

The female gothic:
edith wharton's
"pomegranate seed"
and "afterward"



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Edith Wharton is perhaps the most preeminent female Gothic writer in all of American history. What made her career so unique, besides the fact that she was a woman in a traditionally male dominated field, was that she was not writing for money, fame, or even for women's rights. Wharton wrote her Gothic tales in an effort to express and relinquish her own feelings of personal—and female—anxieties in a realm of the unknown. Growing up, Wharton had a very “ traditional” upbringing. Her family encouraged her to become a well bred young woman and clearly preferred her to be knowledgeable in rituals and manners rather than books. This common restraint on females of her time led Wharton to feel a certain anxiety in regards to her true ambitions. As a child, Wharton remembered that she “ could not sleep in the room with a book containing a ghost story,” and that she “ frequently had to burn books of this kind, because it frightened [her] to know that they were downstairs in the library” (Wharton 303). Her fear of ghost stories, and reading in general, stemmed from her anxiety to become a well-read, educated female writer. Her Gothic tales soon became the realm in which she could explore her fears and finally be rid of them: “ my terror gradually wore off, and that I became what I am now—a woman hardly conscious of physical fear” (Wharton 303). Traditional Gothic writing is all about revealing the ugly, horrid truth beneath the surface. Thus, it is entirely plausible that Edith Wharton's Gothic stories are in reality a glimpse into the truth behind society's treatment of women. In examining Wharton's Gothic tales, particularly “ Pomegranate Seed” and “ Afterward,” we are able to understand how the oppressions placed on the women in Wharton's time manifest themselves into traditional Gothic elements. Wharton's tale “

Pomegranate Seed” follows the story of Charlotte Ashby, a young woman
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investigating mysterious letters being written to her previously widowed husband Kenneth. We immediately see that Charlotte is forced to deal not only with the letters themselves, but with the shadow of another woman over her marriage. Despite Charlotte's presence, the home still shows many of the first wife's influences — such as her furniture, hangings, and even her portrait on the wall of Kenneth's library. This consistent female presence challenges Charlotte's feminine power as a wife: "as time went by she had to confess that she felt...more at ease and in confidence with her husband, since that long coldly beautiful face on the library wall no longer followed her with guarded eyes" (Wharton 224). Already there is a 'ghost' lingering in Charlotte's mind and her fears of being unable to replace Kenneth's first wife begin to 'haunt' her. It is not revealed if the characters are truly being haunted by the wife, but the Gothic elements of this story rely on the idea that the ghost is very real for Charlotte. In search for clues as to the author of the letter, Charlotte begins to delve into her husband's matters, an area where women were certainly not welcome. We can see how this mystery contributes to Charlotte's anxiety regarding the gaining of knowledge. She feels an "anxious power", meaning that "she covets the power of language and yet feels anxious about the trespass implied by a woman's appropriation of such power" (Singley and Sweeney 177). The more Charlotte wishes to question Kenneth about the letters and strange draining effect they have on him, the more anxious she becomes. Wharton writes that "she was restrained by the fear of forcing herself upon his privacy," a statement echoing the societal limitations of a woman's boundaries on her husband's life (Wharton 235). The inherent ideals of subservient women lead Charlotte to feel "ashamed of her persistence, ashamed of uncovering that baffled

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disordered face" (Wharton 240). Yet Charlotte persists in seeking the truth behind the mysterious letters. As Charlotte continues to step over her female boundaries, it becomes clear that she is a traditional Gothic character "stepping into the abyss...plunging into awareness beyond the realistic, where the unexpurgated 'real' story is told" ("Gothic" 137). Being that she is a female defying the rules of the patriarchal society, we feel that she will undoubtedly reveal a secret, terrible story that is being kept hidden underneath the surface. She finally crosses the ultimate threshold when she reads one of the letters. We see her anxiety manifest itself in the haunting details of opening the letter: the "deep silence of the room" and the "human cry" dispelled from the tearing of the envelope (Wharton 250). In the end, we are given no great epiphany or summation. Instead, true to the Gothic, Wharton's reveal of the letter's contents lead us in the same shoes as Charlotte: anxious and questioning of our own sensibilities. The letters in the story, implicitly suggested to have been written by Kenneth's deceased first wife, function as an instance of the uncanny. Importantly, the letters are defined by their "visibly feminine" handwriting and thus function as symbols of Charlotte's threatened womanhood (Wharton 220). However, as the title suggests, the letters also seem to symbolize the pomegranate seeds of the Persephone myth. They function as a way to lure Kenneth into the realm of the dead, and as each one is read, Kenneth becomes visibly "emptied of life and courage" (Wharton 222). The letters bring the nature of the uncanny to Kenneth's attention and "when he returns to familiar things they seem strange" (Wharton 222). He begins to act strangely towards Charlotte and even seems to taunt her curiosity: "Her husband," Wharton writes, "submitted to her cross-questioning with a sort of contemptuous composure, <https://assignbuster.com/the-female-gothic-edith-whartons-pomegranate-seed-and-afterward/>

