scrupulously apart and, in that way, conveys that there is still much to be uneasy about concerning the issue of abortion. It is not an "easy" "issue" to be thrown in with others as part of a platform, whether Pro-choice Democrat or Pro-Life Republican or indeed, even "Feminist." To deny this "hidden" meaning is not being faithful to the reality that surrounds the issue for most women and men.

In revealing the most subtle contradictions, Oates uncovers what is hidden about the feminist movement but has been taken for granted. For example, the reporters ask Celeste questions so familiar to her by now she "could have answered them in her sleep."[698] From a post-feminist perspective, Oates could be suggesting that the "Cause" is worn out. There is nothing fresh in the voices of its loudest spokespeople. "Unprintable" shows the need for post-feminist women to overcome the intellectual laziness that accompanies accepting such well-rehearsed responses as

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[697] Ibid 190.

[698] Ibid 192.

unexamined, un-conflicted and "everyday." In terms which blend the bestial with human, the young journalist interviewing Celeste represents the later generation of critics confronting the earlier generation in a new way. When the interviewer asks questions "Celeste had managed to elude last time," she is described as "a dog sniffing out a buried bone."[699] Celeste does not want the reporter to find out too much about her personal background, that she has had five abortions, because she wants her "secrets to remain secret."[700] She wants her personal to remain personal and not become political.

Celeste was deeply involved with a man in her youth and felt completely devastated when the affair ended and she had to deal with an unwanted pregnancy. Instead of dispassionately seeking an abortion as one of her "choices," Oates lets readers see how distraught Celeste was. Rather than being calmly in control, Celeste had become entangled by an emotional state where love merged with hate and mental fragility. In succumbing to her boyfriend's "anguished" sexual desire, Celeste is weak-willed as she mumbles to herself, "*Yes, no, I hate you, I can't help myself I love you – I will die if you leave me.*"[701] In showing Celeste's "secrets" to readers, Oates reveals the emotional cravings that underlie Celeste's decision to have sex in the first place. Rather than seeing that her "choice" could have been to decide first what she wanted from the relationship, which might have made her abortion unnecessary, the word "choice" warps into something that has become unhinged and alienated from a true sense of volition, in the same way that the word "accident" is also emptied of its original meaning:

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[699] Ibid 197.

[700] Ibid 200.

[701] Ibid 199.

> With each subsequent lover, coolly chosen, to prove, yes, she *was* a woman, she possessed that power. And the "accidents" seemed somehow part of it -- three or four times -- or was it, impossibly five? -- as if to prove, yes, she could. Each pregnancy terminated out of conscience and necessity *I have my own life, no one can trap me* and the proof flushed cleanly away, gone.[702]

Oates has post-feminist readers see how complicated issues, like abortion, cannot be dealt with as easily or summarily as a flush.

In contrast to the fawning attention of Celeste's other admirers at the event, like the "fierce-eyed woman with graying-brown hair" who declares that Celeste's book "saved [her] life, sprang [*her*] from the trap," the young journalist interviewing Celeste represents the scepticism of a younger generation.[703] The younger generation wonders about the congruency between the lives of best-selling authors and the lives of average women. As *The New York Times* columnist Susan Jane Gilman notes, "try telling a welfare mother or a harried secretary that they should worry about being a victim of the unconscious process of phallocentric language."[704] Post-feminist authors like Elizabeth Fox-Genovese illustrate this disjunction in books with titles such as, *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life: How Today's Feminist Elite Has Lost Touch with Real Concerns of Women* (1996).[705] A common post-feminist complaint is that leaders of the movement have made names and careers for themselves by writing books and publishing articles in theoretical journals expounding female emancipation, while real women are left to live lives that are circumscribed by new material boundaries the new-found "freedoms" have introduced.

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[702] Ibid 200.

[703] Ibid 194.

[704] Susan Jane Gilman, "Why the Fear of Feminism?" *The New York Times* (1 September 1991): E11.

[705] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life: How Today's Feminist Elite Has Lost Touch with Real Concerns of Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

In addition to scrutinising the rhetoric within best-selling, more populist, feminist books, Oates suggests that even the more arcane rhetoric of feminist academic theory has become alienated from relevancy or even comprehension in the real world, as well as to feminists themselves. Post-feminist author Naomi Wolf explains how the language of "club feminism" or "insider feminism" is experienced by the lay community as a version of "Pig Latin."[706] Oates illustrates a similar idea when she has Celeste read the speech one of the event organisers has prepared for her; she fumbles over her own words because they are not making sense:

> [her speech] had been cynically spliced together out of previous speeches of hers by a malicious stranger, an enemy who knew her work intimately, thus could sabotage it with devastating skill: sudden jumps in logic, incoherent transitions between paragraphs, repetitive phrases, a number of the words -- *eyrrism, troese, dysphisis* -- unknown, unpronounceable to her.[707]

Further, in what could be read as an oblique reproof at the critical language of Julia Kristeva and Lacanian-inspired feminists, Oates portrays the fascination for the "abject" and "mirrors" as an almost risible obsession in the way she describes a fetish that Celeste has recently developed:

> Celeste did not think of herself as a fastidious woman, but in private, increasingly with age, she was becoming so. Involuntarily glancing into sinks in public rest rooms -- into toilet bowls -- steeling herself for the sight of another's filth. Checking out grime on floors, dust in corners. And then her own frowning scrutiny of her appearance in mirrors -- not her appearance, which was superficial, but the *self* her appearance suggested.[708]

Where Lacanian critics describe an infant's fascination for mirrors as an effort to gain a sense of themselves as separate and whole, Celeste's moment before the mirror leads to her fragmentation. Readers see, even if Celeste does not, how the sense of herself that her appearance suggests is quite different from the hidden

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[706]Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It* (New York: Random House, 1993) 125.

[707] Oates, "Unprintable" 201.

[708] Ibid 198.

meaning of who her "self" really is. Soon after, she is attacked by unborn foetuses and while being attacked, she is still in denial as to her "other" meaning: "a woman of principle and a woman of character and a woman of exemplary courage and a woman upon whom countless women modelled themselves? Why, to these hideous creatures, these ravenous mouths, did none of that matter?"[709] Who Celeste is professionally does not matter to these unborn foetuses because they represent that part of human reality that is bound by instinct, that struggles to survive, and that is sometimes violent.

In different stories, Oates looks again at how, for some women, professional identity is not enough. For example, in "The Dream-Catcher" Oates explores again the hidden side of meaning that is instinctual and primitive, and which mutates into something grotesque when it is denied. In "The Dream-Catcher" Eunice Pemberton is a thirty-seven year-old woman, who has a demanding career as a vice-provost at "The Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts." She has a limited personal life until a dream-catcher she buys on holiday magically transforms it. Her Harvard PhD thesis, with the arid title, *Aesthetics and Ethics: A Post-modernist Debate,* is proof of the cerebral life she has lived, to the neglect of developing a personal life. However, after hanging the dream-catcher above her bed, a "creature, [...] neither animal nor fully human" suddenly appears in her house.[710] Under her nurturing, he develops into a creature that is half-bat and half-man and forces himself on her sexually. But like Celeste Ward, she does not countenance the episodes with any sense of cool collection, and when they are together she thinks to herself: *"No. Stop. I hate this. This is not me!"*[711] But then later, carrying his scent on her when she is at work, she

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[709] Ibid 203.

[710] Oates, "The Dream-Catcher," *Hearts* 236.

[711] Ibid 244.

luxuriates in the thought that none of her colleagues would be able to guess about "*how my life is! My secret life!*"[712]

Significantly, in a bizarre way, post-feminist readers can begin to see Eunice, and not the bat-man, as the spectacle of the story. Looking at a small pile of chicken bones he has left in the kitchen she thinks to herself, "It was *his* way of eating, and Eunice shook her head in bemused dismay. *Animal. From the start. Hopeless.*"[713] For some women, encountering a man in one's home, living with a man, observing how different some men are from some women, a woman can feel like she is dealing with something so totally different from her, yet it gives her deep joy and fulfilment to be sharing her life with someone and to care for another being outside of herself. When Eunice calls the police (after she has killed the creature in self-defence after he has raped her), she thinks of what she will tell the police and concludes, "She would not tell them what she knew also -- that her life was over, her deepest life. Hers, and his."[714] Oates explores this dimension of emotional craving and need-to-nurture as if they were animal instincts, and thereby she makes a hidden meaning available to post-feminist readers. Perhaps Oates's point is ultimately "proto" and not "post" feminist at all: if women become honest with themselves about their true needs, they can create situations for themselves whereby those needs have the possibility to be fulfilled in healthy ways, before the "needs" warp into emotional cravings that cause women to make themselves vulnerable to situations where they might be victimised.

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[712] Ibid 245.

[713] Ibid 246.

[714] Ibid 248.

Part IV – Other Social, Cultural and Aesthetic Concerns

Some of the social and historical subjects that are not limited to female-centred concerns have already been referred to, issues such as the uncanniness of ageing, capitalism and the lack of social capital, child abuse, the disengaged role of the intellectual and Liberal Left in America, human sex traffickers, and suburban "dis-ease". In this final section, I will elaborate on aspects of these and discuss other socio-cultural problems that Oates renders uncanny. This section will conclude with a discussion about how Oates considers other manifestations of the uncanny that cannot necessarily be strictly mapped to the socio-economic context, issues such as the creative process itself and existential questions about the human condition.

