

Agnieszka Kotwasińska

## Looking for Ghostly Crimes: Cross-Pollination of Crime and Gothic Fiction in Edith Wharton's "Mr. Jones"

### Introduction

In order to trace the tangled roots of Gothic and crime fiction, I would like to look at how the two genres came to be identified as wholly separate entities with their own sets of formulas, themes and characters.<sup>1</sup> I want to point to a number of affinities shared by crime and Gothic (some warily recognized, most vehemently denied) which, taken together, hint at an intimate bond between the two, a connection that cannot be explained away by mere coincidence. Since crime fiction emerged as a recognizable corpus of works a few decades after the popularity of the Gothic had already declined, I will concentrate on the canonization processes and genre formation surrounding the historically later genre.<sup>2</sup> By focusing on the ways in which crime fiction writers and critics tried to extricate their works from the Gothic, I hope

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- 1 Even though the distinction between crime and Gothic fiction seems to be taken for granted on today's publishing market with the two genres having their own separate shelves filled with novels that have genre-specific plots, formulas and protagonists, the development of these two fictions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was in no way mutually exclusive. In fact, Heather Worthington notes that crime first found its way into fiction through the Gothic genre; in British fiction in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and William Godwin's *Caleb Williams; or, Things as They Are* (1794), and in American texts such as *Wieland* (1798) and *Edgar Huntly* (1799–1800) by Charles Brockden Brown (16–17). Already in late eighteenth-century American crime fiction reached "an unprecedented diversification and development in new literary forms, including Gothic and urban Gothic novels, criminal biographies and adventures, and sensational trial pamphlets" (Moudrov 132). Meanwhile, the British Newgate novels of the 1830s and 1840s, and later the sensation fiction, which Maureen T. Reddy describes as "a Victorian development from gothic fiction" (191), established themes and plot structure for crime novels to come (Worthington 25).
  - 2 Catherine Spooner has rightly noted that even though the classic Gothic novel's popularity waned after 1820, "its distinctive tropes continued to influence other forms of nineteenth-century fiction" (246).

to reveal a deeply ingrained generic anxiety, which in turn can be linked to the accumulation of socio-cultural capital by the middle-classes and their uneasy relationship with the budding modernist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Finally, following Lucy Sussex's "polygenetic approach" to crime fiction (Sussex 1), I would like to read one of Edith Wharton's classic ghost stories, "Mr. Jones" (1928), and demonstrate how Wharton's text exemplified the often unacknowledged ways in which the Gothic and crime fiction formulas and themes came together, and how the figure of a female sleuth functioned in classic ghost stories written at the peak of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction.

The goal of this paper is three-fold. Firstly, I want to consider how and why crime fiction tried to disentangle itself from the Gothic and how at the end of the day the two types of generic literature do in fact share a number of commonalities, and their clearly demarcated borders have been and still are more porous than their respective advocates would care to admit. Secondly, I would like to prove that the reverse is also true, and crime fiction, and specifically one of its earliest and most popular genres—the detective story—did affect Gothic genres, such as Edith Wharton's "Mr. Jones". Establishing a chronological sequence of all the literary influences exceeds the scope of this essay, and for that reason, I decided to discuss this generic cross-pollination as a series of intensities and flows rather than clear-cut cause-and-result movements. The final objective of this paper is to search for new ways of reading early twentieth-century canonization processes which not only isolated specific genres but also molded them according to particular ideological agendas, which by definition could only include certain notions of generic propriety and had to exclude others. I hope that my essay will demonstrate that even though the major impetus behind the canonization of crime fiction was the emphasis on its being completely distinct from the Gothic, crime fiction conventions did seep into Gothic-inspired genres.<sup>3</sup>

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3 The phrase "crime fiction" is now understood as an umbrella term, of which "detective fiction" remains an important part, albeit much smaller than before (Ascari 6). For the sake of clarity, I will be referring to "detective fiction" whenever I want to stress specific Anglo-American texts that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories or classic whodunit novels of the 1920s and 1930s, whereas "crime fiction" will signal a more general denomination, including all of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts. Similarly, "Gothic fiction" remains an ambiguous designation which in this essay will refer not only to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British fiction of the likes of Ann Radcliffe or Matthew Lewis, but also to their American successors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, as well as to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century texts which are nowadays understood as either late-Gothic or proto-horror texts, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. "Ghost story" will refer specifically to late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century stories, very often written by women writers.

