"Because He's Not Here": Edith Wharton's Study in the Afterlife, Ghosts, and the Art of Belief

Yuki Miyazawa

Edith Wharton Review, Volume 34, Number 1, 2018, pp. 47-61 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/732745

[172.71.254.120] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 00:05 GMT)

"Because He's Not Here"

Edith Wharton's Study in the Afterlife, Ghosts, and the Art of Belief

Yuki Miyazawa, Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan

Abstract

In her writings about ghost stories, Edith Wharton points out the importance of believing consciously in ghosts in order to enjoy the stories, but it seems that Wharton uses the genre to say something more about belief. Through her ghost stories, Wharton, though she generally emphasizes rationality, places herself between the rational and the irrational, a space where something or someone "not here" could be technically "here." In this respect, Wharton makes her ghost stories a space to speculate on metaphysical questions which, in the context of William James's philosophy of religion and late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritualism, was often regarded as irrational. In "The Fulness of Life," Wharton assumes the afterlife as fact and searches for the possibility of settling difficult earthly matters in the world of the dead. Later, in "Mr. Jones," she seeks the possible path of literary afterlife through the ghost figure and through allusions to dead authors like Edgar Allan Poe. Finally, in "The Looking-Glass," Wharton combines themes from earlier stories, presenting a character who mediates between true and false spiritualism and between spiritualism and Catholicism.

Keywords

Edith Wharton, ghost stories, afterlife, psychical research, spirituality

In the posthumously published preface to *Ghosts* (1937), Edith Wharton rejects the question "Do you believe in ghosts?" (vii) as a pointless one, because even though she is not a "ghost-seer," she can sense "invisible currents of being in certain places and at certain hours" (vii). Wharton then explains:

> The celebrated reply (I forgot whose): "No, I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm afraid of them," is much more than the cheap paradox it seems to

Copyright © 2018 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

[172.71.254.120] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 00:05 GMT)

> many. To "believe," in that sense, is a conscious act of the intellect, and it is in the warm darkness of the pre-natal fluid far below our conscious reason that the faculty dwells with which we apprehend the ghosts we may not be endowed with the gift of seeing. (vii)[1]

This passage shows that Wharton had more than a simplistic belief in ghosts, for she maintains that to believe, on one level, is a "conscious act of the intellect," while there is something "far below" conscious reason that can "apprehend the ghosts"—that is to say, to perceive them, which is more experience than rational belief. Wharton criticizes Lord Halifax's attempt to authenticate his ghost tales, observing that the best tale in his collection was the one lacking a ratified source. Her preface argues for the efficacy of imagination, which allows one to perceive ghosts in "thermometrical" shivers (xii), and she advises writers of the ghostly genre to be the first to believe in and fear the ghosts of which they write.

Wharton's preface points out a gap between rationality and mystery, or between the conscious intellect and ghostly perception, then offers the ghost story as a medium operating between the two. Her approach invites a comparison to William James, the psychologist and philosopher, who was also brother to Wharton's close friend, Henry James. William James openly admitted to engaging in "psychical research," seeking scientific proof of life after death through the observation of paranormal phenomena such as spirit mediums. As William James explains in "The Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher'" (1909), "If the material were treated rigorously and, as far as possible, experimentally, objective truth would be elicited, and the subject ['psychic' phenomena] rescued from sentimentalism on the one side and dogmatizing ignorance on the other" (1250). Despite James's claims, his scientific contemporaries were "not only skeptical of psychical research but also so adamant in their commitment to scientific method that they often refused even to consider psychical research because it was not scientific enough" (Knapp 14). Wharton, too, once rejected James's ideas as "psychological-pietistical juggling" (letter to Sara Norton, 21 Feb. 1906, Lewis and Lewis, *Letters* 101–2), which she viewed as "dangerously vague and imprecise" (Singley 53). Yet she, too, was drawn to exploring the afterlife and spirit mediums, the same objects studied by psychical researchers, in her ghost stories.[2] Like James, she sought to avoid both sentimentalism and dogmatic ignorance in writing about the afterlife, but she differed from James in choosing to emphasize "feeling" ghosts over seeing them rationally.