Oates's grotesque tales illustrate the difficulties that can result when people let themselves be wholly identified with, or falsely comforted by, the security of the roles a capitalist "system" provides to them. Oates uses the grotesque as an aesthetic method to examine the residual pieces that are left for people when these roles are revealed to be inadequate in attending to the needs of the whole person. For example, in "The Doll" one of the reasons Florence Parr never marries is because the effort of dating simply would take too much time away from the discipline she needs to apply to attaining a secure professional role for herself. In "The Guilty Party," the distraught single mother seeks a form of refuge in her work, "for after all this was her public life, her exterior life, as valuable a life as any in the capitalist-consumer

society in which she discovered herself living out her years."[715] And in "Schroeder's Stepfather" the abused man finds himself able to return to work "with a passion" ten days after the funeral of his abuser and considers to himself: "... for wasn't work his solace? his truest self? An island of sorts ... ."[716]

Oates's point is to illustrate how on the one hand, the structure of a job or an identity provides some comfort and even relief for these characters; however when characters let themselves be wholly identified with a self-constructed identity, there is something hollow and hauntingly uncanny about their way of being in the world. Jack Schroeder in "Schroeder's Stepfather," for example, becomes an architect so that he can design houses so that people are "required to live within the restrictions he'd invented."[717] As an architect, he can control people through his use of space just as his stepfather used to control him in *his* use of space; his stepfather would abuse him in the basement of the family home. His stepfather defined the house they lived in as a "house of memory, pain, repetition" and by doing the work he now does as an adult, Jack Schroeder is able to use his professional role as a means of engaging on some level with the pain of his existence while at the same time avoiding direct confrontation with the acute sense of injury in his life.[718]

By suggesting to readers that professional identities both shape and stunt self-development, Oates reveals how human beings have needs that extend beyond the structure of the roles societies provides for them. Oates's aesthetic contribution to the uncanny lies in her ability to demonstrate the grotesque effects felt when roles and structures collapse, leaving characters in a void. In the story "Blind" the old

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[715] Oates, "The Guilty Party" 166.

[716] Oates, "Schroeder's Stepfather" 67.

[717] Ibid.

[718] Ibid 62.

woman, who has been uprooted from her community on retiring to the country with her husband, finds herself bewildered by loneliness when she discovers that she has survived her husband and now must wait for death herself. Alone, she experiences an apocalypse that is both literal and metaphoric. The asteroid collision knocks the earth (and her world) from its axis, precipitating a series of explosions that collapse all of its structures, physical and interpersonal. She muses to herself, "Never do you dream as a young woman that one day, this will be you."[719] She realises that

> There was something mysterious about this dark, this night; something that made it unlike any other dark or any other night. For it was not the mere absence of light (which is of course derived from our Sun) but the presence of dark itself, thick and opaque as any matter.[720]

It is not only that she realises that she no longer has the role her youth provided her, or the connections with community that it brought her, but after the role collapses, she is left with a condition that is absolutely frightening: old age and its loneliness becomes a visceral experience, "thick and opaque as any matter." True to her aesthetic method, Oates reveals to readers what is left when a structure one has come to rely on is emptied of its ability to give shape to experience. The void that is left is experienced with annihilating power because it is has material consequences. In "Blind," Oates also indirectly refers to the inequalities that result from capitalism. After the apocalypse the old woman reflects the division of mankind into "those *with* a secure hiding place, and those *without.*"[721] Against the landscape of private pensions and the lack of universal health care in America, such a have/have-not perspective taps into the same nervous energy that keeps the capitalist system alive.

In stories such as "Blind" and "The Radio Astronomer" people face old age

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[719] Oates, "Blind," *Haunted* 239.

[720] Ibid 242.

[721] Ibid 245.

either alone, with impersonal hired help, or with insufficient resources, issues raised previously in stories such as "Island" and "Trial by Combat" by Shirley Jackson, and in "All Souls'" by Edith Wharton. The conflicts raised by capitalism and loneliness in old age, while moving, are not in themselves uncanny. It is the treatment Oates, Jackson and Wharton give to them that taps into deeper existential anxieties about how an individual can be disoriented, indeed rent asunder, by the same systems which once provided a sense of identity, location and bearing. In "The Radio Astronomer" the retired professor is alienated when he senses that though he helped design and raise funds for the new telescope his old department is using, it is as if the academic staff would rather have him out of the way. He feels frustrated because he says it is essential for him to continue to listen for the "unnatural patterns" that might indicate that life exists in another galaxy.[722] He grows panicked because he feels time is running out. His professional preoccupations are again a metaphor for how older people, at the end of their lives, realise that they do not have enough time left to do all the things they always thought there would be plenty of time to do. Accepting this shift can alter a person's very sense of time and can be experienced as doubly unnerving when combined with the realisation that the remaining time is to be spent in utter loneliness. And so, as time runs out, there is also a sense of time stretching, because as one waits for death, one no longer spends time but endures it.

In another story, "Scars," Oates demonstrates again how our professional "roles" fail to save us from the decay in our bodies and sense of personal meaning. "Scars" is the story of a well-known writer who goes back to her hometown for a book signing and is asked to tour a local nursing home because she has achieved a level of fame. During her visit, she is shocked to see that she recognises some of the

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[722] Oates, "The Radio Astronomer," *Haunted* 251.

patients as her former school teachers. Individuals whom she admired for the keenness of their mental capacities are revealed as helpless dolls in fetters:

> [Miss S ---- (her former math teacher)] ... like a number of the other elderly patients, was shackled to her bed; she strained, and strained to break free, her eyes bulging with the effort, but the leather thongs held her fast; sobbing with frustration, humbled, she fell back helpless as a great rag doll. And her words, too, were slurred, for evidently she hadn't any teeth; her dentures had been removed, and her ashen, flaccid face was partially collapsed; only barely could I make out her plea – 'Help me! Tell them! Who I am! Tell them -- you know me! Tell them -- you – you're my friend!' Now other voices took up Miss S ---'s hissing words; I looked, and saw to my shock that some of these individuals, too, looked strangely familiar. Had they been teachers of mine also, or -- was it possible? -- were they relatives? I stared at the withered faces that seemed to mimic my own, my features repeated, replicated as in a funhouse mirror; [...].[723]

Another story that communicates some of the problems associated with an over-identification with one's professional role is "The Guilty Party." In this story, capitalism coerces individuals into a kind of somnambulant existence where they unthinkingly participate in the structures which perpetuate inertia in the American education system, and contribute to America's role as a belligerent force abroad. The woman in the story is so bewildered by the demands of single-motherhood and keeping up economically, she loses sight of the some of the troubling aspects inherent in her occupation:

> She had an advanced degree in English, and it was her responsibility at Bell to assist certain valued employees – engineers, physicists, chemists, mathematicians – prepare reports for their division supervisors and for the Department of Defense in Washington, D.C. Some of them men (they were all men) were foreign-born and needed special assistance, particularly the Japanese; all, even the native-born, seemed to have trouble expressing their ideas in coherent fluid structures.
> ...
> the task the woman accomplished without knowing, or needing to know, what it was the reports meant to report; if there were elaborate requests for funding from the Pentagon, or detailed accounts of how funds had been implemented, she could type them up on the word processor swiftly and

[723] Oates, "Scars," *Hearts* 175.

> serenely, with very little sense of her subject, let alone its ontological status in the high-tech world.[724]

Here Oates provides a comment on the priorities in American culture and economy: resources in education go to fund scientists in the weapons industry; the Arts, and developing an articulate public, are undervalued goals. Readers recognise how this issue is a source of unease as well in "The Doll;" Oates has Florence Parr attending a conference on "The Future of the Humanities in American Education" when her uncanny experience happens to her. As was demonstrated in the chapter on Shirley Jackson, the military-industrial complex is fundamental to the American economic system; America's citizens rely on it for employment. Oates helps reveal some of its contradictions.

Furthermore, in referring to the poor writing skills of workers involved in the weapons industry, Oates not only highlights a problem borne by a specific group of people, but also refers to the wider phenomenon of "dumbing down" in American culture that concerns many contemporary intellectuals.[725] Richard Hofstadter, for example, complains "The truth is that much of American education aims, simply and brazenly, to turn out experts who are not intellectuals or men of culture at all."[726] The economic system that keeps America a prosperous country encourages students to become myopic in their studies, with the view toward gaining skills that will allow them to attain a specific job, rather than to develop into truly educated citizens.

In highlighting how bad the situation has become, Oates reflects how America's education system not only fails to produce men (and women) of culture,

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[724] Oates, "The Guilty Party" 167-168.

[725] See Katharine Washburn and John F. Thornton, Eds, *Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip Mining of American Culture* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996) for a collection of essays on this phenomenon in contemporary American culture.

[726] Richard Hofstadter, "Anti-intellectualism in American Life," excerpted in *American Social and Political Thought*: A Reader (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) 9-12, 10. Originally published in 1964.

but also how it fails to develop basic writing skills across many levels of society. In this, Oates shares the concern of Heather MacDonald who documents how this phenomenon is systemic throughout American higher education. In her essay, "Writing Down Together," MacDonald notes how instructors in university-level composition classes have been encouraged to promote students' self-esteem over the acquisition of basic grammar and writing skills.[727] "The Guilty Party" conveys Oates's concern about this issue as a wider social-cultural problem.

