Pomegranate Seed Study Guide

Pomegranate Seed by Edith Wharton

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Introduction

Edith Wharton composed the ghost story, "Pomegranate Seed," near the end of 1930, and saw it published by the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1931. The tale was subsequently included in Wharton's collection of short fiction, *The World Over* (1936), and then in her collection, *Ghosts,* published in 1937, the last year of the author's life. Readers of that collection admired Wharton's skill in writing tales of the supernatural, but several reviewers believed the ghost story to be a less important genre than the novels of social observation by which Wharton had made her reputation over the previous decades. While Wharton's novels remain at the center of her achievements, her ghost stories have gained critical acknowledgment over the years. "Pomegranate Seed" is admired for the relentless pacing of its suspenseful plot, for the particularity with which its principal characters are rendered, and for the chilling evocation of the supernatural achieved by the story's ending. "Pomegranate Seed" surely possesses the "thermometrical quality" cited by Wharton as the hallmark of good ghost stories; she believed a well-crafted ghost story should send a cold shiver down the reader's spine. The story's title is derived from the Greco-Roman myth of Persephone, which Wharton is likely to have read in Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* Abducted by Pluto, the Lord of the Dead, Persephone is not permitted to leave the underworld permanently because she has eaten six pomegranate seeds in the gardens of death. Contemporary critical debate on Wharton's story has focused, in large degree, upon establishing correspondences between Wharton's characters and their predecessors in the Persephone myth. Striking in its mythological resonances, "Pomegranate Seed" is also a powerful meditation on the supernatural, on the conflict between flesh and spirit, and on the constant risk of alienation in human life.

Author Biography

Born Edith Newbold Jones in 1862, Edith Wharton was a member of the New York leisure class that would become the subject of much of her fiction. Few American women obtained university educations in the decades when Wharton was coming of age; her schooling was conducted by private tutors employed by her parents.

As a child, this future practitioner of the supernatural tale had a terrible fear of ghosts and ghost stories. In an essay entitled "Life and I" Wharton reminisced that "till I was twenty seven or eight, I could not sleep in the room with a book containing a ghost story, and I have frequently had to burn books of this kind, because it frightened me to know that they were downstairs in the library!" Still, the young woman discovered a talent for literature, privately publishing a volume of poetry at the age of sixteen and placing her first short story in *Scribner's* magazine at twenty-eight.

In 1885 she married Edward Wharton, a wealthy Bostonian sportsman. The marriage ended in divorce in 1912, by which time Wharton was well established as a writer. Important friendships of Wharton's middle and later years included one with Bernard Berenson, connoisseur and art historian, and Henry James, master of the international novel of manners and author of short stories, including the supernatural classic *The Turn of the Screw.*

Wharton's fiction has often been compared to that of James, whom she met in 1904. Indeed, in her critical volume *The Writing of Fiction,* Wharton speaks of her craft as derived from James, who felt, she said, "every great novel must be based on a profound sense of moral values, and then constructed with a classical unity and economy of means." In Wharton's work that "sense of moral values" involves scrutiny of the ethical corruption of the American leisure class, and of the role of women in that class. In her greatest novels, *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence,* Wharton indicts the wealthy families of New York as hypocritical, exclusionary, and materialistic.

After her marriage ended, Wharton took up permanent residence in France. During World War I, she organized relief efforts in France and worked to help Belgian orphans, work for which she was decorated with the Legion of Honor by the French government. In 1921 Wharton became the first female winner of the Pulitzer Prize in literature for *The Age of Innocence.* She died in 1937 at St. Bricesous-Forêt in France.

Plot Summary

Part I

"Pomegranate Seed" opens as Charlotte Ashby enters the vestibule to her New York home and pauses before entering the house. She has paused to remember the course of her brief marriage to Ken-neth Ashby, and to consider the mysterious events that have clouded their recent months together. Kenneth Ashby, a lawyer, is a widower whose marriage to Charlotte has apparently healed the grief he felt at the death of his first wife, Elsie Ashby. Charlotte has moved into the house Kenneth had shared with Elsie, and come to feel at home there. Kenneth has even moved the portrait of Elsie that had hung in his library up to the nursery of his two children, in order that Charlotte might feel herself to be the mistress of the house. When they returned from their honeymoon, however, Kenneth found waiting for him a mysterious letter in a gray envelope. Charlotte never learned the contents of the letter, addressed to Kenneth in a woman's handwriting, but from its effects on her husband—withdrawal, sadness, and perhaps a touch of fear—suspects it is from a former lover. Several similar letters have arrived for him since the honeymoon, each one deepening Kenneth's withdrawal and Char-lotte's suspicion. Charlotte enters the house at last and finds that yet another letter is waiting for her husband.

Part II

Troubled by the most recent letter's arrival, Charlotte decides to spy on Kenneth when he comes home. Positioning herself behind the door to the entry hall, Charlotte watches as Kenneth opens the letter, reads it with an expression of great sadness and, to her dismay, kisses the paper on which his mysterious correspondent has sent the unknown message. Charlotte comes out of her hiding place and accuses Kenneth of maintaining a correspondence with a former lover. Kenneth denies this, maintaining that the letters are about business. When Charlotte confronts him with his having kissed the letter, Kenneth continues to evade her questions and finally ends the conversation without having shown Charlotte the letter's contents.

Part III

Alone now, Charlotte reflects upon the former happiness of her brief marriage and resolves to help Kenneth in any way she can. She considers seeking Kenneth's mother's assistance. Mrs. Ashby is a forthright, practical person with whom Charlotte has always felt a bond. To go to his mother about the letters, however, would be a violation of Kenneth's privacy, and Charlotte rejects the idea. At dinner Charlotte suggests to Kenneth that they go away together for a vacation to relax Kenneth's nerves. Kenneth declines the offer, putting Charlotte off with vague explanations of his inability to travel. It occurs to Charlotte that Kenneth won't leave New York because his

mysterious correspondent will not let him go. Kenneth weeps when his wife challenges him with this suspicion, and then agrees to leave town with her.

Part IV

When Charlotte wakes up the next morning she finds that Kenneth has already left the house, telling the maid to inform her that he plans for them to begin their vacation that very day. Charlotte is to expect news of when they will sail. When Charlotte telephones Kenneth's office, however, the secretary tells her that Kenneth has gone out of town. Hours pass with no word from Kenneth, and when evening comes Charlotte is worried and visits Kenneth's mother in hopes of an explanation. Mrs. Ashby has heard nothing from her son and is surprised to learn of their sudden plans for a holiday. Together the two women return to Charlotte's house only to discover that another gray letter has arrived in their absence. Charlotte is resolved to open the letter and get to the bottom of things.

Once out of its envelope the letter proves to be almost illegible, its letters pale and faint. Charlotte is able to make out only the words "mine" and "come." She remarks: "I suppose everything's pale about a ghost." This is the first time the story uses the word "ghost," but it is an appropriate term, for as Mrs. Ashby reaches for the phone to call the police, the impression is given that Kenneth has answered the call of Elsie, his first wife, and gone to join her in the other world.