In Wharton's ghost tales, the difference between the rational and irrational is represented as the crevice between this world and the next. Because the ghost story focuses on this liminal space, it allowed Wharton to explore the possibility of metaphysical matters that otherwise do not have a place in the reality of modern life. In *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit* (1995), Carol J. Singley demonstrates Wharton's extensive commitment to contemporary scientific concerns alongside religion and spirituality, remarking that "Wharton was a deeply religious person who never found completely satisfactory answers to metaphysical questions" (xii). In her ghost stories, I would argue, we can track Wharton's speculation on the "metaphysical" side, which she combined with the pleasure of being frightened. This fear may be more than just a spice to season the stories and may even constitute part of her quest to examine metaphysical matters. In her commonplace book, Wharton includes an excerpt from Franz Schubert's "Im Abendrot" on the last page, "as though it sums up her religious beliefs" (Lee 677): "Could I ever complain? Could I be fearful? / Be unsure of Thee and myself? / No, for in my breast I will carry / Thy heaven here with me" (qtd. in Lee 677). In these lines, overcoming fear comprises a part of religious belief.[3] The overcoming of doubt remains a task of the ghost tale, which turns fear into enjoyment when the suspension of disbelief is achieved.

By their very nature, the ghost story assumes a belief in something immaterial, and at the center of Wharton's ghost stories is absence: a ghost exists after the loss of a person to death. In "The Fulness of Life" (1893), the protagonist herself is a ghost, while "Mr. Jones" (1928) centers on someone who is "not here," the quest to find him leading to the revelation that he is dead. In "The Looking-Glass" (1935), Wharton combines themes from "The Fulness of Life" and "Mr. Jones" in a tale narrated largely by a woman who acts as a medium, claiming to deliver messages from a dead man. In each case, Wharton uses the ghost story genre to fill the gap between what is "here" and "not here." Wharton's tales create a literary threshold between the living and the dead, simultaneously imagining the immortality of the soul and immortality among authors. These tales thus represent the art of believing, comprising fictional spaces that allow room for what is technically not here to be here.

"The Fulness of Life," one of Wharton's earliest stories, is speculative fiction addressing the question: What if the spiritualists are correct?[4] After choking to death due to a disease, the protagonist "stood, as it seemed, on a threshold, yet no tangible gateway was in front of her," and realizes that "death is not the end after all" (13). At the entrance to the world of the dead, she continues: "I always knew that it couldn't be. I believed in Darwin, of course. I do still; but

[172.71.254.120] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 00:05 GMT)

then Darwin himself said that he wasn't sure about the soul—at least, I think he did—and Wallace was a spiritualist; and then there was St. George Mivart—" (13). Alfred Russel Wallace was an advocate of Darwin's theory of evolution, but he was also an admirer of spiritualism and opposed to Darwin's skeptical view of the supernatural (Blum 37–40). Wharton's tale explores the view of Darwinian spiritualists like Wallace, accepting evolutionary theory but maintaining the existence of a soul.

Although Wharton's protagonist embodies the premise that the soul exists after physical death, the fact that she is a ghost has been easy to miss, often overlooked in favor of biographical readings. For example, Elizabeth Ammons writes that "The Fulness of Life" is "transparent psychologically" (8) and that it "dreads and tries to deny that inevitability [of leaving husband Teddy Wharton] at the same time that it tries to assuage the guilt of even fantasizing about leaving one's husband" (8).[5] When not interpreted as a possible mirror upon Wharton's life, her speculation about the afterlife has been read as a symbol of other issues. Bridget Bennett, writing on spiritualism in literature, claims that "the idea of subjects who remain as haunted beings, on the margins, is a powerful metaphor for the kinds of social, ethical, and political injustices that characterize and permeate U.S. history in terms of citizenship and representation" (14). This idea also affects the reading of Wharton's ghost fiction. Allan Gardner Smith, for example, argues that Wharton's ghost stories penetrate areas "that her society preferred to be unable to see, or construe defensively as super (i.e. not) natural" (89). In "The Fulness of Life," Wharton surely tries to look into what society would not want to see directly, and which critics tend to ignore: the spiritualistic version of life after death.