Oates also delivers critical insights on American consumerism and gigantism. In "The Premonition" and "Thanksgiving" Oates suggests that there is something off-balance about the hyperactive spending that takes place during the holidays, as if such activity provided the means to cover over deeper issues of "dis-ease," either literal or metaphoric, in American society. In "The Premonition" the abundance of gifts prepared by the abused wife is no surprise to her brother-in-law because she over-does it every year, despite the domestic abuse she endures. In "Thanksgiving," another story about an apocalypse, this time caused by a mysterious illness, a girl and her father are grocery shopping, buying provisions for the holiday in an effort to please the mother, so that she will have all that she needs to prepare the dinner, but readers begin to doubt if the woman is even still alive. The daughter thumbs boxes of detergent available in five sizes: "regular, economy, giant, jumbo and jumbo-giant," and emerges victorious with the carcass of turkey from a roach-infested hole in the wall that serves as an extension of the meat department, to which her father responds, in awe, "Well, *hell.*"[728] The point is this dystopic picture of a

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[727]Heather MacDonald, "Writing Down Together," *Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip Mining of American Culture* 88-96.

[728] Oates, "Thanksgiving," *Haunted* 226, 230.

diseased society *is* a kind of hell. In a society where consumers ready goods for consumption in wilful ignorance of the appalling conditions in their places of origin, "revulsion turns to appetite."[729]

George Ritzer in his book, *The McDonaldization Thesis* (1998), discusses how new modes of consumption have led to a proliferation of goods and services that has interfered negatively with American capacities to deal with an unparalleled abundance of commodities. He explains that "in addition to the expected goods and services, in the post-modern world virtually every aspect of culture (art, music and so on) is for sale. [...] In other words, we have become overwhelmed by objects of consumption, to say nothing of the vast array of means in existence to allow us to obtain these goods and services."[730] Oates takes the idea that literally everything is commodifiable to its distorted extreme in stories like "The Model" and "The Collector of Hearts," where she shows how feelings are turned into visual displays that are consumed.

In "The Model," Starr, the man who paints Sybil's portrait, has a new kind of lurid fascination, one that is beyond capturing Sybil's beautiful, child-like features. Instead, he is interested in recording her inner emotions, particularly those that torment her. He asks her to tell him about her dead mother and excitedly sketches the emotions that well to her surface. Capturing real feelings, especially those of minors in some form of anguish is a perverse, almost erotic experience for Starr, whose sensibilities have become jaded through over-stimulation. He pays Sybil a ten-dollar "bonus" for making her cry. His concern is with "Emotion. Memory. Interiority."[731] And in one of their more "experimental" sessions Starr

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[729] Ibid 230.

[730] George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization Thesis: Explorations and Extensions* (London: Sage, 1998) 121.

[731] Oates, "The Model," *Haunted* 118.

asks Sybil to share with him one of her memories, "Any memory – any! So long as it is yours. Sybils laughs, "Whose else would it be?" To which Starr responds, "Why, many times innocent children are given memories by adults; contaminated by memories not their own ... In which case memory is spurious. Inauthentic."[732] Starr tells Sybil that

> "There are people, primarily women! -- who are what I call "conduits of emotion." In their company, the half-dead come alive. They need not be beautiful women or girls. It's a matter of blood-warmth. The integrity of spirit." He turned the page of his sketch page and began anew, whistling through his teeth. "Thus an icy-cold soul, in the presence of one so blessed, can regain something of his lost self. Sometimes!"[733]

With this remark it is not that Oates perpetuates the idea that women are somehow uncanny receptacles for emotion; it is not that *women* are uncanny, but rather it is the intense emotional hunger that exists in parts of America for *real* emotional experiences that is the source of the story's unease and hence its uncanny dimension. Unhinged from his own capacity to have authentic emotions, Starr vampirically feeds on the raw, authentic emotions of others.

This emotional hunger is seen elsewhere in Oates. In the story "*****" for example, the abused wife, Aunt Elinor, encourages her visiting niece June to eat her Sunday lunch – a revolting combination of spoiled raw meat and corn pudding in a sauce "like pus" because as she explains, "June, dear, there is a hunger beyond hunger [...] and this is the hunger that must be reached." To which the abusing Uncle Rebhorn emphatically adds, "And we're Americans. Remember *that.*"[734] The little girl June notices a disjunction between what her relatives, the Rebhorns, *seem* to have in their outwardly prosperous life and what they really have, which as

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[732] Ibid 123.

[733] Ibid 124.

[734] Oates, "*****," *Hearts* 99.

we see is a not a spacious existence but rather one that is claustrophobic and emotionally impoverished. The emphasis on outward signs of material comfort masks a deeper emotional and existential hunger that mutates into something grotesque. Though the house has an outwardly impressive appearance with "dozens of latticed windows reflecting the sun like smiles," entering the house was like an experience out of Alice and Wonderland:

> But to enter Uncle Rebhorn's sandstone mansion, it was strange, and a little scary, how we had to crouch. And push and squeeze our shoulders through the doorway. [...] As we approached the big front door which was made of carved wood, with a beautiful gleaming brass American eagle, its dimensions seemed to shrink; the closer we got, the smaller the door got, reversing the usual circumstances where of course as you approach an object it increases in size, or gives that illusion. ...
> How could this be? -- Uncle Rebhorn's house that was so spacious-seeming on the outside was so cramped, and dark and scary on the inside?[735]

The idea of a kind of emotional-existential hunger in the suburbs is seen again in the story "The Hand-puppet." On the one hand "The Hand-puppet" can be read as another story about how the fact of motherhood does not live up to the expectations some women have that it will fulfil their every need; but in another sense, the story is also about a hunger for meaning. The hand-puppet the mentally fragile girl plays with pesters the mother with disturbing, incessant requests: "H'LO MISSUS! G'MORNIN' MISSUS! WHAT'S TO EAT MISSUS!"[736] Part of the story's point is that the emotional diet of life in American suburbs is a meagre one. The woman, who defines her role as a suburban mother, finds her self-development stunted. Though Oates describes her as "a fully mature woman of forty-two" readers see how "the trappings of the identity that accrued to her in this shining kitchen, this

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[735] Ibid 95-96.

[736] Oates, "The Hand-puppet" 35.

rural-suburban brick-and-stucco colonial house on a curving cul-de-sac lane," in fact, have the effect of inhibiting her full development.[737]

In terms of setting, the story has resonances of Poe in the way the landscape and sky contribute to evocations of emotional claustrophobia:

> Staring out the window above the sink, as into a void. The Lakes lived in a rural-suburban landscape where, in summer, the foliage of crowded trees created a dark screen, like a perpetual cloud ceiling; in winter and early spring, before the trees budded, the sky was predominant, pressing. Yet it seemed always the same sky – opaque, dully white, layers of cumulus clouds like ill-fitting flagstones.[738]

In Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," the physical setting of the house and its environs are described as similarly oppressive:

> ... about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity – an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees and the gray wall, and the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.[739]

As in Oates's other story "*****" and in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," in "The Hand-puppet" there is a troubling disconnection between the outward signs of the woman's material prosperity and her inner, spiritual and emotional fragmentation. In the same manner in which the house is described as perfectly intact in Poe's story – "No portion of the masonry had fallen" – there remains an unsettling "inconsistency between [the house's] still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones."[740] Although the outward appearance of the woman's life seems perfectly unimpaired, inside there is decay, and a degenerating emotional hunger. In the same way that America's

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[737] Ibid 38.

[738] Ibid 38.

[739] Edgar Allan Poe, "Fall of the House of Usher," *The Portable Poe,* Philip Van Doren Stern, ed (New York: Penguin, 1977) 247. Originally included in *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, 2 vols., originally published in Philadelphia in 1840.

[740] Ibid 248.

"house" might appear to be cohesive, the individual stones of the house (as well as individuals in society) suffer alienation and isolation.

Oates stays with the theme of emotional hunger by giving readers another story where emotions are literally commodified and consumed. "The Collector of Hearts" is a story about a judge who collects human hearts and turns them into ornament-like objects to be displayed in his home. The story is narrated from the point of view of a young black woman, a drug addict and former prostitute, whom the judge meets earlier in the day in his courtroom. He lures her to his house on the pretence that he wants to listen to her about "[her] background, [her] birth-mother and foster families" and help her transition into a new life.[741] But really, he has brought her to his home not to help her, but to rip her heart out and carefully preserve his rarefied version of it. He regards her heart as a distilled emotion missing from his collection. When she gets to his house the woman observes,

> Most of these hearts, as the old guy called them, you wouldn't probably identify as hearts if he hadn't said. They were about the size and shape of a man's clenched fist. I wonder where he got them, some special art store? antique store? I seemed to know you couldn't just walk into a department store like say Macy's and make such a purchase. Some of them must've been real expensive, too.[742]

The caution Oates provides in the story is that people need to be careful who they tell their stories to because in telling a personal history, a person is giving his/her heart and the receiver may not regard it with the care it deserves. The story might be "consumed" by one who is a sick purveyor of emotions. Oates describes how the human combines with the bestial: the judge plies the girl with doped champagne,

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[741] Oates, "The Collector of Hearts," *Hearts* 120.