## Common Roots of Gothic and Crime

One could say that the struggle between the Romantic Spirit and Reason was finally won by the latter, and it was rationality that came to represent the standard line of inquiry by the beginning of the twentieth century. Still, this development did not automatically eliminate human longing for the marvelous, the fantastic, and the unexplainable. In fact, Maurizio Ascari, in his *Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational*, argues that "the enjoyment of readers depended precisely on the interplay between natural and supernatural elements, which engendered a fruitful tension between the domain of the intellect and that of the emotions" (2). The industrial revolution, urbanization and technological advancements offered a lifestyle bereft of superstitions, premonitions and the irrational fear of the unknown, yet at the same time these very processes cast serious doubts on the place of humanity in the larger scheme of things. All these incredible developments such as electricity, railway, photography, telephone or automobile disrupted temporal and spatial certainties offered by pre-modern times, and introduced new entries into the dictionary of phobias, fears and unexplained phenomena. Paradoxically then, the proud march of social and political progress as well as scientific invention did not dispel the shadows of the pre-industrial times, but rather perversely illuminated new fields of obscurity and the uncanny.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, "the melodramatic imagination," clearly noticeable in a number of nineteenth-century literary genres, "represented a conservative antidote to modernity, whose aesthetic fruit was realism and whose ideological fruit was positivism" (Ascari 58). Victorian writers in particular relied on symmetry, parallelism and opposition in order to sketch the everlasting battle between good and evil forces, fateful events and their far-reaching consequences. Ascari rightly identifies how the baroque plots, amazing coincidences and seemingly chaotic chance encounters on which the vast majority of Victorian plots are founded hint at a reality in which people are mere puppets (58). This preoccupation with auspicious turns of events and ghastly family secrets informs the concept of "gothic vestigiality" in which the sins of the fathers are visited on their children and which, in turn, nicely connects the Old Testament idea of retribution and the inescapability of punishment with the scientific emphasis on heredity and the Darwinian evolutionary theory (Spooner 246).

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4 For more on the relationship between the rise of the Enlightenment and the emergence of the uncanny, see Terry Castle's *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Thus, “gothic vestigiality” came to signify one of the central tropes of nineteenth-century fiction and as such permeated and shaped a number of genres, including that of crime fiction. To use Lucy Sussex’s expression, the Gothic could be seen as “a Pangea of genre literatures, containing within it the future continents of horror, science fiction (as with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*) and crime writing” (18). Sussex’s broad list is also echoed in Catherine Spooner’s lengthy enumeration of the specific genres influenced by the Gothic over the course of the nineteenth century: “the Newgate novel, Walter Scott’s historical fiction, the realist fiction of Dickens and the Brontës, the sensation novel, the ghost story, the American Gothic of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and crucially, the detective story” (246).

Notwithstanding the pervasiveness of “the melodramatic imagination” and “gothic vestigiality,” the last few decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the detective story writers and critics giving shape to the new genre by deftly “denying its sensational heritage” (Ascari 1) and, consequently, cutting any links to the Gothic. Spooner adds that “[i]n the climate of literary Modernism, Gothic was deeply unfashionable, and as a consequence Gothic associations were stripped from the detective story, which was regarded as merely a logical puzzle, ending by celebrating the triumph of rationalism” (246). The emphasis was to be placed on rationality rather than emotionality, on the one hand, and on high-brow and intellectually demanding literature rather than Victorian melodrama, on the other. Spooner links this anti-Gothic stance to the “modernist desire for severance from the nineteenth century and its supposedly torpid literary conventions” (248), which in turn could be subsumed under a much larger discussion of the place and function of the middle class on the eve of the twentieth century. As the middle-classes were vivacious and indiscriminate consumers of Victorian sentimental and sensational texts, it only stands to reason that the modernist turn to high-brow literature marked an attempt to channel and shape bourgeois aspirations to the upper-class artistic patronage. The newly emerging genre of detective fiction had to sever its ties from both its Gothic kin and sensational predecessors in the vein of the Newgate Calendar or Wilkie Collins’s novels, and prove to the readers and critics alike that it had been purged of any residual emotional taints which were gradually transferred to the uncultured and easily excitable lower-class body. By denying middle-class readers their simple pleasures derived from Gothic and crime fiction, the modernist critics and authors wanted to remove generic literature from its torpid, tacky and blatantly plebeian roots.<sup>5</sup>