Re-centering this fundamental premise reveals what Wharton seemed to view as beneficial in spiritualistic belief. It is not the communication with the dead that seems to have driven much nineteenth-century spiritualism in the United States. Rather, a spiritualistic afterlife offers a resolution impossible to achieve on earth. In the story, the "Spirit of Life" recognizes that the protagonist had never experienced the fullness of life in her marriage and offers her a "kindred soul" (17) to be united to "for eternity" (17). Here, the Spirit makes possible the permanent separation from her husband on earth and a new marriage to an ideal husband. At the story's end, however, the Spirit informs her that her husband on earth shall not be provided with such a kindred soul after his death because it is she who is ideal for him. She then decides to wait for her husband until he dies, saying "cheerfully," "I have all eternity to wait in" (22). This statement seems to reverse her former disappointment in her husband, showing her

reconciled to him, which could not have been possible without her existence after death. Of course, this plot may depict Wharton's ambivalence toward her husband. However, at least the protagonist expresses her will to be with her husband, in terms of a positive prospect for eternity. What the afterlife offers is not so much an Emersonian "compensation" (17) or a perfected existence, but rather a way to settle unresolvable earthly matters. Being outside this world gives the protagonist a different perspective on the husband that had annoyed her; eternity would never feel like home to her without the "creaking of his boots" (22). Wharton's view on a spiritualistic afterlife is an affirming one even if it reiterates the terms of life in this world.

"The Fulness of Life" is unusual among Wharton stories in representing the spirit world and centering on the consciousness of a ghost. Her literal treatment of the afterlife may shed a new light on a comment by Wharton: "As to the old stories of which you speak so kindly, I regard them as the excesses of youth. They were all written 'at the top of my voice,' & The Fulness of Life is one long shriek. —I may not write any better, but at least I hope that I write in a lower key, & I fear that the voice of those early tales will drown all the others: it is for that reason that I prefer not to publish them" (letter to Edward L. Burlingame, 10 July 1898, Lewis and Lewis, *Letters* 36). Quoting this letter, R. W. B. Lewis writes that "The Fulness of Life" is "not only too direct an expression of her personal situation, but almost a lament about it" (*Edith Wharton* 87; see also Lewis, "A Writer" 20–21), a view most critics have shared. Yet if Wharton reveals too much about her private conflicts, she may also have ventured too far in speculating about life after death as a spiritualist might envision it.

Perhaps for that reason, for several decades after "The Fulness of Life" Wharton seldom treats the subject. In most tales written before 1926, the afterlife recedes from the center of the narrative, and the supernatural serves mostly as a prompt for historical memory. In "Kerfol" (1916), for example, the protagonist's encounter with the ghosts of dogs leads to an investigation of court documents related to a seventeenth-century murder that occurred in the old house which gives the story its title. "Kerfol" takes place in this world, not the next, and the ghosts are presented through the narrative frame of a rational observer not normally given to spiritualism. The supernatural phenomena simply work as triggers for the remembrance of the past, to bring living people to think about the deceased, whose memories would otherwise have been lost.

In Wharton's later ghost stories, however, she returns to the subject with a more intense attention to the literary dimensions of the genre. As Wharton

[172.71.254.120] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 00:05 GMT)

comments in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), during a section on how to write a good ghost story, "The greater the improbability to be overcome the more studied must be the approach" (37). At first, "Mr. Jones" (1928) resembles Kerfol because it is set at an old mansion that seems to be asleep (497) and because it involves an investigation into the past. Lady Jane Lynke, who has inherited the place, and her friend Stramer, the novelist, start searching for a strange butler named Mr. Jones, because they have become "curious" (511) about this man who seems to be managing the whole establishment but is never met. In the process, they discover the family's shameful history among its papers, which Mr. Jones has struggled to hide. In this regard, it seems that the ghost of "Mr. Jones," like the ghost dogs of "Kerfol," prompt characters toward the restoration of a lost history.

In its way of structuring interaction with the supernatural, however, "Mr. Jones" is closer to "The Fulness of Life," as the protagonist's conversation with the Spirit of Life takes place on a "threshold" (13), which shows that she is on the border between life and death, or, as the Spirit calls it, "eternity" (17). Likewise, the house in "Mr. Jones" itself contains a threshold space for the dead, called the "blue room": "She [Jane] crossed the threshold of the blue room. . . . Some one was in the room already; she felt rather than saw another presence" (508). Later, Jane recognizes the "presence" as Mr. Jones, and gradually sees the blue room as his room, which means, as they later discover, that it is a ghost's room. As Lady Jane, Stramer, and the elderly maid Mrs. Clemm stand on or cross the threshold (503, 507, 508, 509, 515, 517, 518, 522), they, the living, gradually draw nearer to the dead Mr. Jones until Mrs. Clemm is apparently strangled to death by the ghost. Like the threshold in "The Fulness of Life," the blue room of the house, which is "as mute and solitary as the family vault" (497), functions as the rough border between life and death.