[742] Ibid 115.

while he "drink[s] down [sparkling water] like a thirsty dog."[743] He is getting ready to feed.

The girl is easily coaxed by the Judge because she is eager to believe that someone is genuinely interested in her. She explains, "Have to admit I believed every word Judge -- told me and even some he'd only hinted at, like there was this special understanding between us *because I was special.* Which we all know or wish to believe in our hearts."[744] Oates has readers see that despite how the girl might like to see herself as special, many of the people she comes in contact with (in her activities as a prostitute, and now with the judge) do not see her as special; they do not see her heart, but rather, they consume the feelings she gives to, or rather arouses in, them. Oates makes visible to readers the disturbing notion of how many people are so desensitised to experiencing subtle ranges of authentic emotions, they find themselves seeking more commodified and objectified emotional experiences. The young woman herself finds that she is stirred in new ways when she fondles a walking cane with a heart-shaped "knobby top" and detects a faint pulse and then dismisses it: "A heart. An actual heart. There is an actual heart trapped inside here."[745]

Oates is not alone in sensing how over-stimulation has inured modern capacities for apprehending more delicate ranges of feeling. As Michael Vincent Miller explains in his essay, "Does Sex Still Exist?"

> There are various ways through which a society can succeed in dumbing itself down. One is repressive control of information; another is a repetitive flood of information that numbs the soul. When the latter occurs, we start to lose our capacity to notice subtle but important differences. Pretty soon, it is no longer a question of subtlety: The ability to describe even the most

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[743] Ibid 121.

[744] Ibid 117.

[745] Ibid.

> dramatic emotions and events with vivid specificity joins the other lost arts. Whole realms of experience begin to blur into one another.[746]

While Miller complains about the lost art of writing about vivid emotions, Oates takes the point one step further to its source – even before man has lost his ability to write about subtle emotions, Oates outlines how, for some, over-stimulation leads to a loss in the ability to experience these emotions in the first place.

The judge explains that he has brought the woman to his home because "Not many times in my professional life has a young woman like yourself, or a young man, made a strong impression on me. I have wanted to know her, or him, more intimately. To bring her, or him, into my life."[747] Like a grotesque version of a character from Henry James, such as Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller*, as a "judge," the judge represents the "detached" observer of human emotion. He does not become too intimate with people in any real sense, but rather feeds off them by objectifying them, and then congratulates himself for the collection of different personalities he has arrayed around himself. He makes no effort to truly get to know people; instead, he contains them as types, as ornaments of people, not as people. Oates shows readers how this effort to contain and objectify people and experiences becomes a grotesque fetish.

As mentioned earlier, the theme of child abuse is dealt with in many of Oates's stories. By showing how this abuse afflicts both men and women, Oates illustrates how the issue is not limited to female-centred concerns just because how children are raised might have traditionally been considered part of the domain of

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[746] Michael Vincent Miller, "Does Sex Still Exist?" *Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip Mining of American Culture* 321-329, 326.

[747] Oates, "The Collector of Hearts" 121.

female writers.[748] With the sheer number of stories concerned with the issue, Oates demonstrates how its very pervasiveness in society makes it a broader political issue.[749]

In "The Sky Blue Ball," Oates moves on to a different kind of child abuse that, while not explicitly referred to, could be interpreted metaphorically as the abuse of children over the Internet. The story concerns a fourteen-year-old girl who is walking beside a brick wall and suddenly notices a bright blue ball thrown over the wall to her. There follows a back and forth between the girl and someone whom she imagines to be playing with her, whom she hopes is another little girl so that she might have a playmate. The reader, familiar with Oates's use of the grotesque, might fear that the person on the other side of the wall is not another little girl, but a middle-aged man, perhaps a paedophile. Though the identity of her playmate is never revealed, there is a male presence in the story, and a suggestion that it is an adult male who is teasing her or luring her in some way. The back and forth with the stranger becomes a kind of game for the little girl, which, in veiled terms, might be a reference to the abuse that takes place over the Internet, when young girls play with strangers, not knowing their identity, age or sex.

The girl eventually climbs over the wall and can see no one; the area is just a disused factory site with filthy oil drums and "virulent-smelling" chemicals.[750] In quite another sense the story could be a reference to the mis-management of industrial waste in America, but also it could be another story about the low level of social capital. With poor investment in infrastructure for children, there are no

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[748] Oates, "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?" *The New York Times Book Review* (March 25, 1981): 35.

[749] Child abuse, in some form, exists as a theme in the following stories in Oates's grotesque tales: "The Model," "Poor Bibi," "The Accursed House of Bly," "Sky Blue Ball," "Death Mother," "Schroeder's Stepfather," "*****," and "The Temple."

[750] Oates, "The Sky Blue Ball," *Hearts* 4.

playgrounds or after-school centres for her to meet other children her age. Oates paints a picture of a wasteland, where readers can imagine how a girl, curious at the age of fourteen, might find a new "playground" on the Internet, not knowing what she is doing, not knowing the identity of the people she plays with behind walls and yet on some level knowing that what she is doing is not entirely appropriate (hence, the shame she feels). As disturbing as this picture might be, Oates demonstrates how the girl has few other social alternatives. As inappropriate as playing with a stranger might seem, it helps to reconcile her loneliness. She does not like feeling alone, yet being alone and lonely is what she, like many Americans, grows to accept as her [their] natural state: "In a long-ago time when I seemed often to be alone, and imagined myself lonely. *Yet this is your truest self: alone, lonely.*"[751]

Oates foregrounds the issue of loneliness so prominently in her stories in order to highlight the acute sense of social isolation many Americans feel. As Robert D. Putnam describes in *Bowling Alone,* the number of Americans participating in church, voluntary or social clubs has declined considerably since the 1950s, leaving many Americans with little sense of social engagement and connectedness. Putnam goes on to describe a kind of revival in club membership in recent years, however Oates shows how this "need to join" a group, is conducted with a hyperactive sense and emerges in response to a distinct lack in meaning in modern American life. For example, in the story "Elvis Is Dead: Why are *You* Alive?" Oates examines the phenomena of Elvis cults in America along with the proliferation of stand-alone fundamentalist churches and independently-armed domestic militia groups. In "Elvis Is Dead" Oates does not examine the existence of these organisations in isolation, but rather conflates them into one, demonstrating

[751] Ibid 3.

how they spring from a common urge to cure a sense of nihilism with an extreme emotional attachment to a group. The story is about a man named Meredith who has a recurring dream/nightmare that he has joined some kind of evangelical church, where the members continually re-enact Elvis Presley's funeral at their church, and then afterwards go to a nearby shopping centre and kill people with scourges, "a kind of machete, yet with numerous blades."[752] The dream feels more real to him than his real life.

On one level the story deals with the differences in class in America – how some observers might say that people of certain socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to join these kinds of groups. On another level, the story goes on to unravel this fixed view by demonstrating how the protagonist, a descendant of a New England Brahmin family, shares the same emotional vulnerability that makes him attracted to "becoming a member" of the Elvis-worshipping-Christian-Fundamentalist-militia group. Meredith considers how the members of the church are in a different class from his. They are working class with cheap tastes and an over-excitable emotional nature, while he is comfortably upper-middle class, reserved and Waspish. In contrast to evangelical types who join "'modern' churches that resemble discount stores from the outside," (churches with "odd, mildly comic names" such as "Calvary Assembly of God, Friendship Baptist, Calvary Gospel, [and] Bible Fellowship Evangelical Church"), he comes from a family of "professional people, educated people."[753] His adoptive parents "were childless and liberal and cultivated and had an association with the Unitarian Church that was rather more sociable than religious or indeed passionate."[754] Despite his

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[752] Oates, "Elvis Is Dead: Why Are *You* Alive?" *Hearts* 132.

[753] Ibid 128 and 135.

[754] Ibid 135-6.

privileged background, Meredith finds his life now, in his 50s, as so devoid of meaning, he secretly envies the emotion of his fellow worshippers in the Elvis church. He envies the freedom of their passion, the ease with which they express themselves and the intensity of their redresses to those who do not believe:

> How fierce their grief, how they not only wept, but sweated with it! Meredith shrank from them, disdaining them, yet, unashamed and open as they were with their emotion, not seeming to know, nor certainly to care, how ugly, how red-faced and absurd they were, Meredith could not help but admire them. Yes and perhaps he wanted to be accepted as one of them. *Mourning our dead King. He who will never come again. He who is with the Lord Our God, sitting on His right hand, amid all His high host. Alleluia!*[755]

As with "An Urban Paradox," readers see the idea of how the existence of an underclass gives the privileged class something to define themselves against and from which to secede.

However, later in the story Meredith reflects how if his biological mother, from a poor West Virginia background, had "been more loving" and had decided to keep him, he probably would have been raised in a similar class as these church members. In a comment on class divisions in America, Oates provides of portrait of what Meredith's "other life" would have been like. For a start, Oates has Meredith understand that his wife probably would not have married him, "had he been, not Meredith Bernhardt, but someone else."[756] Far from being the land "of equal opportunity," modern America is a country where huge cultural and economic gulfs exist between classes. Like himself, Meredith's wife would have shrunk with revulsion from "the pack of flush-faced, dwarfish mourners streaming out of the church as out of a hive, his fellow Americans, whom life since Elvis had cheated,

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[755] Ibid 129.