Characters

Charlotte Ashby

Charlotte Ashby, the second wife of widower Kenneth Ashby, is dismayed to discover a series of mysterious letters to her husband. At first she suspects that Kenneth is corresponding with a former lover. As the story unfolds, however, Charlotte comes to believe that the letters are from the ghost of Kenneth's first wife, Elsie. Her increasing certainty about the ghostly source of the letters illustrates the story's theme of alienation as she discovers an unknown side of her husband's character.

Elsie Ashby

Elsie Ashby was the first wife of Kenneth Ashby and now her ghost haunts the house of her former husband and his new wife, Charlotte. It is Elsie who sends the mysteriously delivered letters that causes Kenneth and Charlotte such dismay. A controlling and rigid woman in life, Elsie seeks to remain in control of Kenneth even from beyond the grave. Her message to Kenneth can be summarized by the only two intelligible words Charlotte can make out in Elsie's last letter: "mine" and "come."

Kenneth Ashby

Kenneth Ashby, a newly remarried widower, begins to receive a series of letters from the ghost of his first wife, Elsie. He tries to keep the letters and their sender a secret from his second wife, Char-lotte, but she gradually comes to understand his secret. The letters and his efforts to conceal their nature alienate Kenneth from his new wife. Ken-neth, however, is a model of marital fidelity. As he tries to be faithful both to the ghost of his dead wife and to his living one, Kenneth succumbs to a terrible nervous strain. The end of the story gives the impression that Kenneth has gone to join Elsie in death.

Mrs. Ashby

Mrs. Ashby is the mother of Kenneth Ashby. Kenneth's second wife, Charlotte, seeks out the guidance of Mrs. Ashby once Kenneth has

disappeared near the end of the story. Mrs. Ashby is present when Charlotte opens the last of the mysterious letters.

Ghost

See Elsie Ashby

Themes

The Supernatural

In Edith Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed," the newly remarried widower, Kenneth Ashby, begins to receive letters from the ghost of his first wife, Elsie. Charlotte Ashby, Kenneth's second wife, believes at first that the letters are from a former lover of Kenneth's. When she realizes the truth about the letters, it is too late; Kenneth has gone to join Elsie, his first wife, in the afterworld. In the preface to her collection Ghosts, Wharton wrote that "the more one thinks the question over, the more one perceives the impossibility of defining the effect of the supernatural." In the absence of such a clear definition, she believed the ghost story "must depend for its effect solely on what one might call it's the rmometrical quality; if it sends a cold shiver down one's spine, it has done its job and done it well."

Flesh vs. Spirit

Tales of the supernatural inevitably involve a contest between the flesh and the spirit. The many forms this contest can take explain the wonderful diversity of supernatural fiction. Consider the many versions of the vampire story, in which the triumph of the spirit over the flesh results in a cursed and agonized immortality. In Mary Shelley's Frankenstein the theme of flesh vs. spirit supports an essentially didactic account of man's corruption of nature.

In Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" the contest is won by the spirit. Elsie Ashby comes back from death to reassert her claim to her house and her husband, Kenneth Ashby. The force of Elsie's will is so great that she persuades Kenneth to free his spirit from his own body and join her in death. Moreover, Elsie's spirit is apparently strong enough to permit her to take actions not normally thought of as being within the ability of a ghost, such as writing and delivering letters. Experienced readers of ghost stories recognize this victory of the spirit over the physical.

Alienation

Perhaps the most interesting ghost stories are those in which a supernatural element acts to reveal some characteristic or circumstance of the people in the story that might not otherwise have become evident. This is the case in "Pomegranate Seed," as

Elsie's ghost reveals a quality of alienation within Kenneth and Charlotte's marriage. When Charlotte first confronts Kenneth about the mysterious letters: "A line of anger she had never seen before came out between his eyes, and she said to herself: 'The upper part of his face is too narrow; this is the first time I ever noticed it?"' As the tale continues, the distance between husband and wife grows as Charlotte comes closer to understanding the truth about the letters Kenneth has been receiving. Pleading with her husband for an explanation of the mystery, Char-lotte comes to see her husband as "a stranger, a mysterious incomprehensible being whom no argument or entreaty of hers could reach." Kenneth has been a passionate and attentive husband to his second wife, but Elsie's ghost reveals a reserve and a privacy in Kenneth that Charlotte cannot touch.

Style

Point of View

The narrative point of view in Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" is third-person limited. In a work of fiction related from a third-person limited point of view, the narrator is not a character in the story, but someone outside of it who refers to the characters as "he," "she," and "they." This outside narrator, however, is not omniscient (or all-knowing), but is limited in knowledge to the perceptions of one or more of the characters in the story. The narrator of "Pomegranate Seed," and therefore its reader, sees the events of the story through the eyes of Charlotte Ashby, even though it is not Charlotte herself who tells the story. The story's readers never have more information than Charlotte does at any point in the narrative, and are thus more fully involved in the story's mystery than they might have been if it were told by an omniscient narrator.

Setting

"Pomegranate Seed" takes place in two locations in 1930s New York City: Kenneth Ashby's house and the nearby residence of his mother. Wharton makes clear that the Ashbys' neighborhood is a relatively quiet one; theirs is a "street long since deserted by business and fashion." Even from this quiet street, however, "the soulless roar of New York" is apparent to Charlotte's ears. "Pomegranate Seed" is the only one of Wharton's ghost stories to have an urban setting, and Wharton may have placed the story there as a sort of challenge to herself as a writer.

Allusion

An allusion is an indirect reference by one literary text to another text, or to a historical event, a myth or legend. The title, "Pomegranate Seed," is an allusion to the Greek myth of Persephone. Daughter of Zeus and Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, Persephone is abducted by Hades, the god of death, and carried off to the underworld. At Zeus's insistence, Hades agrees to release Persephone on the condition that she has eaten no food while in the underworld. Unfortunately Persephone has eaten six pomegranate seeds in Hades's garden, and for that reason is allowed to return to the world of the living for no more than six months at a time. This can be likened to Wharton's story, in that Kenneth is pulled between

the underworld and the world above: between Elsie, who is dead—or in the underworld—and Charlotte, who is flesh and blood and belongs to the world familiar to Kenneth, the land of the living.

Gothicism

"Gothic" has had many meanings throughout history. Originally describing a medieval Germanic tribe, the Goths, the term later named a style of European architecture of the late medieval and early renaissance periods. In Anglo-American literature since the eighteenth century, "Gothic" has described works of prose fiction characterized by the grotesque, violence, and supernatural apparitions. Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" may be considered a late work in the Gothic tradition.