Mr. Jones himself is "between life and death" (506), and when Lady Jane asks, "And who is Mr. Jones?" (504), Mrs. Clemm replies, "Well, my lady, he's more dead than living" (504). Even though Mrs. Clemm knows that Mr. Jones is dead, she does not say so to Lady Jane, implying instead that he remains in this world and that she and her niece Georgiana obey his orders. Thinking that Mr. Jones is simply very sick, Lady Jane replies, "I'm sorry to hear that" (504). Later, as Lady Jane and Stramer start to search for Mr. Jones and related articles about the house, they find the same name, Jones, recorded in the historical papers of the previous century. Stramer had once suspected aloud, "There is *no* Mr. Jones!" (513), and this turns out to be true (in one sense) after Mrs. Clemm dies and Georgiana finally confesses the facts:

> "Tell me, Georgiana: where shall we find Mr. Jones?"
>
> The girl turned to her with eyes as fixed as the dead woman's. "You won't find him anywhere," she slowly said.
>
> "Why not?"
>
> "Because he's not here."
>
> "Not here? Where is he, then?" Stramer broke in.
>
> . . . "He's in his grave in the church-yard—these years and years he is. Long before ever I was born . . . my aunt hadn't ever seen him herself, not since she was a tiny child . . . ." (523)

Lady Jane and Stramer discover the true meaning of Mrs. Clemm's comment that Mr. Jones is "more dead than living." They can never find him, or catch the murderer of Mrs. Clemm, because he does not belong to this world. By setting the focus on someone "not here," Wharton lures the protagonists into tracking a ghost between life and death, physically dead but strangely active among the living.

The allusions within "Mr. Jones" create a similar threshold between the living and the dead. To begin, the name "Jones" is Wharton's birth name, which the author must have associated with her dead family members, and thus, as Charles Crow points out, the story "begs for an autobiographical reading" (114). In addition, the story is filled with allusions to the dead author Edgar Allan Poe. According to John Getz, the name "Clemm" is taken from Maria Poe Clemm, whose daughter was married to Poe (21–22), and Wharton also alludes to Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (1844) in mentioning the "letters purloined by Lady Jane" (522). In this sense, Benjamin F. Fisher's argument that the house in "Mr. Jones" is a "recognizable descendant of Poe's House of Usher" (31) seems appropriate. Mr. Jones's "lifeless house" (Wharton, "Mr. Jones" 512) is itself a remembrance of and memorial to the dead author. The fact that "Mr. Jones" takes a form similar to detective fiction may further link Wharton to Poe, who invented the American detective story through his Dupin tales, such as "The Purloined Letter." As Kathy A. Fedorko observes, "Like Poe . . . Wharton was intrigued by mystery, ghosts, secret misdeeds, haunted houses, simmering eroticism" (81).

Moreover, when we find that Lady Jane's friend Stramer is a writer who is "finishing a novel" (509), and the story is set in an old English mansion as in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), we might glimpse the shadow of Henry James. Of course, we cannot assert Stramer's presence as an allusion to James just because both of them are novelists, but in considering this story, Wharton's response to

[172.71.254.120] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 00:05 GMT)

James's death is noteworthy. When Wharton faced the news of James's decline, she wrote to Gaillard Lapsley on 17 December 1915, "His friendship has been the pride & honour of my life. Plus ne m'est rien after such a gift as that—except the memory of it" (Lewis and Lewis, *Letters* 365), and felt a need for a "shared memory of Henry James" (Lewis, *Edith Wharton* 383). In "Mr. Jones," the haunted house, though it may not have the warmth that Wharton felt toward James, presents a certain structure for the preservation of memory after death through such gathered allusions. In this sense, the story constructs a kind of ghostly and literary immortality.