as if he were humoring an unreasonable child" (Wharton 230). By belittling her fears and treating her as the rest of society does, Kenneth succeeds in fueling Charlotte's anxieties. He is making her question her motives, emotions, and sanity. The idea that the female protagonist may not be entirely sane is an important element in the Gothic. The reader can not know whether or not the events in the story are truly supernatural or simply unnatural due to the unreliability of the main character. "Afterward," a short story written twenty years before "Pomegranate Seed," explores many of the same issues of female oppression in a similarly Gothic environment. In this story, we see a seemingly perfect marriage between Mary and Edward Boyne. The couple attempts to find a home in the English countryside with the "charm of having been for centuries a deep dim reservoir of life" and are rewarded as they are told that the home they have chosen is haunted by a ghost that is not revealed until long after it has been witnessed (Wharton 61). This environment is the perfect setting to play upon Mary's female anxieties. She is seen as living in a golden cage, blissfully unaware of the ugly truths of the world and her husband's business. When the couple receives notice of an unpleasant lawsuit against the husband, they begin to observe a mysterious male figure lurking around their home. All at once Edward disappears and Mary is forced to investigate the appearances of this figure. She is both terrified of and attracted to the exploration of this unknown environment—much like the Gothic reader who gains a thrill from pleasurable terror. Mary's exploration of her new home and the mystery surrounding her husband's eventual disappearance are, again, an instance of stepping into the abyss. We can see how "the willingness of characters to face the darkness indicates the willingness to understand their inner life" — <https://assignbuster.com/the-female-gothic-edith-whartons-pomegranate-seed-and-afterward/>

and here, Mary is willing to look underneath the façade of her perfect marriage and find out the truth behind her husband's business (" Gothic" 138). While Mary practices a traditionally female detachment from her husband's professional life, she, like Charlotte, crosses a boundary in order to gain knowledge. Mary's previous intentions of remaining ignorant about " the material foundation on which her happiness was built" fuel the mystery behind the occurrences (Wharton 70). The longer her husband is gone, the more fearful Mary becomes. We can see a parallel between this and " Pomegranate Seed" as the wife grows increasingly anxious waiting for her husband (who has presumably been carried off by the very ghostly presence that has been haunting them) to return. As we learn that the ' ghost' was in fact a colleague of Edward's, it becomes clear that this manifestation of an unknown entity has been based on Mary's ignorance of her husband's dealings. In the end, Mary even blames herself saying: " Oh, my God! I sent him to Ned—I told him where to go!" (Wharton 91). What is truly Gothic about this story is not the revelation that the house really is haunted, but rather that the couple has actually created and carried their own ghost with them. In examining " The Pomegranate Seed" and " Afterward" we can see how Edith Wharton intended to comment on society's oppression of women. As a female author, Wharton certainly felt a certain " anxiety about forbidden female reading and writing"—a nervousness which clearly transcends onto her female characters (Singley and Sweeney 180). As the women of these tales encounter the unfamiliar, their eventual need to overstep their roles in society inclines them to become apprehensive. Thus, their fears manifest themselves as Gothic characteristics. This is why seemingly normal occurrences, such as the arrival of a letter or a visitation

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by a husband's colleague, can become something far more terrible and horrifying. These stories are an examination of the buried intentions behind keeping women in their place. If women are kept naïve and unknowing, they couldn't possibly expose the dirty secret truths of the society. It's when they actually venture to do so that they are often punished by a terrible Gothic understanding of the world. Wharton's tales consistently remind us that it is not what is outright on the surface that is frightening, but rather what is unsaid, the hidden oppressions of our world, that create the fear.