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5 The elevation of crime fiction above the sensational, melodramatic and Gothic conventions can be also read in gendered terms. The emphasis on puzzle-solving and rationality could be read as a movement away from the emotionality and instability which are constructed

In a somewhat different vein, Srdjan Smajić describes the need for “generic purity” in crime fiction as a form of metatextual anxiety “that the supposedly rational genre in which the supposedly rational Holmes feels at home is everywhere contaminated by the supernatural, occult, or irrational; that the epistemological principles and investigative procedures that define detective fiction’s characteristic modality are deeply implicated in what the genre insists on condescendingly treating as ‘rubbish’ and ‘pure lunacy’” (3). Unsurprisingly, intense anxiety that the generic purity might be unattainable begets even more anxiety to a point where authors somewhat neurotically begin to probe the boundaries between the genres. Thus, even the foundational detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle were haunted by “clairvoyance, intuitionism and spiritualism,” which marked a titillating and illicit liaison between the two generic realms (Smajić 6).

The quest for generic purity in crime fiction was aided by a growing critical scholarship penned during the Golden Era of Detective Fiction in the 1920s and 1930s. Texts such as the 10 commandments of a mystery novel written by Ronald Knox in 1929 (or a more detailed list by S. S. Van Dine from 1928) sought to give shape to the expanding corpus of texts and provide a consistent framework for future critical analysis. Some of these early essays were later collected by Howard Haycraft in *The Art of the Mystery Story* (1946); he also published his own critical analysis of the genre five years earlier. These seminal works signed by Haycraft presented original crime fiction texts and their analyses selected so as “to sustain a normative view of a genre whose borders were being traced with increasing sharpness,” effectively blocking unwanted elements which stood for cheap thrills and morbid Gothicism (Ascari 3). As Joel Black suggests in “Crime Fiction and the Literary Canon,” the emphasis on the powers of rational and logical mind served to elevate detective fiction as an art form wholly divorced from its sordid, sensational roots: “Whereas the artistry of criminal-centered crime fiction tends to lie in Gothic sensationalism and psychological analysis, the artistry of detective fiction has traditionally been attributed to its display of what Poe called ‘ratiocination’ and Arthur Conan Doyle ‘intellectual acuteness’” (81).

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as specifically female traits in traditional Western philosophy and culture. Still, during the Golden Era of Crime Fiction, rational and painstaking puzzle-solving was no longer read as masculine enough, and the hard-boiled detective fiction of the likes of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler was consciously fashioned as a response to the puzzle-oriented, upper- and middle-classes focused, and supposedly “softer” feminized whodunits. Due to space restrictions I cannot dwell on this issue, but I will return briefly to the subject of gender differentiation in generic fiction in the later part of my essay.

### “Gothic Vestigiality” and Other Affinities

The first and perhaps most obvious element shared by crime fiction and the Gothic is the centrality of the criminal act which has to be excavated and examined in order to restore peace and close the rift that has since appeared. This epistemological fissure can take several forms and be shaped, for instance, as a temporal rift (ghostly figures invading the present or long-lost characters returning from the past), a spatial one (tombs or hidden compartments), a psychological one (doubling or paranoia), or more generally, a representational one in the sense that the protagonists are fooled by the masks and false appearances of duplicitous villains, deceitful femme fatales, or cunning patriarchs. I have avoided pointing to specific examples from Gothic or crime fiction as the motifs mentioned above can be easily found in both genres, and it is largely a matter of convention (shaped by genre-specific canonical practices) to associate, for example, femme fatales with hard-boiled detective fiction and evil father figures with classic Gothic texts. The reverse is, however, also true as prototypes of femme fatales can be found in Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Carmilla” (1872) or in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), whereas Agatha Christie included wicked relatives obsessed with inheritance in most of her classic whodunits.