Precisely because of this, the story's final object is not simply to meet Mr. Jones but to discover the letters described as "purloined by Lady Jane" (522). Considering that Lady Jane is an author of "books of travel" (499) and that Stramer is "finishing a novel" (509), and that the two writers enter a house filled with allusions to Edgar Allan Poe and perhaps Henry James, "Mr. Jones" presents a literary dimension wherein characters who are writers interact with writers who are dead. At first, the letters, like Mr. Jones, are "not here" (516), but the papers are later found and read—unlike Mr. Jones, who, in Georgiana's words, is still "not here" (523). Therefore, while Lady Jane and Stramer discover that they cannot find Mr. Jones in this world, they retrieve a letter, written by the wronged Viscountess of Thudenay, among the papers. This letter reveals the truth about Mr. Jones's history and also serves as a link to a literary past. These characters thus inhabit a textual work in dialogue with the work of a dead author, through which Wharton creates an authorial afterlife for Poe and perhaps James. Both "Mr. Jones" and "The Fulness of Life" speculate on life beyond physical death—but while "The Fulness of Life" does so in relation to marriage, "Mr. Jones" seems to focus more on a writer's life and afterlife.[6]

A final story foregrounds more strongly both the liminal space between the living and the dead, and the literary retrieval of the dead. In "The Looking-Glass" (1935), Mrs. Cora Attlee, speaking to her granddaughter, explains her story's background as an era in which "all the fine ladies, and the poor shabby ones . . . took to running to the mediums and the *clair-voyants*" (767–68) to hear from the dead during World War I. Mrs. Attlee claims that she "*did* see things, and hear things, at that time" (768) as a medium, though she later quit such spiritualistic practice due to Catholic doctrine.

In this short introduction, Mrs. Attlee contrasts two pairs: true/false mediums and spiritualism/Catholicism. First, she states that "there was a fair lot of swindlers and blackmailers in the [medium] business" (768) and they tried to drag the "money out . . . for a pack of lies" (768). On the other hand, she, a

true medium who "*did* see things, and hear things," helped the women who longed for information about their lost husbands or sons at the front by receiving unearthly messages about them. The name Cora Attlee even recalls the American medium Cora L. V. Scott (1840–1923), who is known for her spiritualist writings and to whom Sir Arthur Conan Doyle refers in *The History of Spiritualism* (1926) (173). Assuming that Mrs. Attlee is a real spirit medium, as she claims, she then had to reconcile this fact with the Catholicism that was her religion. Unlike Wharton, who never formally converted to Catholicism (Singley 185),[7] Mrs. Attlee constantly emphasizes that she is a "good Catholic" (763) and fears punishment after death for what she has done on earth. Thus, because she "knew the Church was against it" (768), she had to make "it all straight with Father Divott" (768) and stop acting as a medium.

Having set up these contrasts of true/false mediums and spiritualism/ Catholicism, Mrs. Attlee then mediates between them. When Mrs. Attlee realizes that Mrs. Clingsland, one of her massage clients, is in danger of being victimized by a fraudulent medium, she decides to act as a medium to protect her. Yet she also tries to respect the Catholic teaching against spiritualistic practice. So she lies to Mrs. Clingsland, claiming to have felt a ghostly presence, a young man named Harry with whom Mrs. Clingsland had felt a romantic connection but who had died years earlier on the *Titanic*. Thus, while Mrs. Attlee claims to have real spiritualistic capacity, she only pretends to use it with Mrs. Clingsland, therefore becoming a fraudulent medium. Instead of communicating with Harry's spirit, Mrs. Attlee asks an intelligent young man to write messages as if they were from the dead Harry. Mrs. Attlee then gives this fictional information for free to Mrs. Clingsland.

This fictional mediation, however, takes an ironic turn toward "reality," as Mrs. Attlee comes to believe that she really is bearing messages from Harry and becomes offended when Mrs. Clingsland questions it (776). At the end of the story, the young man who had written the messages dies, leaving a final letter for Mrs. Clingsland, which Mrs. Attlee retrieves from his room after finding his dead body. Mrs. Clingsland reads the letter and accepts it as decisive proof that the messages really were from Harry: "at last he's spoken to me, really spoken" (780). As Mrs. Attlee later explains, Mrs. Clingsland "saw that I'd spoken the truth. It *was* from the dead that I'd got it" (780).