[756] Ibid 137.

furious and deadly as maddened bees."[757] But the irony of this observation is that deep inside, he, in fact, is one of them. The story concludes with a twist. Meredith goes down to his fruit cellar and finds that he owns one of the scourges the group uses; and readers are left thinking maybe his dream is not just a dream but his reality. Oates situates the story at a time "since Elvis" to make a poignant observation: while many social observers might consider the sixties and seventies in America as decades of polarisation and social chaos, Oates shows how since then, extremism has not been mitigated; in fact, by some perspectives, the strands of extremism within America have become sharper, more exaggerated, and even more violent in their evangelism.

In the twenty-five years preceding 1995, the profits of economic growth went entirely to the top twenty percent of the population, making the difference between classes more extreme, a shift that corresponded with the decline in associational membership.[758] However, as the authors of *Habits* discuss, membership in religious institutions seems to be the one sphere in American society that has resisted the generally declining trend in associational life.[759] Sociologists note how churches in America offer a kind of "mobilizing function" in the development of civic skills that is otherwise performed by unions and labour or social democratic parties in other countries.[760] Unfortunately these sharpened skills remain untapped in their application to broader society. While steady or increasing levels of church membership may be taken to have a generally positive effect on individual morals, unfortunately, on a macro-level, church membership can be seen

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[757] Ibid 133.

[758] Bellah, et al. 25.

[759] Ibid xvi.

[760] Sydney Verbs, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 18-19.

to be inimical to the development of wider resources in social capital as people believe that they are doing their "part" for society by being a good "individual" or "self" by going to church and looking after their *own* family and friends. As the authors of *Habits* discuss, some strands of ascetic Protestantism even maintain that the wider civic duties required to maintain a healthy state and larger society "are considered unnecessary because the saved take care of themselves;" they explain how "one influential strand of biblical religion in America encourages secession from public life rather than civic engagement, and is even tempted to condemn the most vulnerable as morally unworthy."[761] In "Elvis Is Dead" Oates distorts these ideas and trends to their extreme versions.

Despite the way Oates cleverly foregrounds issues in her cultural context, not all manifestations of the uncanny provided in *Haunted* and *The Collector of Hearts* can be strictly mapped to socio-cultural or economic issues. One of the most memorable stories is "The Affliction," where Oates examines how the process of creating art itself can be a grotesque and uncanny experience. The artist in "The Affliction" has a peculiar skin disorder whereby mysterious "things" – "welts, clots, boils" or worm-like substances develop under his skin; the only way he gets relief from them is by extracting them with tweezers.[762] Plagued by his affliction from a very young age, the episodes cause him great pain and embarrassment. But then, at the age of twelve, instead of "flushing the *things* away down the toilet, shielding his eyes from them in disgust, he began to save them. For weren't they after all not symptoms of an affliction merely, but signs of something mysterious, not to be

[761] Bellah, et al. x.

[762] Oates, "The Affliction," *Hearts* 156.

named?"[763] He noticed that when he placed the things on a flat surface they would calcify into beautiful shapes and designs of "startling colours: bronze, blood-rust, tawny-golden, bruiselike hues of purple, orange-green, iridescent blue." He was able to mould them into "strange, vivid, dreamlike designs, fascinating, mesmerizing" and the man goes on to become a famous artist.[764] The theme of the story is how people can make art out of their pain and shame.

By working on his art with the *things*, he would become so immersed in the task that "he moved in a paroxysm of such intense excitement, he forgot himself for hours; there was no *self* where he stood; the pain of removing the *things* from his body was forgotten entirely in the ferocity of his concentration."[765] In this observation, Oates makes a more general point about writers: that they, like other artists, often create art out of their pain. By dealing with their pain, extracting it, learning to change their attitude towards it, the pain helps them to come into their own identity and share something oddly beautiful with the world.

Using the *things* as material for art is experienced as healing by him but also makes him realise that in some ways through them he has become "the carrier of a secret" and he starts to develop a theory about his art:

> It intrigued him how, out of the chaotic mixture of his body's excrescences and what might be termed neutral materials, there could be fashioned a presence of a kind that, though inanimate, mimicked life: to glance at one of his artworks, however casually, was to feel a stab of -- what? -- an uncanny, panicked recognition?
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> Strange, too, how he came to know himself as *healthy* as others could not know themselves, for he knew, intimately, what *unhealth* was.[766]

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[763] Ibid 159.

[764] Ibid.

[765] Ibid.

[766] Ibid 159-160.

The man is fascinated by the uncanny nature of the manner in which his art comes into being by grappling with afflictions that are simultaneously everyday, his own and yet mysteriously beyond him. His afflictions represent the "me" and yet "not me" that is often attendant with the uncanny effect. In reaction to the praise he receives from his critics, he states: "*Make of it what you will: it's no more mine than yours.*"[767]

The idea that the artistic process is itself uncanny resonates with an aspect of Joyce Carol Oates's own biography. When Oates lived in London during the early seventies while on sabbatical, she had an encounter with transcendental meditation that she later attributed as providing her with keen insights into the nature of the artistic process. The experience only lasted "five to eight minutes" but during it, Oates describes how she became aware of surrendering her individuated sense of self, her ego, into a life force that was a greater, "impersonal, inhuman flow of energy, which has nothing to do with the ego at all."[768] In a 1973 interview Oates explained how she grew to understand that artists like Mozart, Picasso, Lawrence and others "attuned themselves to this inexhaustible field of spiritual vitality;" that "art was dream-like, springs from the dreaming mind [...] Art is magnificent, divine, because it records the struggles of exceptional men to order their fantasies, their doubts, even their certainties, into an external structure that celebrates the life force itself, the energy of life."[769] Oates believes that this deeper well or site of artistic creation is itself uncanny in the sense that the process of creating art is mysterious, transcendent and incapable of being known fully in any definitive sense; yet it intrudes in moments for artists receptive to it.

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[767] Ibid 161.

[768] Johnson 214.

[769] Oates interview with Stanley Plumly in the *Ohio Review* (1973), qtd in Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 214.

There are aspects of the uncanny which defy explicability. In the story "Phase Change," the way Julia changes from a coherent whole to a fragmented madwoman, is uncanny precisely because "a phase change was not deducible but only to be experienced. A phase change was/was not irrevocable."[770] As a writer of the uncanny, Oates is fascinated by liminal states, where conditions of the mind both are and are not. Being on the cusp of experiences which can deliver both profound union and/or utter desolation thrills characters with sensations of dread mixed with "childlike excitement and yearning."[771] In apocalyptic stories such as "Blind" and "Thanksgiving" the uncanny is portrayed as the moment before the apocalypse – where "*no one can help anyone, this is the dark of the very beginning and the end.*"[772] As Oates explains in her Afterward to *Haunted*,

> The most profound mystery of our human experience [relates to] the fact that though we each exist subjectively, and know the world only through the prism of the self, this "subjectivity" is inaccessible, thus unreal, and mysterious, to others. And the obverse – all *others* are, in the deepest sense, strangers. [773]

Acknowledging the deference Oates displays to the sheer unknowability of other human consciences (and similarly, for that matter, one's own conscience), her fiction can strike readers as significantly reinterpreting the psychoanalytic tradition, which assesses this terrain as knowable, analysable and as operating mechanistically. In this sense, her interpretation of the uncanny is a kind of antidote to Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations. In stories such as "The White Cat," Oates de-emphasises the phallus and gives a new significance to ocularism in female-gendered terms. The eyes of the white cat have the capacity to "flare up as if by

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[770] Oates, "Phase Change" 195.

[771] Ibid 193.

[772] Oates, "Blind" 237.

[773] Oates, "Afterward" 303.

will" and dilate back and forth as orgasmic genital lips. Oates reinterprets "The Cask of Amontillado" by Edgar Allan Poe with the portrait of a woman being buried alive in "Blind," and in "Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" Oates adapts the "Turn of the Screw" by Henry James in controversial ways with her suggestion that any affection, even inappropriate affection, is better than no affection at all. However, such readings are only suggested interpretations. Because Oates acknowledges the utter remote quality of human subjectivity, in each reading of one her uncanny stories, meaning is emptied as part of employing the grotesque as an aesthetic technique, which helps readers understand that uncanny stories are flexible enough to accommodate a range of meanings.