Historical Context

In one important way, the historical considerations that readers bring to the interpretation of other kinds of fiction do not apply to ghost stories. Ghost stories deal with situations that are outside of nature and, for that reason, outside of history. Ghosts and the emotions with which audiences read stories about ghosts exist in a realm that is not much affected by history, politics, and economy. At the same time, of course, writers live and work inside history, and the media with which writers practice their craft—language and literary genre—are very much shaped by historical factors. For these reasons, and not because Elsie Ashby's ghost is in some recognizable way a ghost of the 1930s, Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" is a story whose historical and cultural background may be profit-ably explored.

For one thing, "Pomegranate Seed" is a story that presents its setting and characters as being very much up to date. It is Wharton's only urban ghost story, taking place amid what she calls the "soulless roar of New York." Much of the story's action is presented as dialogue exchanged over the telephone—a work of technology that was still something of a novelty when the story was first published by the Ladies' Home Journal in 1931. Kenneth Ashby, the remarried widower who is haunted by his first wife's mysterious letters, is a lawyer with a bustling career in the metropolis. Clearly, much of the story's effect is derived from the intrusion of something so old-fashioned as a ghost upon the lives of the modern-day Ashbys.

The Ashbys, however, seem to be curiously exempt from what worried Americans most at the time of the story's first publication: the Great Depression. Beginning with the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and lasting until the early 1940s, the Depression left more than 16 million people unemployed and reduced the U.S. Gross National Product by almost fifty percent. For many Americans it was a time of lost hope, skepticism toward government, and brutal poverty. Wharton herself suffered some financial reverses after 1929 as the New York real estate in which her money was invested declined in value, and as the magazines to which she sold her work were forced to reduce the sums they paid contributors.

The Depression does not figure in "Pomegranate Seed" in part because ghost stories do not typically concern themselves with economic history, and in part because, as with most of Wharton's fiction, the story is about people who are very secure financially. With the important exceptions of Ethan Frome (1911) and Summer

(1917), most of Wharton's fiction is about members of America's most privileged leisure class. Specifically, Wharton's novels have chronicled the tension between persons of inherited wealth and their rivals, the newly wealthy entrepreneurial class who sought access to distinctions and pleasures that before had belonged exclusively to "old money." This rivalry is the backdrop to events in her two most acclaimed novels, The House of Mirth (1905) and The Age of Innocence (1920), both late examples of the novel of manners. A tradition of the Anglo-American novel since the eighteenth century, the novel of manners often presents class conflicts as it defines heroism through moral integrity and develops character through the practice of social norms or manners.

By 1931 when "Pomegranate Seed" was first published, and certainly by 1937 when it came out in Wharton's collection Ghosts, the novel of manners would have seemed quite old-fashioned. John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men and Hemingway's To Have and Have Not were published in 1937; both are novels of gritty realism in which the economic dislocations of the Depression are given center stage, and in which heroism takes the form of bitter stoicism. Moreover, the conflict between old money and new money which occupied Wharton in her finest novels might also have seemed like old news in the Depression, which brought poverty or near-poverty to almost all social classes and robbed many Americans of the class status they had prized before 1929.

Critical Overview

Between 1930 and 1937, the year of her death, Edith Wharton published four original collections of short stories. The productions of a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer near the end of her career, these collections were almost universally praised, yet little detailed attention was given to individual stories in these collections. In the decades since Wharton's death, the ghost stories have received little critical commentary. To a great extent, Wharton's short fiction has been less discussed than her novels, and her fiction of social observation has been of greater interest to scholars than her supernatural fiction.

Since the 1970s, however, as the women's movement has prompted a reevaluation of neglected works by female writers, Wharton's ghost stories have been the focus of some critical discussion. In 1970, writing in Criticism magazine, Margaret B. McDowell argues that the true focus of Wharton's ghost stories is on the living characters and how their contact with supernatural elements reveals what is central to them. Specifically of "Pomegranate Seed," McDowell argues that Elsie's ghost reveals moral weaknesses in Kenneth and Char-lotte: "If Kenneth has not been altogether candid with her, Charlotte has helped him too little in his crisis. She loses him forever, as much by her moral flaccidity as by her rival's malevolence."

In a 1987 issue of Literature and Psychology, Virginia L. Blum presents the story as an analysis of man's conflicted understanding of women. As Kenneth Ashby chooses between his dead wife and his living one, he is also choosing between an idealized and sexless conception of woman, and one that is real, sexual, and demanding. Given these opposed ideas of women, Blum argues that Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" reveals the impossibility of the sexes uniting in an understanding way in the real world. Annette Zilversmit presents an argument in College Literature magazine that contradicts Blum's: in her contest with Elsie, Charlotte is defeated not by the ghost but by her own fear that she is less sexually desirable than her rival.

In a 1991 issue of Women's Studies, Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney maintain that Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" is a self-reflexive story; that is, one that comments on its own status as a work of verbal art. Singley and Sweeney argue that the story explores women's attitudes to the previously male-dominated activities of reading and writing. According to these critics, Charlotte is a reflection of the female reader, and Elsie is a version of the female

writer. Both experience an ambivalence the critics call "anxious power" as they undertake these verbal activities. Moreover, Singley and Sweeney suggest that "Pomegranate Seed" offers a new model of reading as "the production of meaning rather than the discovery of truth."

Criticism

- ***Critical Essay #1***
- ***Critical Essay #2***
- ***Critical Essay #3***

Critical Essay #1

Goluboff is an associate professor of English at Lake Forest College. In the following essay, he examines the influence of Greek mythology on Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed."

Edith Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" is a remarkable story that has largely eluded modern anthologies of short fiction. Perhaps this is because anthologists don't consider ghost stories to be serious literature; more likely the omission is a result of how Wharton's ghost stories have been overshadowed by the fiction of social observation through which she made her reputation in the first decades of this century. Nevertheless, "Pomegranate Seed" is very much deserving of our attention both for the way it makes the conventions of the traditional ghost story work in a setting that is conspicuously modern, and for its deft use of Greek myth to lend classical resonance to the events in that modern setting.

When Wharton sent a revised manuscript of "Pomegranate Seed" to the Ladies' Home Journal in 1931, she complained in the accompanying letter that the editor of the magazine, Loring Schuyler, had failed to understand the allusion contained in the story's title: "As for the title, Mr. Schuyler must refresh his classical mythology. When Persephone left the underworld to re-visit her mother, Demeter, her husband, Hades, lord of the infernal regions, gave her a pomegranate seed to eat, because he knew that if he did so she would never be able to remain among the living, but would be drawn back to the company of the dead." It must have seemed to Wharton that the world had become an alien place by 1931 if the editor of a popular journal did not know his classical mythology. In the preface to her 1937 collection Ghosts, where the story was reprinted, Wharton remarked that ". . . in the dark ages of my childhood an acquaintance with classical fairy lore was as much a part of our stock of knowledge as Grimm and Andersen...."