The fact that the identity of "the dead" in this case was not Harry but the young man helping Mrs. Attlee does not matter to Mrs. Attlee and may be purposefully unclear. In the story, the young man who writes the messages is an ill and dying alcoholic. Like Mr. Jones, he may be somewhere between life

[172.71.254.120] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 00:05 GMT)

and death, and it is unclear if his final writing may not have turned out to be a communication from the dead Harry delivered through the dying young man, or if Wharton only presents the writer's literary imagination as a clever substitute for the lost. But after the young man dies, his room becomes a dead man's room, functioning like the "blue room" in "Mr. Jones." Wharton manifests the change clearly in Mrs. Attlee's voice as she goes up toward his room: "It's as cold as ice on these stairs . . . and I'll wager there's no one made up the fire in his room since morning" (778). Mrs. Attlee senses the transfer of the room into the territory of the dead: "and as I climbed the stairs I felt one of those sudden warnings that sometimes used to take me by the throat" (778). Here, we can see the structural resemblance between "The Looking-Glass" and "Mr. Jones": a character entering a dead man's room (a space given to the dead) and finding a letter.[8]

In bringing this letter back for Mrs. Clingsland, Mrs. Attlee survives the death-by-choking that takes the protagonist of "The Fulness of Life" and Mrs. Clemm of "Mr. Jones." She senses the warning that takes her by the throat, but she returns from the ghostly threshold and remains "here." In this regard, although Mrs. Attlee does not intend to communicate with the other world spiritually, she does act as a medium, a vehicle that connects the living and the dead. In her discussion of female mediums and the act of spiritualistic or automatic writing, Jill Galvan writes that such channeling "involved not just a sensitive body but also, in many cases, compromised psychological control of that body" (62). Galvan compares the role of mediums in automatic writing to work in "typing and other late Victorian scribal functions often assigned to women" which "became associated with an automatic state of reduced or fragmented attention" (62).[9]

Yet in "The Looking-Glass," Mrs. Attlee gains agency instead of losing it, and her voice dominates the narration of the story. In the end, what she achieves through her mediation is the creation of belief, one that moves between Catholicism and spiritualism, and between this world and the next. As Mrs. Attlee later reflects, "For it was true I'd risked my soul . . . but then maybe I'd saved hers, in getting her away from those foul people, so the whole business was more of a puzzle to me than ever" (780). At this moment, Mrs. Attlee, who tries to keep within the range of Catholicism, feels that she succeeded in "saving" her customer's "soul" by making her believe in the actuality of a spiritualistic version of life after death.

The irony of this situation shows that Mrs. Attlee's achievement lies in making Mrs. Clingsland believe. Mrs. Attlee feels that she has "got to risk my punishment for the wrong I did to Mrs. Clingsland" (763), but Mrs. Clingsland shows

a great delight: "Oh, Cora—now at last he's spoken to me, really spoken. . . . I can well believe it. But this is a treasure I can live on for years" (780). Wharton wrote "The Looking-Glass" in the 1930s, looking back on the World War I era in which many spiritualists were active. However, the 1930s were also the time that intellectuals such as Ralph Barton Perry, in his work *The Thought and Character of William James* (1935), attempted to find a rational explanation or excuse for James's interest in psychical research (see Knapp 303–9). According to Galvan, some psychical researchers mixed empiricism with an "underlying hope in the existence of a spiritual plane of human activity"; they, like some spiritualists, sought "a substitute for religious faith—as a means of recovering, in the Victorian period of increasing disbelief, evidence of an immortal soul" (4). In writing about a former spirit medium and her customer, Wharton seems to sympathize with the spiritualists who are not convinced of the dogma of existing religion, but "The Looking-Glass" demonstrates an attempt to salvage belief in both.

This attitude resembles William James's philosophy of belief and connects to Wharton's preface to *Ghosts*. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), a book in which James often cites the findings of psychical researchers like Frederic Myers and Edmund Gurney, he insists that "it would never do for us to place ourselves offhand at the position of a particular theology" (456), stating that "that would be unfair to other religions, and . . . would be an over-belief" (456). James prefers to "seek first of all a way of describing the 'more'" (457), something "*operative in the universe outside of*" (454) the human, which can be experienced in various forms. But this does not necessarily mean that James denies believing in religion, for he, in the postscript, seeks a way to represent "divine protection" and "religious consolation" (469) universally. Wharton's attitude in "The Looking-Glass" seems similar to James's in that she lets different forms of belief coexist in one story.

Moreover, in his famous essay "The Will to Believe" (1896), James encourages religious belief in his discussion of "Pascal's Wager," which originally appeared in one of Wharton's favorite books, *Pensées*.[10] As he speculates on whether to believe in a religion, James writes, "We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical [*sic*] and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. . . . Scepticism [*sic*], then, is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk" (475). Here, James denies the strategic value of skepticism because it is a disadvantage in terms of the good things that come from religion. James then encourages the reader to

[172.71.254.120] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 00:05 GMT)

believe and to enjoy the benefits of belief. Similarly, Wharton's preface bypasses the absence of rational proof and presents the pleasure of the ghost story—being well-frightened—as a reward for accepting the premises of the ghost tale.