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Part V – Conclusion

In Betty Friedan's 1981 introduction to her book *The Second Stage*, she observes a new kind of complaint among the generation of her own daughter and sons. She explains, "I've begun to hear undertones of pain and puzzlement, a queasiness, an uneasiness, almost a bitterness that they hardly dare admit."[774] She describes how despite their acknowledgment of the gains made by the women's movement of the sixties and seventies, respect for these same advances has cultivated a new kind of self-censoring reticence among the younger generation that makes them feel unable to "ask out loud certain questions, talk about certain other needs they aren't

[774] Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (1981; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) 3.

supposed to worry about – those old needs which shaped our lives, and trapped us, and against which we rebelled."[775]

Friedan goes on to argue that there is still much unfinished business associated with the women's movement of the sixties and seventies; despite the fact that women are perceived to be more in control of their choice on whether to enter the workforce and/or have children, that "choice" is not real for women (or men as their partners) without national childcare programs, paid parental leave, and changes to models of work that would allow parents staggered and flexible hours along with a reduced work week. Additionally, Friedan also senses "a political bewilderment" and fatigue with carrying on the "battle at all."[776] She notes how "feminism" has become "a theoretical luxury, a liberal or radical notion we could toy with in the late soft age of affluence;" however, in the latter age of advanced capitalism with mounting political and economic pressures from the Right and the Left and the spectre of "terrorism," it has become something that many feel must be "put aside for the grim new realities of economic and national survival."[777] She discusses how single issues, such as child-care, abortion and pornography, are used to isolate the women's movement as part of the "Left," as separate from the "Right;" and likewise, these same issues are used to enforce a contrived unity among "feminists." Taken together, this polarised view of feminism separates women from the common concerns they share with men in crafting America into a healthier, more liveable society with increased levels of quality social bonds.

In *Haunted* and *The Collector of Hearts* Oates taps into the same *zeitgeist*

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[775] Ibid 4. In *The Second Stage*, Friedan notes how the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s helped to secure laws on sex discrimination, affirmative action programs, victories in class-action suits, changes in the way language was used, and the Roe v. Wade supreme court ruling which gave American women the rights to control their own bodies and reproductive processes (xxiv).

[776] Ibid 5.

[777] Ibid 6.

of un-ease Friedan describes. In doing so, Oates relates the uncanny as a "cusp" experience, that state of mental disorientation where the subject is still struggling to discern if the changes in her moral, social or cultural environment are benign, malignant or simply strange, irresolvable and "un-easy." Ending this chapter by returning to the work of one of the seminal figures in American feminism, Betty Friedan, is appropriate because Friedan herself felt that the feminist movement had lost its focus and she detected how the people most affected by it were still struggling to make sense of perspectives, lifestyles and relationships that were experienced as skewed, out-of-kilter and unhinged. One could say Friedan had assessed a *new* "problem that has no name"[778] and thereby, a "crisis of the proper" within the feminist movement; in fact, one of the last books she wrote before she died is entitled, *Beyond Gender*: *The New Politics of Work and Family* (1997). In it, she argues that the time has come to move beyond seeing certain economic and social realities as "women's" problems and instead engage with them as *human* questions; thus perhaps the feminist movement needs a new name.

On a parallel plane, this chapter has aimed to demonstrate that Oates clearly deals with more in her uncanny fiction than gender-focussed concerns. In her desire to work independently as an artist, Oates resists feeling that she needs to write about problems that satisfy a "feminist" political agenda. Similar to Friedan, Oates protests against the labelling of certain problems as the domain of women writers, where others are deemed appropriate for male writers. As will shortly be discussed in Chapter Five, such a polarised view of the differences between the genders may work against one of the original goals of feminism, that women are to be viewed as fully human. By overstating the grotesque dimensions of social and political trends

[778] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* 20.

in her environment, Oates uses the uncanny to illustrate how diminished levels of social capital contribute to a growing sense of untrustworthiness that can be seen as generalised throughout American society.

Interestingly, Friedan also writes about a growing sense of untrustworthiness towards one's environment. Friedan describes a new sense of nervousness in the women's movement, in terms that are quite uncanny. She writes of "enemies and dangers, omnipresent, unseen, [and] of shadowboxing enemies who aren't there – are they paranoid phantoms [...]?[779] She writes about the "'choices' women have supposedly won, which are not real."[780] In demonstrating how words and labels are emptied and become unstable, and thus contribute to a generalised, more extreme suspicion about the trustworthiness of social bonds, Friedan shares a sensitivity to the same social context Oates illuminates in her use of the uncanny. Friedan says that she thinks, "the women's movement has come just about as far as it can in terms of women alone."[781] The importance of moving beyond a polarised view of gender will be discussed next, in the concluding chapter of this thesis, Chapter Five.

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[779] Friedan, *The Second Stage* 14.

[780] Ibid 11.

[781] Ibid 15.

Throughout this thesis the uncanny has been described as associated with a distinct feeling of unease that arises over a conflict between past and present moments as well as an apprehension toward the future and an essential distrust over where shifts in value systems were (and are) leading. It relates to a sense of feeling "not at home" in the world and a homesickness for an imagined notion of wholeness associated with the past; thus the uncanny corresponds with drift, and the phenomenon of not being able to find or recognise one's home. It relates to a sense of rootlessness that results from an inability to determine the full implication of the changes one witnesses in the moral, social and political environment, and particularly how those changes redefine one's understanding of one's "home".

Interestingly, all three of the writers this thesis has considered were active in a time where other intellectuals in their respective periods also complained about this modern anxiety or feeling of rootlessness. Contrasted against one another, a review of the three periods Wharton, Jackson and Oates represent might reveal the tempting conclusion that this "extraordinary" feeling of experiencing something "uncanny" was in fact quite an "ordinary" feeling *throughout* the twentieth century. As Anthony Vidler notes in his introduction to *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (1992), the concept of the uncanny "cuts through the periodizations of historians [...] as a way of understanding an aspect of modernity that has given a new meaning to the traditional Homeric notion of 'homesickness.'"[782] Vidler explains that "estrangement and unhomeliness have emerged as the intellectual watchwords of our century, given the periodic material

[782]Anthony Vidler, *the Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992) 12.

and political force by the resurgence of homelessness itself, a homelessness generated sometimes by war, sometimes by the unequal distribution of wealth."[783] Vidler refers to a quote from Benjamin Constant, who, writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire, describes how the modern sense of estrangement resulted from the perception that "local customs" and "community bonds" had been irrevocably cut in the following way:

> Individuals, lost in an isolation from nature, strangers to their place of birth, without contact with the past, living only in a rapid present, and thrown down like atoms on an immense and levelled plain, are detached from a fatherland that they see nowhere.[784]

Viewed from this perspective, it is tempting to consider the uncanny as not limited to a special phenomenon or epistemology of the twentieth century, but rather can be viewed more broadly as part of a wider anxiety associated with modern times. The conclusion of this thesis recognises the pervasive sense of the unhomely Vidler points out; however, this thesis ultimately concludes that they sense of the unhomely, the uneasy, the anxious and the uncanny was experienced in unique ways in each of three periods in which Wharton, Jackson and Oates were writing. In fact, if it was recognised at the time that the sense of unease was to be accepted as part of a reaction to modernity in the general sense, there would not have been the profound sense of conflict over present and future moments which, as this thesis has shown, was essential for delivering the uncanny effect in the stories' protagonists, writers and readers.

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[783]Ibid 9.

[784]Benjamin Constant, *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation dans les rapports avec la civilisation européenne* (1814), in Benjamin Constant, *Oeuvres,* annotated with an introduction by Alfred Roulin (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957) 984, qtd in Anthony Vilder, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992) 4.

Vidler's quote is included in this conclusion to underscore the manner in which the uncanny is related to the search for one's "home," and not being able to find it or when found, not being able to recognise it because it has been altered irrevocably. The fact that "home" can change so fundamentally can be experienced as unnerving and as horrifying because it calls into question the fixity of values and identities that one had previously assumed were structuring absolutes. In Chapters Two, Three and Four of this thesis, the discussion centred on how Wharton, Jackson and Oates, respectively dealt with that which was, as "disturbingly transient" and/ or unsettling about new understandings of intimate relationships as well as the author's own political and historical context.[785]

In the final chapter of this thesis, I will summarise my conclusions by reviewing the research methodology employed from the start of this research project. The reading method applied in my approach to the work of these three writers was not to see the stories somehow as ciphers of their contexts, where images or symbols in the stories coincidentally could be read as mere reflections of "un-easy" social and historical subjects. Such a reading approach would risk analysing the texts in a deterministic and reflectionist way, and would suggest an element of didactism in the writers' methods. Throughout this thesis I have resisted this view and provided evidence for how each writer sought to distance herself from ostensible political connections as an aesthetic decision. Further, one of the express goals of this research project has been to restore some of the freedom of signification on which the uncanny relies. I have discussed how the uncanny effect, in fact, depends on the quality of vagueness in narrative details as well as on the other enigmatic and

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[785]Vidler 5.

indeterminate features of the text, such as the reader's response to a particular set of facts and plot sequence, or the particular "mood" or "atmosphere" the author creates in the work. As well, I have noted how restoring this freedom of signification is important for post-feminist critics who wish to liberate the reception of female authors' work from fixed expectations of what patriarchy or a cadre of literary critics maintain work from female writers is "supposed" to say. I noted how one of the reputed goals of the women's movement was to position women as fully human,[786] free to be artists of their own design, and not beholden to internalised norms of what they can or cannot express, whether those norms came from patriarchy or indeed feminism itself.