The necessity of mending the epistemological rift in both Gothic and crime fiction signals two ways in which the concept of omniscience developed over the course of the nineteenth century. In its Gothic formulation, omniscience is associated with the all-knowing, but also terrifyingly whimsical Higher Being playing cruel games with humans whose perception is partial and distorted (Ascari 45). In its secular version, omniscience appears rational and stable, and as such is symbolized by Sherlock Holmes’s magnifying eye. Ultimately, however, the late-Victorian fascination with the myriad ways of looking, seeing, gathering data and interpreting information unearths a troubling epistemological doubt wrapped around the idea of agency and truth in a world increasingly ruled by the unmanageable forces of physics, biology, medicine and genetics. The detective’s compulsion to hunt for data, catalogue evidence and deduct information can no longer be explained away as mere curiosity, but rather it comes to signify a deep epistemological hesitancy concerning the nature of truth and representation.<sup>6</sup>

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6 As such, crime fiction is perfectly suited to such intellectual pursuits, as it illustrates “the functioning of a chronological and linear plot that starts with a violation of order, depicts the attempts to restore it, and ends once this aim has been achieved. It also demonstrates the importance of closure, as the conclusion represents a definitive ending, which reveals the logical, causal, and temporal connections among the events” (Pyrhönen 50).

The epistemological rift shared by both detective fiction and the Gothic brings to mind the above-mentioned "gothic vestigiality" understood as the "preoccupation with the return of past upon present," which forces the protagonists to tackle the scandalous specters of the former times (Spooner 246). Drawing on Paul Askenazy's work, Spooner argues that even though secrets from the past might stand in sharp contrast to the present values, they do shed light on the protagonists' current predicaments (248). This emphasis on unearthing the past and searching for an effective resolution of a mystery underpins not just classic Gothic fiction and many of its nineteenth-century permutations, but also the vast majority of twentieth-century and later horror texts whose lineage can be traced back directly to the Gothic.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the day, the fixation on the mystery which requires protagonists to search for clues, investigate (family) histories and find solutions is yet another shared feature of crime and Gothic fiction.

In fact, it was the Gothic that supplied the crime fiction with the concept of a "mystery" in the first place. The term "mystery" had "a history of wandering between literary genres", and while in the Middle Ages it indicated a biblical play, "by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it connoted the Gothic", as in Ann Radcliffe's 1794 bestseller—*The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Sussex 18). Still, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the "mystery novel" denoted a detective story rather than a Gothic narrative. Yet, in contrast with earlier Gothic secrets, the mysteries in detective fiction required a mystery specialist to solve them, be it a private eye, a police officer, a nosy spinster, a consulting detective, or an amateur sleuth.<sup>8</sup> The new-found emphasis on a distinct class of evidence-gathering professionals points, in turn, to a shift from the concept of persecution, a staple of Gothic fiction, to its twin sister—prosecution—in crime fiction (Ascari 42).

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7 In fact, Noel Carroll argues that typical horror narratives persistently follow the discovery plot, as human curiosity and morbid fascination with "cognitively threatening" monsters constitute *raison d'être* of all Gothic and horror texts (34).

8 The proto-detective figure might be traced back to the classic Gothic texts, but its first fully-fledged appearance is traditionally associated with Edgar Allan Poe's 1840s stories about C. Auguste Dupin. Poe's stories, in turn, influenced many later nineteenth-century American, British and French writers, and references to his works can be found in British sensation novels of the Victorian Era. Still, up until the mid-nineteenth century the emphasis was placed on the criminal (for instance, in widely popular Newgate novels) rather than the detective, and it was not until the late 1850s and 1860s that a slate of police detective's novels began to change that focus (Worthington 21). By the 1880s crime fiction was recognized both in the US and Britain, with the landmark Sherlock Holmes narrative, *A Study in Scarlet*, published in 1887 (Worthington 26).



Picking up on the changes in the Western criminal law and the philosophy of law enforcement, popular literary texts fed the rising interest in prosecution, rather than just persecution. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the socio-political theater transformed from a public demonstration of punishment associated with sovereign power to a more discrete display of disciplinary power (which included the emergence of prisons, advanced legal machine, slowly coalescing police forces, the transfer of the burden of proof from the accused to the accuser, etc.). As the bourgeoisie grew in numbers, the apparatus associated with the legal and police authorities expanded, and with time came to represent just as fascinating a subject to the middle-class authors as vengeful ghosts of the Gothicized past. In other words, the Gothic imagination was crowded with torture chambers, ghostly visitations and victimized maidens slowly gave way to more mundane dangers lurking just around the corner or, even worse, at the readers' own middle-class brownstone.<sup>9</sup> The frailty of a middle-class existence was further underscored by unjust inheritance laws, fickleness of the financial market, and socio-political upheavals. In "the secret theatre of home," violence, silence and abuse could be effectively hidden behind a veneer of respectability and behind a newly established insistence on the absolute right to privacy (Collins). Not surprisingly, many of the themes tackled by nineteenth-century novelists were connected to the question of inheritance, primogeniture, lost wills, passing on of titles and estates, and the myriad legal problems and potential loopholes that allowed for exploitation and misuse of paternal (and patriarchal) power.<sup>10</sup>