As Wharton suggests in the preface to *Ghosts*, we must believe in ghosts in order to enjoy ghost stories. Wharton must have noticed the similarity between believing in ghosts and believing in the afterlife that religion or spiritualists describe: if we do not believe, we are not able to enjoy. Therefore, we should not underestimate the value of Wharton's ghost stories, for they are the space in which Wharton examines the benefits of belief. In this sense, they support Singley's claim that "paradoxically . . . Wharton—who had always prided herself on rationality—valued religion at the end of her life because it embraced mystery" (37). Wharton, who inscribed on her gravestone the Catholic motto *Ave crux spes unica* seems to have wagered on the Catholic side, even though she never fully converted to Catholicism. Yet in her ghost stories, she employs spiritualistic views of the afterlife and entertains the idea of literary immortality through the medium of ghost tales. Like the psychical researchers who did not abrogate the possibility of supernatural phenomena, or like William James who recommended belief in religion even if it could not be proved, Wharton encourages us to make room for believing, just as we believe in ghosts naturally when reading a ghost story.

YUKI MIYAZAWA is a doctoral student in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature at Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan. His articles have appeared in *Literary Imagination* and *The Explicator*.

Notes

1. As seen in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, the question "Do you believe in ghosts?" (845) seems to have lingered throughout Wharton's life. Wharton viewed the ghost story as a "minor form" (Crow 113) but returned to it throughout her career. As Karen J. Jacobsen observes, "In the last decade or so, Edith Wharton's ghost stories have finally begun to attract the critical attention they deserve" (100).

2. For more on the "psychical research" movement, see Blum; Knapp. The connection between Wharton, James, and the contemporary scientific spiritualist movement has received little critical attention. In contrast, scholars often note or criticize Henry James's interaction with psychical research. See, for example, Sheppard 116–211. The details of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* are closely associated with psychical research (Sheppard 183–84), as is the short story "Sir Edmund Orme" (1891), based on psychical researcher Edmund Gurney. Later, Henry James also consulted a number of mediums following the death of his brother, William.

3. Hermione Lee observes that Wharton, after her father's death in 1882, became more skeptical and "mov[ed] away from her dark childhood religious preoccupations, and from conventional church-going practices" (63). In her late years, however, we can see the "evidence of her shift from scepticism [*sic*] to belief" (Lee 677) in her favorite quotations.

4. As Bridget Bennett concedes, spiritualism is a "broad term that covers a complex and sometimes heterodox system of beliefs and practices" that could also include "conflicting notions" (5). In this context, I use the word "spiritualists" following Wharton's use of it in "The Fulness of Life": people who claim that the immaterial soul exists beyond physical death, in an afterlife not necessarily defined by traditional religion. Although spiritualists often focused on communication with the dead, Wharton is less interested in that aspect, as the ghostly protagonist makes no attempt to contact her living husband.

5. Similarly, Shari Benstock, although admitting that "The Fulness of Life" is "a highly layered text that opens to a variety of interpretations" (31), uses it as an example of Wharton's "literary apprenticeship" (29–30), which "reveals more of Edith Wharton's personal situation in these years than she wanted the public to know" (31). Singley describes the protagonist as "a misguided spiritual seeker" (28) but focuses on treating the story as the "conflict between social and personal expectations" (27). See also Margaret B. McDowell, who claims that Wharton's ghost stories "provide a convenient focus for an inquiry into Mrs. Wharton's methods and achievement in short fiction" (133). "The Fulness of Life" is also notable for its use of visual images (Singley 27–28; Dwight 183–84).

6. See Port 3 on Wharton's concern about her reputation after her death. Note also Wharton's interest in All Souls' Day: see the entry on 2 Nov. 2010, in the Library of America's blog, *Reader's Almanac*.

7. While Wharton did not formally convert to Roman Catholicism, Singley writes that Wharton "came to faith in her later years, expressing a confidence in heaven and its ruling deity" (184). For a detailed account of Wharton and Catholicism, see Singley 184–208.

8. The motif of letters from the dead seems to have been important to Wharton. Candace Waid observes that "in both 'Mr. Jones' and 'Kerfol,' Wharton includes a reassuring motif: the discovery of the woman's words, which are read after her death by a sympathetic reader," which allows Wharton to "give play to her anxieties" (191). Waid emphasizes the importance of "Pomegranate Seed" (1931) along those lines (194–203).