This concluding chapter seeks to emphasise the importance of de-centring critical positions such as the one Rosemary Jackson conveys in her introduction to Jessica Amanda Salmonson's anthology of feminist supernatural fiction in order to underscore the need to qualify the perspective which would see the category of gender as influencing women writers in a mechanistic way. In the same way that Chapter One discussed the problems associated with regarding Freud's definition of the uncanny as conforming to a "list" of experiences -- that when detected signal a fixed psychoanalytic interpretation -- feminist critics who regard the ten generic features Rosemary Jackson identifies as a similar "list," risk not seeing the other meanings the uncanny stories suggest.

The materialist-feminist, post-feminist perspective of this thesis recognises the valuable contribution critics such as Jackson, Cranny-Francis, Carpenter and Kolmar make, however it also re-evaluates those perspectives with sensitivity to how such perspectives narrativise women's writing in a way that re-produces the same unequal

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[786]See Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* 79, 81.

or polarised views of gender such positions originally sought to subvert. This thesis has resisted seeing the uncanny fiction of Wharton, Jackson and Oates as necessarily representing a world in which women were oppressed by patriarchy, as if this concept of patriarchy were "tragic – unchanging, universal and monolithic."[787] It has also emphasised how it is now appropriate for feminists to examine their own critical methods. Specifically, as Newton and Rosenfelt relate, feminists critics need to question the manner in which their own constructions of history obscure historical change, cultural complexity and women's agency, [and the way] they themselves replicate the habits of thought they intend to challenge.[788] In particular, an example of the feminist viewpoint which this thesis has challenged is the essentialisation that "subsumes women into the sisterly category of 'woman' [...] or posits women's nurturing and relational qualities in themselves as counter to male domination.[789]

This thesis argues that feminists need to undo those perspectives which see the masculine and the feminine polarised as diametric opposites, where the masculine is associated with violence, patriarchy and dominant economic systems and that the feminine is associated with their opposites. This thesis has maintained that men are also caught in the ideological and economic systems that oppress women. Further, as the discussion of the stories has illustrated, women also participate in these systems; at times women can be victimisers and not only victims, and sometimes women actively participate in replicating the conditions that create their own degradation. But more significantly, this thesis has not dwelt on the issue of patriarchy as exclusively male defined, or on the issue of female victimisation or inequality. It argues that feminist literary criticism needs to move on from positions

[787] Newton and Rosenfelt xvii.

[788] Ibid.

[789] Ibid.

which "hunt" for evidence of female subversion or statements of female experience and pay closer attention to what women writers were in fact writing and determine the extent to which that writing reflects the social-historical, material conditions of its production. Often these conditions can refer to issues in a given context that are not strictly mapped to gender-based concerns. Additionally, this thesis has also argued that post-feminist critics need to be sceptical of critical terms which suggest a distinctly "feminine" or "female" way of writing for the way such a view risks further essentialising and etherealising the notion of the female writer.

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When asked to make a contribution to a volume of essays dealing with questions as to whether there is a distinctly "female" voice, Joyce Carol Oates responded that such questions signal a certain privileging among the feminist literary editors of what she calls "inferior" art and criticism. Oates explains:

> For a practicing writer, for a practicing artist of any kind, "sociology," "politics," and even "biology" are subordinate to matters of personal vision and even to matters of craftsmanship. Content cannot make serious art. Good intentions cannot make serious art. "Characters with whom women identify" don't make serious art. No one would confuse – however generously, however charitably – propagandistic impulses with the impulses of art. To me, the concepts embodied in the title of your journal [*Gender and Literary Voice*] simply do not have the same weight. "Women" refers to a sociological, political, and biological phenomenon (or class, or function, or stereotype); "literature" refers to something that always transcends these categories *even while being fuelled by them*. A feminist "theme" doesn't make a sentimental, weak, cliché-ridden work valuable; a non- or even anti-feminist "theme" doesn't make a serious work valueless, even for women. Unfair, perhaps, unjust – but inevitable. Content is simply raw material. Women's problems – women's insights –

> women's very special adventures: these are material: and what matters in serious art is ultimately the skill of execution and the uniqueness of vision.[790]

Here Oates defines the serious artistic voice as sexless. It is important to read the stories of Wharton, Jackson and Oates as the work of female artists who craft available material into uncanny works of fiction.

I would agree with Rosemary Jackson that we need to re-situate fantastic modes like the uncanny in their social contexts, "placing authors in relation to historical, social, economic, political and sexual determinants, as well as to a literary tradition."[791] But it is apparent that the historicist imperative Jackson advocates has been minimised to some degree in the drive to write coherent feminist literary histories that privilege works where female experience and feminist protest politics are said to be manifest. Susan Standford Friedman explains how feminist criticism, as a field, has now matured to the stage where it has become conscious of the need to re-evaluate its own narrativising methods. "There has been a palpable anxiety within the feminist movement about the possibility that our own activities as feminists [...] run the risk of repeating the same patterns of thought and action that excluded, distorted, muted or erased women from the master narrative of history in the first place."[792] Friedman highlights the importance of studying how feminist critical positions have been adulterated by their own ideologies, how feminist reading positions are shaped to and by certain aspects within a narrowly-defined feminist political agenda.[793]

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[790]Oates, "Is There a Female Voice?" *Gender and Literary Voice* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980) 10-11.

[791] Ibid 3.

[792] Susan Stanford Friedman, "Making History: Reflections on Feminism, Narrative and Desire," *Feminism beside Itself*, ed. Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (New York: Routledge, 1995) 11-54, 12.

[793] Ibid 18-20.

In Wharton the uncanny is used as ghost story to convey unease over the abuses and shift in values that took place in the Progressive Era, the First World War and the post-war era. In Jackson, the uncanny becomes a weird tale, where the author communicates unease over mass movements and the elemental nature of evil in man. In Oates, the uncanny utilises tropes of the grotesque to relate the problems that remain inside the Feminist movement as well as those that stem from diminished levels of social capital. It is important, at this stage, to reiterate that the social issues this thesis seeks to map to the shifts in the uncanny aesthetic are not seen as "rationalistic explanations"[794] of the stories. It is a relationship that is felt as a subjective response to the atmosphere and climax of the story rather than an objective explanation. Often uncanny tales are not "about" anything more than that delicate range of experience of trying to cope with some disorientating phenomena. And if they are about something more, the loophole for rationalistic explanation can exist, but as M.R. James explains, when admiring well-crafted uncanny tales, "the loophole [must] be so narrow as not to be quite practicable."[795] The connections between the uncanny and social issues, as well as -- for that matter -- the relationship between the uncanny and categories of gender, can be as tenuous as the experience of actually seeing a ghost; as James explains, "you are sure that the ghost did intervene, but sometimes you will find it quite difficult to put your finger on the moment when it did."[796]

By way of final conclusion and in answer to the question this thesis originally set out to consider -- does the "female uncanny" exist as a distinctive

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[794] M.R. James, Introduction to *Ghosts and Other Marvels* xii.

[795] Ibid xii.

[796] Ibid xii.

female sub-genre? -- the answer is a qualified yes. As stated in Chapter One, the uncanny can be regarded as a genre only to the extent that certain stories associated with it appear to evoke an uncanny *reading effect*. This effect is determined by that which readers bring to the story. Thus, the reading effect and the genre boundary can vary widely, depending upon the reader's identity and the critical perspectives brought to his or her experience of the work. If readers with certain second-wave feminist reading positions wish to bring aspects of female experience, subversion of patriarchy, or psychoanalytic themes as material that *evokes* the haunting, they are free to define the female uncanny in those terms as a sub-genre.

However, the important corollary this thesis has sought to allow is that female-authored uncanny fiction need not be approached with such expectations; the gaps in the writing need to remain open so that they can be filled in different ways by other readers. Since genres or indeed sub-genres are defined in part by the expectations readers bring to them, and since those expectations and particular reading effects can vary widely with the uncanny, this thesis resolves the question of the female uncanny by returning to an adaptation of the point on the uncanny and its relationship to genre made by Nicholas Royle: the female uncanny both *is* a sub-genre and simultaneously *sits anomalous to* the sheer notion of genre.

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Figure 1 – Norman Rockwell, *Freedom from Want*. 1942. This picture is taken from Office of War Information poster OWI Poster Number 46 O-511887. *Freedom from Want* appeared in the pages of *The Saturday Evening Post* (March 6, 1943) 11. http://www.normanrockwellvt.com/NewsletterIssues/FreedomfromWant.htm 23 July 2007.

Freedom from Want by Norman Rockwell

Figure 2 – Cartoon from *The New Yorker*, 23 August 1945.

Figure 3 – Mark Rothko. *No. 3 / No.13*. 1949. Oil on canvas. 7' 1 3/8" x 65". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=79687, 2 October 2007.