The summary of the Persephone myth that Wharton made for Loring lacks several important details. As the story is told in Ovid's Metamorphoses, a versified collection of Greco-Roman myths from the first century B.C., Hades is not Persephone's husband. He has abducted her and carried her off to the underworld against her will. Persephone's father, in Ovid's version, is Zeus, who at Demeter's insistence has tried to persuade Hades to release their daughter. Moreover, Persephone has not eaten one pomegranate seed, but six. As the daughter of Demeter, goddess of the harvest, Persephone is the personification of vegetation. The six seeds from the underworld

ensure that like the crops, Persephone will spend six of the year's months among the living, and the other six in the underworld.

How, then, does the Persephone myth function in Edith Wharton's short story? In what way may we better understand the story's characters and theme by using the myth as a guide? If we take Mrs. Ashby (Kenneth's mother) as the story's Demeter figure because, like the goddess of the harvest, she has had a child taken away by death, then Kenneth Ashby becomes Wharton's Persephone figure. Despite his male gender, Kenneth stands in nicely for Persephone as a figure torn between the world of the living and the "company of the dead." Elsie Ashby, certainly then, becomes Hades, the beckoning representative of death. And Charlotte Ashby, Ken-neth's second wife who seeks to persuade him back from the gates the underworld, plays the role of Zeus who tried to persuade Hades to let Persephone go free.

While these mythological parallels bring the identities of Wharton's characters into sharper focus, they also raise several baffling questions about "Pomegranate Seed." In classical mythology, for example, Hades is considered the second most powerful of the gods, yielding precedence only to Zeus himself. When Zeus and Hades come into conflict over Persephone in the original myth, their dispute is settled in something like a draw: Persephone must spend six months in the underworld and six months on earth. In Wharton's version of the myth it seems that the forces of death win out over those of life, that Elsie triumphs over Charlotte in claiming Kenneth as exclusively her own. Does Wharton, then, invert the order of the gods as established in Greco-Roman mythology, giving Hades precedence over Zeus?

Another way of asking the same question is to remember that the original myth suggests that nature undergoes cyclical renewal from year to year. As personification of crops and vegetation, Persephone divides the year between the upper and lower worlds, returning to earth every year with the return of the spring. In Wharton's story, is there any comparable hope for cyclical renewal? If Kenneth Ashby is the Persephone figure, is there reason to believe that he will eventually return to Charlotte and the world of the living? The final scene of "Pomegranate Seed" offers little hope in this regard. When they are finally convinced that Kenneth has in fact disappeared Mrs. Ashby picks up the phone to call the police, saying to Charlotte: "We must do everything—everything." To which Char-lotte grimly replies: "Exactly as if we thought it would do any good to do anything?" The story's ending seems to foreclose any faith we might have that

Kenneth will come back. Perhaps Wharton has given us a version of the myth in which death gains a definitive upper hand.

Finally, there is the question of just what is the "seed" to which the story's title refers? In her 1987 essay, "Edith Wharton's Erotic Other-World" (Literature and Psychology), Virginia L. Blum claims that "The 'seed' is simply sex itself in a story about a man's conflicting perceptions of woman." Blum argues that Elsie lures Kenneth away from his living wife because she offers relief from the demands of Charlotte, a living sexual being. But one could also argue that the "seed" is Kenneth's memory of his lost wife, his nostalgia for, as Wharton put it in her letter, "the company of the dead." Perhaps the "seed" is something like a death-wish on Ken-neth's part, or a symbol of Kenneth's acknowledging, as Wharton seems to do in her manipulation of the Persephone myth, that Hades is a greater power than Zeus. Wharton's use of the Persephone myth, finally, lends perspective to the ghost story, even as it poses a series of rich interpretive questions.

Much of the effect of "Pomegranate Seed" comes from the way Wharton introduces these elements of classical mythology into a setting that is conspicuously modern. Indeed, Wharton may have set out in this story to invent a ghost that would "work" in those modern conditions that she saw as antithetical to supernatural fiction. In her preface to the collection Ghosts Wharton wrote that ". . . deep within us as the ghost instinct lurks, I seem to see it being gradually atrophied by those two worldwide enemies of the imagination, the wireless [radio] and the cinema." Ghosts, or our willingness to believe in them, may be expected to vanish from an increasingly technological society because they "require two conditions abhorrent to the modern mind: silence and continuity." In the "roaring and discontinuous" world of the American twentieth century, ghosts will no longer find receptive imaginations to haunt.

It is striking, for this reason, that Wharton sets "Pomegranate Seed" in precisely those circumstances she has identified as least conducive to the supernatural. Charlotte Ashby is very much aware of this. As she stands upon the threshold of her house, preparing to go in and face another ghostly letter, she thinks, "Outside there . . . skyscrapers, advertisements, telephones, wireless, airplanes, movies, motors [automobiles], and all the rest of the twentieth century; and on the other side of the door something I can't explain, can't relate to them. Something as old as the world, as mysterious as life. . . ." Of the technological items in Charlotte's list, the story dwells particularly on the telephone. Early in Part III of "Pomegranate Seed" Kenneth tries to calm Charlotte's suspicions by making

conversation about neutral topics. These include ". . . French painting, the health of an old aunt, and the installing of the automatic telephone." In the climactic fourth part of the story, nearly half of the narrative action takes the form of telephone calls, as Charlotte tries to trace Kenneth's whereabouts. And, of course, the final image of the story is that of Mrs. Ashby, picking up the receiver to call the police.

Clearly in Elsie Ashby, Wharton seeks to give her readers a ghost who can endure the technological discontinuities of the twentieth century, whose spell can't be broken even by the "soulless roar of New York." That Elsie also appears in the story as a figure traceable to Greco-Roman mythology lends her dimension and timelessness. Grounded in Wharton's contemporary moment, and articulating itself in a vocabulary derived from ancient myth, "Pomegranate Seed" is a story that very much deserves renewed attention.

Source: Benjamin Goluboff, Overview of "Pomegranate Seed," for Short Stories for Students, The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, the critics explore the power of the written word over the characters, maintaining that Charlotte Ashby reflects the reader's ambivalence about reading while Elsie Ashby embodies the author's anxiety about writing. The critics also propose that the relationships between the women in the story is dependent upon their connection to Kenneth Ashby.

At the beginning of Edith Wharton's story "Pomegranate Seed," Charlotte Ashby pauses on the threshold of her house, half-afraid to enter because she wonders whether another "square grayish envelope" addressed to her husband lies on the hall table within. Such letters, which figure prominently in Wharton's fiction and especially in "Pomegranate Seed," have the distinct power to alter relationships between men and women and between characters of the same sex. Eager and fearful to discover the contents and author of these ambiguous letters, "so alike in appearance that they had . . . become one letter, become 'it'," Charlotte feels ambivalent about the letter and the opportunities for independent interpretation and expression that it represents. She experiences what we will call "anxious power": she covets the power of language and yet feels anxious about the trespass implied by a woman's appropriation of such power.