9. For more on the historical background concerning female mediums and their representation in literature, see Galvan, especially the section on women's mediation in communication (62–68).

10. For the list of Wharton's favorite books in 1898, see Lewis, *Edith Wharton* 86.

Works Cited

Ammons, Elizabeth. *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980.

Bennett, Bridget. *Transatlantic Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Benstock, Shari. "Edith Wharton, 1862–1937: A Brief Biography." *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*. Ed. Carol J. Singley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. 19–48.

Blum, Deborah. *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life after Death*. 2006. New York: Penguin, 2007.

[172.71.254.120] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 00:05 GMT)

Carpenter, Lynette, and Wendy K. Kolmar, eds. *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspective on Ghost Stories by American Women*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1991.

Crow, Charles L. *American Gothic*. Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2009.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. *The History of Spiritualism*. Vol. 1. London: Cassell, 1926. Print.

Dwight, Eleanor. "Wharton and Art." *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*. Ed. Carol J. Singley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. 181–210.

Fedorko, Kathy A. "Edith Wharton's Haunted Fiction: 'The Lady's Maid's Bell' and *The House of Mirth*." Carpenter and Kolmar, 80–107.

Fisher, Benjamin F. "Transitions from Victorian to Modern: The Supernatural Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman and Edith Wharton." *American Supernatural Fiction: From Edith Wharton to the Weird Tales Writers*. Ed. Douglas Robillard. New York: Garland, 1996. 3–42.

Galvan, Jill. *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859–1919*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010.

Getz, John. "Edith Wharton and the Ghost of Poe: 'Miss Mary Pask' and 'Mr. Jones.'" *Edith Wharton Review* 21.1 (2005): 18–23.

Jacobsen, Karen J. "Economic Hauntings: Wealth and Class in Edith Wharton's Ghost Stories." *College Literature* 35.1 (2008): 100–127. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 15 Feb. 2017.

James, William. "The Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher.'" *Writings, 1902–1910*. Ed. Bruce Kuklick. New York: Library of America, 1987. 1250–65.

———. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Writings, 1902–1910*. Ed. Bruce Kuklick. New York: Library of America, 1987. 1–477.

———. "The Will to Believe." *Writings, 1878–1899*. Ed. Gerald Myers. New York: Library of America, 1992. 457–79.

Knapp, Krister Dylan. *William James: Psychical Research and the Challenge of Modernity*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2017.

Lee, Hermione. *Edith Wharton*. New York: Knopf, 2007.

Lewis, R. W. B. *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

———. "A Writer of Short Stories." *Edith Wharton*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. 9–28.

Lewis, R. W. B., and Nancy Lewis, eds. *The Letters of Edith Wharton*. New York: Scribner, 1988.

McDowell, Margaret B. "Edith Wharton's Ghost Stories." *Criticism* 12 (1970): 133–52.

Port, Cynthia. "Celebrity and the Epistolary Afterlife in Edith Wharton's Early Fiction." *Edith Wharton Review* 31.1–2 (2015): 3–28. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Feb. 2017.

Sheppard, E. A. *Henry James and The Turn of the Screw*. Auckland: Auckland UP, 1974.

Singley, Carol J. *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*. 1995. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.

Smith, Allan Gardner. "Edith Wharton and the Ghost Story." *Edith Wharton*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. 89–97.

Waid, Candace. *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991.

Wharton, Edith. *A Backward Glance. Novellas and Other Writings*. Ed. Cynthia Wolff. New York: Library of America, 1990. 767–1068.

———. "The Fulness of Life." 1893. *Collected Stories, 1891–1910*. Ed. Maureen Howard. New York: Library of America, 2001. 12–22.

———. *Ghosts*. New York: Appleton, 1937.

______. “The Looking-Glass” 1935. *Collected Stories, 1911–1937*. Ed. Maureen Howard. New York: Library of America, 2001. 763–81.

______. “Mr. Jones.” 1928. *Collected Stories, 1911–1937*. Ed. Maureen Howard. New York: Library of America, 2001. 497–523.

______. *The Writing of Fiction*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925.

“What All Souls’ Day Meant for Edith Wharton.” *Reader’s Almanac*. Library of America, 2 Nov. 2010. Web. 8 Feb. 2017.