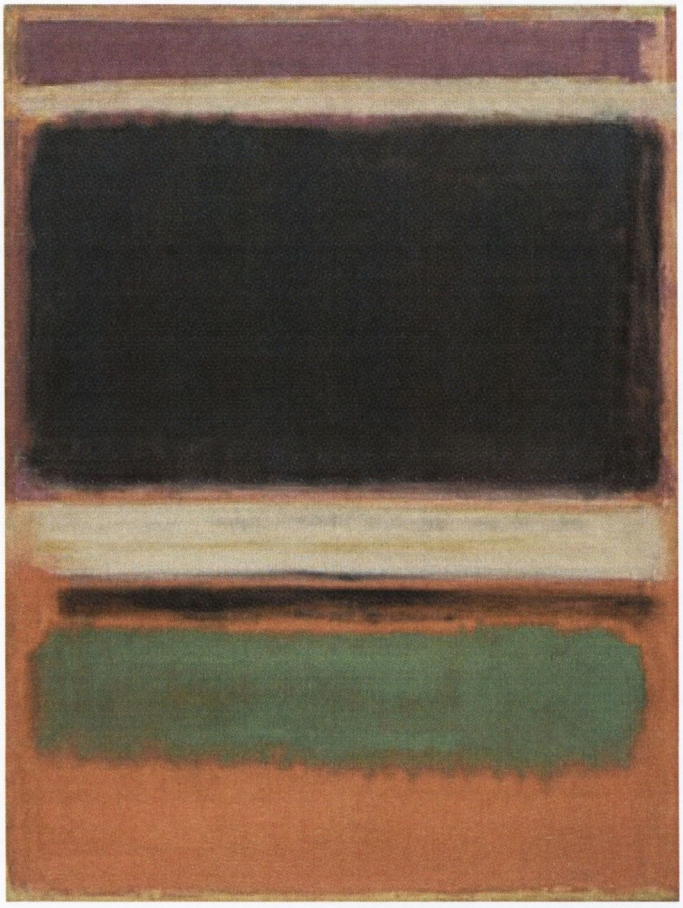

Figure 4 – Willem de Kooning. *Painting.* 1948. Enamel and oil on canvas. 42 5/8" x 56 1/8". The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=79242, 2 October 2007

Figure 5 – Jackson Pollack. *Lucifer*. 1947. Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint on canvas, 41" x 8' 9 1/2" (104.1 x 267.9 cm). Collection Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson.
http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/1998/pollock/website100/pic_lucifer.html, 2 October 2007.

Figure 6 – Robert Rauschenberg. *Bed.* 1955. Combine painting: oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports, 6' 3 1/4" x 31 1/2" x 8". The Musuem of Modern Art, New York. http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=78712, 2 October 2007.

Figure 7– Willem de Kooning. *Woman I.* 1950-1952. Oil on canvas, 75 7/8 x 58 in. The Museum of Modern Art. http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=78712, 2 October 2007.

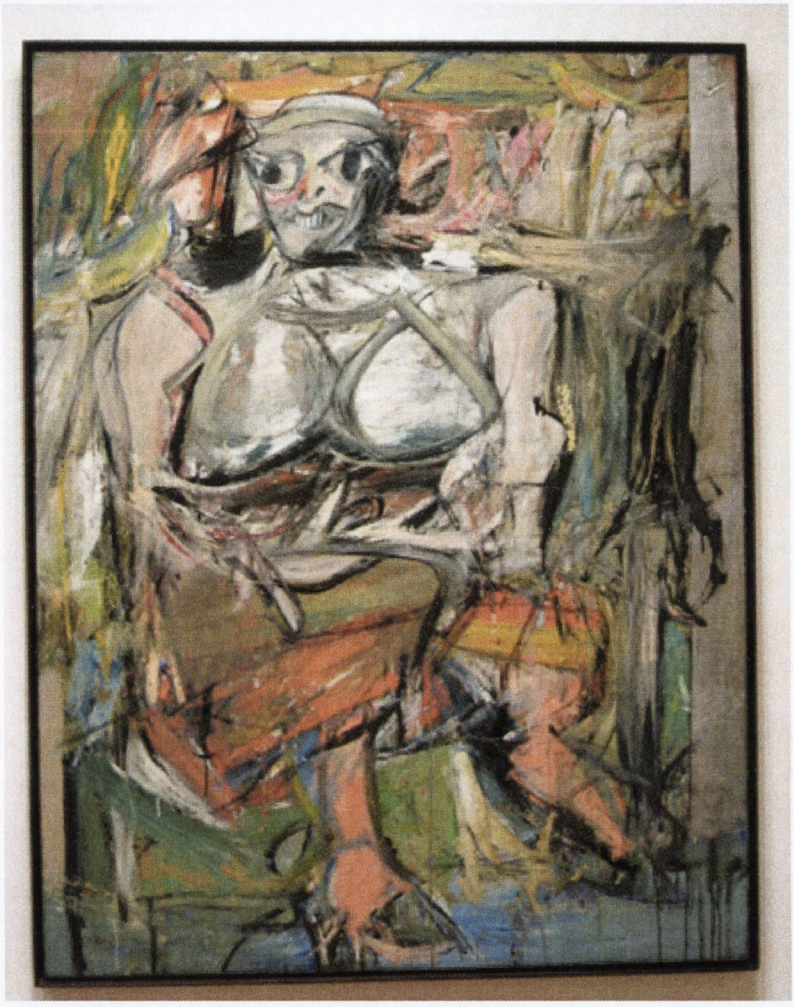

Figure 8 - Thomas Hart Benton. *Politics, Farming and Law in Missouri (A Social History of the State of Missouri)*. 1936. Oil and egg tempera on linen mounted on panel. 14 x 23 feet. Missouri State Capitol, Jefferson City. (http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Exhibit/5437/Benton.html), 2 October 2007.

East Wall (left side)

East Wall (right side)

Figure 9 – Thomas Hart Benton. *City Activities with Subway.* Mural, 1931. Oil and egg tempura on linen, mounted on reinforced wallboard, 7 ½' x 12'. The New School for Social Research, New York. (http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Exhibit/5437/Benton.html), 2 October 2007.

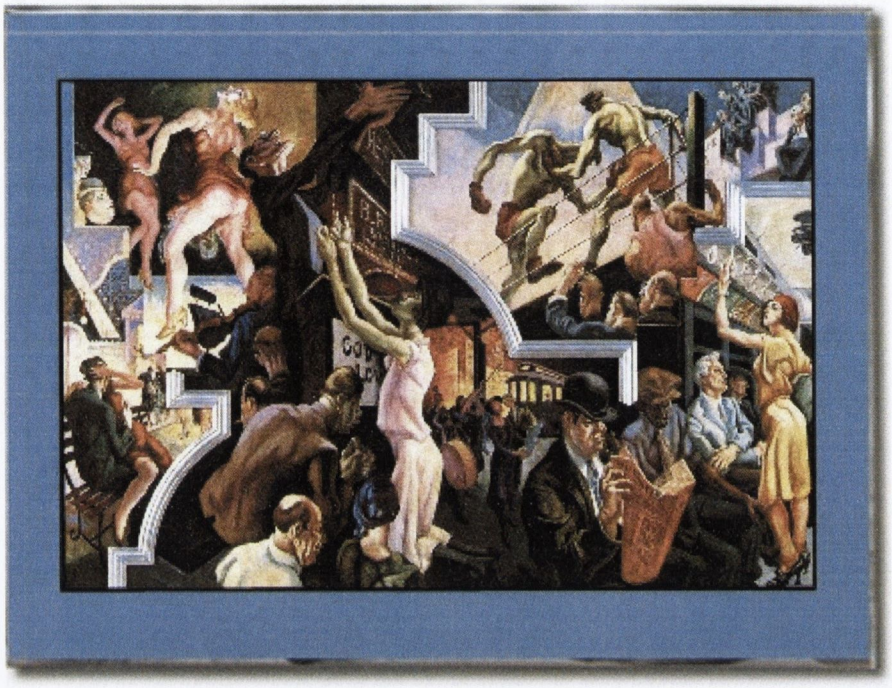

Figure 10 – William Gropper, *Automobile Industry.* 1940-1. Mural in the Northwest Post Station, Detroit. http://newdeal.feri.org/library/browse_projects.cfm?SubCatID=1031&CatID=7, 19 September 2006.

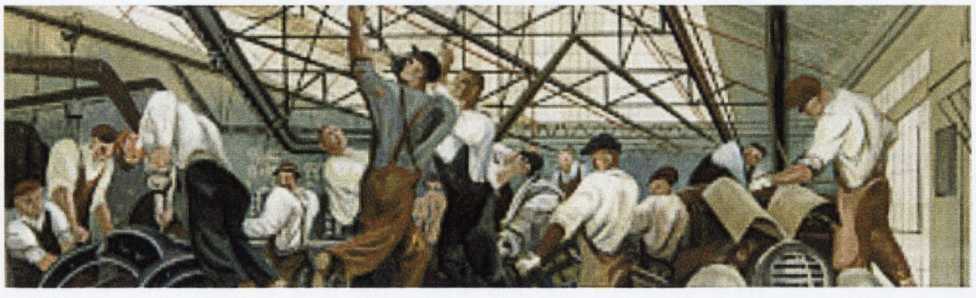
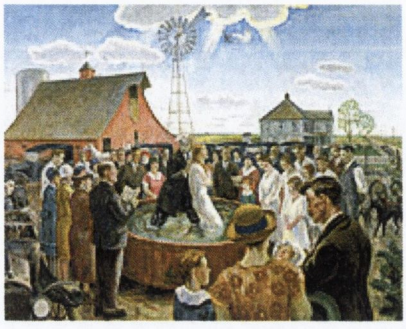
Figure 11 -- John Stewart Curry. *Baptism in Kansas.* 1928. Collection of the Whitney Museum of Modern Art. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec98/curry_8-13.html, September 18, 2006.