Charlotte wrestles with the choice between the power of written discourse—traditionally a male domain—and the power of romance—traditionally a female domain. The horror of the story is that on the one hand, Charlotte fears she cannot compete with the letter's uncanny power over her husband; on the other hand, she attempts to master that power by appropriating and reading the letter, but with ambiguous results (she gains a mother, but loses a husband). Charlotte's anxiety extends to her sense of herself as a typically passive woman and as a potential usurper of texts and the power that they represent. She is poised "on the threshold," suspended between two realms of gendered expectation, a fact underlined by the narrative construction of the tale itself—its supernatural and realistic tone, its multitude of indeterminacies, gaps, and absences.

Indeed, Wharton's story provides an excellent example of the ways in which ambivalence toward reading and writing—like that which Hester Lynch Thrale acknowledges—shapes narrative by women.... [In order to show how "Pomegranate Seed" exemplifies anxious power,] we show how the story's three female characters—Charlotte and Mrs. Ashby, who fearfully read a letter that does not belong to

them, and Elsie, who writes illegible letters from beyond the threshold of the grave—represent the anxious power of female readers and writers. In other words, we propose to read "Pomegranate Seed" as a parable about women's ambivalence toward the power of reading and writing....

Charlotte's forbidden reading is described as an act of transgression, in which she not only appropriates Kenneth's letter but interprets various blank spaces and missing parts: the space where Elsie's portrait hung, Kenneth's disappearance, and the text of the letter itself. Instead of standing on the doorstep, "shivering with the premonition of something inexplicable, intolerable, to be faced on the other side," or secretly watching her husband's correspondence with the letter, Charlotte crosses the threshold, usurping Kenneth's library, desk, and letter-opener as well as the letter itself. In this climactic act of reading the ninth and last letter, Kenneth's death is implied, the author of the letters is identified, and Charlotte's new relationship with Mrs. Ashby is established. Despite the certainty implied by these resolutions, however, the ending of "Pomegranate Seed" remains ambiguous, evoking ambivalent responses in both Charlotte and the reader.

By purloining not only Kenneth's letter, but also his possessions, Charlotte assumes in this scene the male role of reader, detective, and penetrator of secrets, a role emphasized by phallic imagery of authority and rape. Charlotte first stares at the letter "as if she could force her gaze to penetrate to what was within"; but the envelope is not only closed to her gaze, but "so tightly stuck that she had to hunt on her husband's writing table for his ivory letter-opener." In fact, opening the letter seems to con-firm Kenneth's death: when she rummages through his desk, the items on it "sent through her the icy chill emanating from the little personal effects of someone newly dead," and when she opens the envelope, "the tearing of the paper . . . sounded like a human cry."

But what does Charlotte gain by appropriating Kenneth's letter? The sheet of paper inside the envelope is nearly blank, unreadable: "Her sight must be blurred, or else dazzled by the reflection of the lamplight on the smooth surface of the paper . . . she could discern only a few faint strokes, so faint and faltering as to be nearly undecipherable." This sentence ironically recalls Wharton's earlier description of the curtains on Charlotte's front door, which prevented her from seeing if a letter had arrived because they "softened the light within to a warm blur through which no details showed." Although Charlotte has now crossed the threshold and even

read the letter, she is confronted with the same blurred, illegible surface as before.

In a series of triadic relationships, Charlotte had watched Kenneth read the eighth letter; she herself was "watched by Mrs. Ashby" as she tried to read the ninth; and now, unable to comprehend it, she watches her mother-in-law read it in turn. While Mrs. Ashby tries to decipher the almost invisible handwriting in the lamplight, Charlotte studies her face as if it were the letter, just as earlier she had tried to learn the eighth letter's contents by reading Kenneth's face. Indeed, Charlotte learns more about the letter's contents from her mother-in-law's face than from the letter itself: Mrs. Ashby's features, which usually express only "simple and sound emotions," now express more ambivalent ones: "a look of fear and hatred, of incredulous dismay and almost cringing defiance . . . as if the spirits warring within her had distorted her face to their own likeness."

Although the letter's contents remain mysterious, Charlotte does discover its author when she asks whether Mrs. Ashby recognizes the handwriting. Significantly, she learns the answer not through Mrs. Ashby's words, but through her gaze. Earlier, Charlotte watched her read the empty page; now she watches her gaze at the empty walls, as her "anxious eyes [steal] with a glance of apprehension around the quiet familiar room," hesitating to pronounce the name aloud. When Charlotte counters, "'You'd better say it out, mother! You knew at once it was her writing?' . . . Mrs. Ashby looked up; her eyes, travelling slowly past Charlotte, were lifted to the blank wall behind her son's writing table." Elsie is thus named by her absence rather than her presence, just as the letter has meaning specifically because its contents are withheld. In fact, Elsie's signature is the "blank wall" —placed, appropriately enough, behind the writing table —which resembles her letter: as Charlotte tells Mrs. Ashby, "If even you can see her face on that blank wall, why shouldn't he read her writing on this blank paper?"

In "Pomegranate Seed" Wharton literally represents the act of reading as peering at an almost blank page, filling in gaps, absences, ellipses. "No one could possibly read that letter," Mrs. Ashby tells Charlotte, and after considerable effort, with the aid of a bright lamp and even a magnifying glass, Charlotte believes that she can decipher only two ambiguous words: "I can make out something like 'mine' —oh, and 'come.' It might be 'come'." As readers of "Pomegranate Seed," we must also fill in blanks. The words "come" and "mine" demand that we construct hypothetical sentences, such as a command addressed to Kenneth ("Come, you will always be mine, and you belong with me"), or a message addressed to

Charlotte, who, after all, is the one who reads the letter and therefore, according to Lacan, its intended recipient ("He has come to me, he is mine"). In "Pomegranate Seed," then, Wharton defines reading as the production of meaning rather than the discovery of truth. As readers of the story, we, like Charlotte, must make our own decisions and recognize our ambivalence about them....

Kenneth's disappearance is another mystery for which the reader must devise her own explanation. In fact, his absence, like other absences in the story, somehow suggests a presence: even after his apparent death, Kenneth continues to shape the women's relationships with one another. For example, we can read Elsie, Charlotte's predecessor, as her double, in the same way that Bertha Rochester is Jane Eyre's double. After all, Charlotte makes few changes in the house because Elsie's drawing-room is "exactly the drawing-room she would have liked for herself." As she attempts to discover the letter's contents, Charlotte resembles Elsie more and more, until, entering Kenneth's library and appropriating the final letter, it is, in [Annette] Zilversmit's phrase [in "Edith Wharton's Last Ghosts," College Literature 14, 1987], as if Charlotte "resurrected the ghost herself." Wharton expresses this relationship, too, in terms of the gaze: when Charlotte sits "singing at her image in the glass," imagining her triumph over the mysterious other woman, she is actually gazing at herself." The power of Elsie's letter —"something she can't explain"—unlocks Charlotte's own repressed desire for power and knowledge, helping her to reach a secret goal: "to feel herself the sovereign"—not just of Kenneth's past, but of her own future. Charlotte's romantic bid to rescue her husband fails, however, as does her attempt to read Elsie's letter, despite its apparent invitation—"come"—which may be addressed to her as well as to Kenneth. The story suggests, then, that a woman may gain power either through romance or language, but not both.

"Pomegranate Seed" also holds out a third possibility: a daughter may gain power through her connection with the maternal. When Charlotte and Mrs. Ashby read the letter together, their relationship is different from the competitive relationships that the letter evokes among Charlotte, Kenneth and Elsie. Indeed, Charlotte's act of reading brings her closer to Mrs. Ashby, her "proxy mother," strengthening their "tacit bond" at the same time that confirms Kenneth's death—as if the price for intimacy were loss of the husband. All three women—each named "Mrs. Ashby," defined in relationship to Kenneth, and connected only through him—thus gain new relations with one another in his absence.

For help deciphering the barely legible script, then, Charlotte turns to the mother figure, who responds ambivalently with both caution and support. Charlotte senses that she knows the writer's identity; but Mrs. Ashby, "spirits warring within her," refuses to reveal the knowledge of Elsie's authorship which reading the letter would confirm. Instead, Mrs. Ashby's maternal instincts ultimately lead Charlotte back to a traditional feminine dependence on male authority, as she "resolutely" reaches for the telephone to call the police, advising Charlotte not to act but to wait for an explanation from Kenneth or the authorities.

This insertion into the text of another figure—the police—transforms Charlotte's intimate relationship with her mother-in-law into another triangle: Charlotte, Mrs. Ashby, and male authority. Thus "Pomegranate Seed," like the Persephone-Demeter myth, seeks to replace the conjugal relationship with the primacy of the mother-daughter bond, but succeeds only in reaffirming male power.... Ironically, at the very moment that Charlotte claims her own power by appropriating and reading Elsie's letter, she is presumably willing to surrender it as evidence in a police investigation, an act which reinforces the letter's role as signifier. As Shoshana Felman notes [in "On Reading Poetry: Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytic Approaches," The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic reading, eds. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, 1988], "the signifi-cance of the letter is situated in its displacement, that is, in its repetitive movements toward a Different place" rather than in its content (original emphasis).

As women reading "Pomegranate Seed," how do we respond to the proposition that bonding with other women depends upon the absence or death of a man—or that bonds between women ultimately yield to male authority? The story invites us to respond in ambivalent ways. We can conclude that Charlotte's traditional domestic power is no match for Elsie's masculine force, which can be read as either "malevolent" or constructive. We can also read Charlotte's appropriation of the letter as either reprehensible or admirable: as a violation of Ken-neth's privacy, or as the justifiable acquisition of knowledge that she has been denied. Zilversmit blames Kenneth's disappearance on Charlotte's behavior and assumes that "the reader" does the same: "Charlotte thinks that her husband has perhaps gone to join her [Elsie]. The reader realizes that the second wife's guilt and insecurity have driven the husband away." [In "Edith Wharton's Ghost Stories," Criticism 12, No. 1, 1970, Margaret B.] McDowell blames Kenneth, Charlotte, and El-sie equally: "death and negation triumph in this marriage because of Charlotte's distrust, possessiveness, and cowardice; because of

Kenneth's inertia, nostalgia, and resentment; and because of Elsie's craving for continued power over one whom she has supposedly cherished." And in her psychoanalytic study of Wharton's seductive female ghosts ["Edith Wharton's Erotic Other-World," Literature and Psychology 33, No. 2, 1987, Virginia L.] Blum reads the story not from Charlotte's but from Kenneth's point of view: "he at once yearns for the living and is drawn to the dead. We find here a very literal enactment of a man's inability to decide whether the woman is the Angel in the House or the Angel of Death."

We suggested earlier that Charlotte, poised expectantly on her doorstep, was a figure for Wharton's reader, poised on the threshold of "Pomegranate Seed." And when Charlotte finally crosses the literal and figurative thresholds of the story to read Elsie's letter, she evokes for female readers, in particular, divided allegiances that reveal our own ambivalence toward knowledge and power. In reading "Pomegranate Seed," we discover not answers to our questions, but new questions that we must answer—just as Charlotte, trying to find out when she and Kenneth will leave together, learns that he has left town and sits "blankly gazing into new darkness."

If Charlotte reflects our own ambivalence about reading, then her double, Elsie, reflects Wharton's anxiety about writing. Although feminist criticism may too quickly identify Wharton with her female characters, the parallels between Elsie Ashby and Wharton's sense of herself as a writer are obvious. The very ghostliness of Elsie's writing evokes Wharton's own literary creativity, which she describes as an alienating and mysterious process that occurs "in some secret region on the sheer edge of consciousness." It is also characteristic of Wharton to express her anxiety about the writing process in a ghost story; as Zilversmit points out, she often used such tales "as a metaphor of internal fears."

Elsie Ashby can be read, then, as a ghost writer for Wharton herself; and her spectral letters suggest Wharton's internal fears about her own appropriation of the male role of writer, what [Sandra M.] Gilbert and [Susan] Gubar call [in The Madwoman in The Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, 1979] the "anxiety of authorship." Not only does Elsie's writing take the traditionally feminine from of letters—the "forgotten genre," as [Patricia Meyer] Spacks calls it—but it is barely able to communicate. Excluded and repressed, "written as though there were not enough ink in the pen, or the writer's wrist were too weak to bear upon it," her letters are "so faint and faltering as to be nearly undecipherable."

If Elsie is represented primarily by her writing, then her death—an absence that cannot quite be repressed—also signals Wharton's ambivalence toward female art and authorship. If, as Susan Gubar suggests [In"'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory, ed. Elaine Showalter, 1985], "the creation of female art feels like the destruction of the female body," then in "Pomegranate Seed" the artist's body is dead and buried. Like Margaret Aubyn in The Touchstone, whom [Mary Suzanne] Schriber calls [in Gender and the Writer's Imagination: From Cooper to Wharton, 1987] "the only serious female artist figure whom Wharton dared to commit to paper," Elsie is dead before her story even begins. Living female artists in Wharton's fiction fare no better: although she often portrays artists of either gender with irony and ambivalence (Spacks, Female Imagination 249-54), she particularly satirizes female artists in such stories as "The Pelican," "April Showers," and "The Expiation." Schriber concludes that "the younger Edith Wharton was not secure enough in her vocation to draw out of her foundering self a female protagonist who is an artist; the older Edith Wharton, realizing that women novelists were ignored by the culture, purposely did not assign her own gender to an artist, choosing instead to satirize the state of the arts as governed by men." Wharton does, in fact, depict a successful female writer, Helen Dale, who refers to herself as "the greatest novelist . . . of the age," and has authored many best-sellers. But even Helen Dale's success is marred by her ambivalence: faithful readers are a poor substitute for the married lover she gave up years ago; and her debate with that lover about using their old love letters as "copy" for forthcoming memoirs implies that female artistic success comes only at the cost of emotional fulfillment.

The fact that Elsie's handwriting is so remarkably androgynous —"bold but faint," manifesting "masculine curves" and yet somehow "visibly feminine"—also reveals Wharton's anxious power. Indeed, Elsie's pen(man)ship implies that one alternative to the absence of the female artist is male disguise —as if for a woman authorship and authenticity were incompatible. Schriber wonders whether Wharton "imagined that a character confident in a vocation to art required a male identity for reasons of verisimilitude"; in fact, Wharton once appropriated a male identity for herself—the pseudonym "David Olivieri"—to publish her early novel Fast and Loose. In addition to granting legitimacy, masculine disguise provides protection from public exposure. For Wharton, "the author who circulates her name on a title page" is "as vulnerable as the lady of leisure who displays herself as an art object." Accordingly, Elsie Ashby's authorship, as

represented by her handwriting, is ambiguous and contradictory, as if for a woman male disguise were necessary in order to write at all.

The empty sheet which constitutes Elsie's writing is itself an ambivalent figure, as Susan Gubar's essay on female authorship implies. In traditional metaphors of literary creativity, Gubar argues, woman is typically described as a blank page to be inscribed by the pen of the masculine author. Such metaphors—as well as the cultural attitudes that they represent—force the female writer to experience her own authorship as "a painful wounding," a "self-inflicted violence," in which she writes upon the blank page of her body with her own blood. The solution to this identification of women's art with physical suffering is to reappropriate the image of the blank page. In Isak Dinesen's story "The Blank Page," for example, that image "becomes radically subversive.... Not a sign of innocence or purity or passivity, this blank page is a mysterious but potent act of resistance." Elsie Ashby's page—an almost "absolute blank," which nevertheless bears traces of illegible writing—similarly represents in a single image both the suppression and the expression of her art. If death represents an internal and external restriction of Elsie's art, then the fact that her writing transcends death, by crossing the very threshold of the grave, suggests the strength of her need to express herself—as if writing were more important than being. Her letter, then, is also "radically subversive." In keeping with Mary Jacobus's defini-tion of feminist writing, Elsie's letter, "though necessarily working with 'male' discourse . . . work[s] ceaselessly to deconstruct it: to write what can't be written." In other words, it asserts the feminine, which [Julia] Kristeva describes [in "La Femme, ce n'est jamais ça," trans. Marilyn A. August, New French Feminisms, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabel de Courtivron, 1980] as "that which is not represented, that which is unspoken, that which is left out."

Thus Elsie's writing, when finally deciphered, spells out Wharton's own anxious power. "The conscious mind of Edith Wharton did not break free entirely from her culture's ideology of woman," Schriber explains; "Her imagination, however, the driving force behind her fiction, saw well into it and beyond." "Pomegranate Seed" is shaped by this difference between Wharton's imagination on the one hand, and her fearful acceptance of social convention on the other. In this ghost story, Edith Wharton purloins both the "letter" and the power it represents; but she also reflects her own ambivalence—and that of the female reader—toward the possession of such power.

Source: Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "Forbidden Reading and Ghostly Writing: Anxious Power in Wharton's

'Pomegranate Seed'," in Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1991, pp. 177-203.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Zilversmit focuses on Charlotte Ashby's rivalry with the ghost of her husband's first wife, maintaining that she is overcome and eventually defeated by her fear that she is not as sexually desirable as her rival.

Near the end of her life, Wharton, like [Henry] James, wrote two of her best and most revealing stories of psychological terror, "Pomegranate Seed" (1931) and "All Souls"' (1937). In "The Jolly Corner" James finally exposes the true source of his isolation in the specter of the fingerless and maimed alter-ego his protagonist encounters. So Wharton, nearing her seventies, called up her most potent fears, the phantoms, not of men or society, but of other women, seemingly more attractive and deserving than herself or her heroines. These other women, like the rivals in many of her novels, seem so formidable as to be in touch with other-worldly powers that enhance them and allow them to defeat and destroy the seemingly helpless protagonists. The final brilliance of these last tales is that long before the external spectres are confirmed, the inner aberrations of the heroines are felt. The final presence of the supernatural only confirms the entrapment of these women in their own long-denied fears.

"Pomegranate Seed" recounts the rivalry between Charlotte Ashby and the ghost of her husband's first wife. Even before faintly written letters begin arriving and disturbing the apparently happy marriage, the competitiveness of Charlotte with Elsie Ashby had begun. Like most of the other women in the familiar triangles of Wharton's novels, the rival is acquainted with the heroine (this time they are casual friends). On the occasion of her only visit to the first Mrs. Ashby's home, Charlotte had already felt "it to be exactly the drawing room she would have liked for herself." When this wife of twelve years dies, the heroine marries Kenneth Ashby, and acquires the house, which becomes a "veiled sanctuary . . . in the soulless roar of New York."

But when barely legible letters addressed to her husband in a handwriting "visibly feminine" begin to arrive, Charlotte's confidence erodes. Her husband becomes upset, but Charlotte confirms that "he seemed to recover; she couldn't." With no thought of spectral possibilities, she imagines the letters are from an old or present mistress. When her husband tries to reassure her that they are "about business," she demands them as proof of his innocence. He refuses, declaring, "It is not easy to prove anything to a woman

who's once taken an idea into her head," and yet he leaves to arrange their vacation together.

When he fails to return, Charlotte rushes the ninth and latest letter to her mother-in-law, who recognizes the handwriting of the deceased wife. Charlotte thinks that her husband has perhaps gone to join her. The reader realizes that the second wife's guilt and insecurity have driven the husband away. Despite all her momentary bravura, the seemingly successful woman concedes victory to her once toppled rival. As though she has resurrected the ghost herself, Charlotte believes her dead rival now exerts a greater hold, a greater attractiveness for the desired man than an alive and devoted wife. Like the moral and social imperatives other Wharton heroines (like Ellen Olenska and Mattie Silver) have raised when renouncing their victories, the forces that seem to lure the desired man away reside in powers that seem ghostly and supernatural. In relegating defeat to forces outside themselves, such women try to avoid pain and responsibility, and keep themselves forever from controlling their destinies. Ghosts are the final confession of one's self-pitying helplessness.

The strange and seemingly irrelevant title Wharton gives this story, "Pomegranate Seed," offers clues to perhaps the deeper identity of the letter-writing phantom who haunts Wharton's heroine. By alluding to one of the early sub-species of the supernatural tale, the Greek myth of Persephone, Wharton concedes that the fears of her heroines are rooted in the mesh of Western civilization even as Wharton's modern retelling yields new meaning.

R. W. Lewis's brief summation at the bottom of the title page suggests its significance to the author: "Persephone, daughter of Demeter, goddess of fertility, was abducted and taken to Hades by Pluto, the god of the underworld. Her mother begged Jupiter to intercede, and he did so. But Persephone had broken her vow of abstinence in Hades by eating some pomegranate seeds. She was therefore required to spend a certain number of months each year—essentially the winter months—with Pluto." Although now usually viewed as raped by Pluto, Persephone can also be viewed as initially only abducted. More importantly, her failure to return to her mother is attributed not to her imprisonment by her abductor nor his eventual ravishment of her, but to her own decision to forgo abstinence and to partake of the forbidden fruit of sexuality. Persephone, the myth suggests, has chosen to remain partially with Pluto. Compelled eventually by Demeter's threats of sterility, she returns to spend part of her life as dutiful daughter, but she has at

least assured her return to the realm of husband and sexuality, even if that realm remains swathed in guilt and the shadows of death.

Wharton seems to be suggesting that this myth is a Greek and woman's version of the Hebraic and masculine Garden of Eden and, like the Biblical legend, dramatizes the conflicts of men and women to establish an independent and sexual life. Persephone's intimacy with Pluto is complicated by the fact that he is her father's brother and thus her desire is also both competitive and incestuous (a note Wharton sounded more and more clearly in her later work until, in "The Beatrice Palmato Fragment," a daughter sleeps with her father). Persephone's guilt, which the eating of the red fruit accents, is further compounded in that she not only feels she has usurped the mother but been more successful. Unlike the polygamous lover of her mother, Zeus, Pluto desires and achieves a lasting marriage with the conflicted daughter.

But, in Wharton's modern retelling of the story itself, Charlotte Ashby is doomed by more than the displaced Oedipal competition with her mother. True, she feels she has eaten the forbidden seeds of usurping another woman's husband, descending with him to the hot climes of the West Indies, and even making him happier. But it is the husband who returns finally to the underworld, leaving Charlotte with a proxy mother, Mrs. Ashby senior. Since sex is relegated to the realm of the dead, Kenneth Ashby's return there symbolizes Wharton's heroine's deepest and unacknowledged fear, the most potent spectre of all, the conviction that she is not as sexually desirable or legitimately deserving as her rival. After nine months of marriage and nine letters, instead of becoming a secure and fertile (child bearing) wife, Charlotte Ashby, through her self-fulfilling prophecy of guilt and inadequacy, has driven her husband into the arms of her rival, although the woman is a corpse. The last scene of Charlotte enclosed now in her dearly desired house with only her mother-in-law confirms what Char-lotte has chosen: the less fulfilling, but more familiar role of defeated and lonely woman, forever wedded to a mother figure, a fate more limited than even Persephone's....

Source: Annette Zilversmit, "Edith Wharton's Last Ghosts," in College Literature, Vol. XIV, No. 3, 1987, pp. 296-305.

Topics for Further Study

Read a selection of Grimms' fairy tales and make note of what features any of them have in common with Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed."

Research the effects of the Great Depression in New York City, and compare the Ashbys' experience of the 1930s with others you might discover in your investigation.

Read the myth of Aphrodite and Adonis in Ovid's Metamorphoses, and consider what it has in common with the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Consider what sort of ghost story might be made out of the Adonis myth. Write a ghost story based on the myth of Adonis and Aphrodite.

Compare and Contrast

1926: Renowned magician and escape artist Harry Houdini dies. During his lifetime, Houdini devoted much of his energies to debunking spiritualists and mediums who claimed they could contact the dead. He claimed that if there were truly a way to contact the living after one's death, he would do so. He set up a code with his wife Bess, who faithfully attended seances and awaited his return for ten years, after which time she gave up.

1990s: "Psychic hotlines," telephone numbers people can call to speak with someone who offers advice through various extra-sensory means, become extremely popular and are endorsed by various celebrities.

1929: Wall Street's Dow Jones Industrial Average reaches 381, up from 88 in 1924. On October 29, 16.4 million shares of stock are traded, prompting the Dow Jones to drop 30.57 points. Despite assurances by leading economists that no business depression is imminent, liquidation continues, prompting the Great Depression.

1990s: The Dow Jones sets records annually, reaching 10,000 in early 1999.

1931: New York's Empire State Building opens April 30th at Fifth Avenue and 34th Street. The 102-story skyscraper stands as the world's tallest building for more than 40 years.

1998: The CN Tower, located in Toronto and completed in 1976, is the world's tallest building. Standing at just over 1,815 feet, the tower was built to improve the clarity of radio and television signals that were being obscured by the growing number of skyscrapers in downtown Toronto.

What Do I Read Next?

The Turn of the Screw (1898). Composed by Edith Wharton's friend and mentor, Henry James, this is considered to be one of the greatest ghost stories in the English language. A young governess who takes charge of two children on a British estate begins to see, or imagines she sees, the ghosts of former employees attempting to corrupt her two young charges.

Ovid's Metamorphoses. Roman poetry written in the first century B.C., this is a relatively easy way for students to become familiar with the mythology of the Greco-Roman tradition.

Something Wicked This Way Comes (1962), by Ray Bradbury, tells how the citizens of a small Midwestern town are tempted by their hidden, basest desires when a carnival comes to town, offering the townspeople, through its deadly attractions, the fulfillment of humanity's oldest dream: "Ye shall be as gods."

"An Encounter by Mortstone Pond," included in Russell Kirk's story collection Watchers at the Strait Gate (1984), tells of a lonely boy's brief meeting with his older self, and, in later years, his encounter in old age with his boyhood self. The older man muses that he is in the presence of an indissoluble mystery, as "We are essences—but insubstantial really, such stuff as dreams are made of, not understanding death because we do not know what life is."

"A Cautionary Note on the Ghostly Tale," also included in Kirk's Watchers at the Strait Gate (1984). Kirk addresses the question: "In an era of the decay of religious belief, can fiction of the supernatural or preternatural, with its roots in myth and transcendent perception, succeed in being anything better than playful or absurd?"

Thomas Ligotti's essay, "In the Night, in the Dark: A Note on the Appreciation of Weird Fiction," which prefaces his collection of ghostly tales Noctuary (1994), is an informative general introduction to the characteristics of the supernatural tale.

Further Study

Lewis, R. W. B. ed. The Letters of Edith Wharton, by Edith Wharton. New York: Scribner's, 1988.

The standard collection of Wharton's correspondence, this volume traces the writer's career in her own words. Meticulously edited and annotated by Wharton's biographer.

Wharton, Edith. The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton, New York: Scribner's, 1973.

The definitive collection of Wharton's supernatural fiction, this volume contains eleven stories, plus the 1937 preface to Wharton's Ghosts and a fragment from her autobiography.

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McDowell, Margaret B. "Edith Wharton's Ghost Stories." Criticism,Vol. XII, No. 2, Spring, 1970, pp. 133-52.

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Project Editor
David Galens

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.

Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- *Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.*
- *Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.*
- *Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.*
- *Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in*

Invisible Man-the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."

- *Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.*
- *Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.*
- *Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.*
- *Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.*
- *Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).*
- *Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.*
- *Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.*

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- ***Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.***
- ***Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.***
- ***Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.***
- ***What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.***

Other Features

SSfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to

contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535