With family drama firmly embedded at the heart of the Gothic, its two distinct subtypes, the Female and the Male Gothic, revolved around the question of family and the protagonist's place in it. Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) stands for the prototype of the Female Gothic, which (quite independently of the writer's gender) focuses on the female protagonists whose main role is to escape the prison-like house and establish their own

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9 That is not to say that crime fiction eclipsed or replaced Gothic fiction. Still, classic Gothic fiction as well as its many offshoots (ghost story, cosmic horror, psycho-thriller, etc.) continue to give way to crime fiction in terms of popularity, sales, publicity and critical recognition till this very day.

10 These topics are usually associated with the rise of sensation novel in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Worthington argues, the sensational fiction "took crime right into the domestic sphere, the very heart of Victorian society. Abduction, adultery, murder, bigamy, fraud, seduction, forgery: the crimes in sensation fiction were social, personal, credible, and not committed by a criminal underclass but by the men and, shockingly, women of the middle and upper classes. Where the Newgate novels tended to be set in the past, sensation fiction was made sensational by its proximity to the present in both its action and its settings" (23).



safe haven by the end of the narrative, preferably through a successful marriage.<sup>11</sup> The key to escaping the tyrants who keep them locked is to solve the family mystery and repair the epistemological rift the secret has caused in the first place. The emphasis is thus placed on the value of knowledge as well as the ability to learn "to read (or rather, not to *misread*) appearances" by female characters (Williams 144, original italics).<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the Male Gothic, perhaps best exemplified by Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), relies heavily on the figure of a male villain, whose expulsion from the warm hearth forms the center of the narrative, and whose violent tale rarely provides the readers with a resolution in the form of a happy ending. Looking at these two forms of the Gothic, Sussex suggest that the Male Gothic could be seen as a link between the picaresque and the Newgate novel, and in a way it prefigures the twentieth-century psycho-thriller, with Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) being its best-known example, with a monstrous male anti-hero usurping the main stage. The Female Gothic, on the other hand, can be linked with Sherlock Holmes stories because of the shared insistence on the search for clues and the quest for rational explanations (Sussex 30).

Contrary to the popular understanding, many nineteenth-century Gothic novels emphasized the logical and rational over the irrational and fantastic. According to Anne Williams's redefinition of the Female Gothic, the "plot has a constructive and empowering function for its female readers" mainly because of its comic undertones, preoccupation with terror rather than horror, and, most importantly, the emphasis which is placed on the female ability to reason and solve the mysteries (138). Adrienne E. Gavin notes that even in the earliest examples of Gothic fiction, such as Ann Radcliffe's novels, the heroines who were victimized or imprisoned were also able to orchestrate their "escape through proto-detective methods" (259). The

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11 Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith rightly point out that the usefulness of the term "Female Gothic" has been repeatedly called into question since the early 1990s (1). While some critics pointed to its limited scope and exclusionary nature, others saw in the Female Gothic a precursor to contemporary "victim feminism" (Wallace and Smith, 4). Still, in a move away from the 1970s and 80s psychoanalytically inspired criticism, contemporary criticism has opted not so much for the demolition of the term, as for its fragmentation and multiplication; hence, the proliferation of terms such as the lesbian Gothic, post-feminist Gothic, Gothic feminism, women's Gothic, etc.

12 Similarly, Eugenia C. DeLamotte in her influential study of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction puts emphasis on the complexity of knowledge, which quite often fuses the two meanings of the word: knowledge understood as more abstract result of learning, education and investigation, and knowledge understood as human intimacy and erotic familiarity (49).

women in these tales search for and find answers which are rational and logical, and which ultimately dispel the superstitions and bad omens that kept the readers glued to the previous chapters. This particular type of “the heroine-sleuth of the Female Gothic reappears across genres, in few texts that are indubitably crime,” argues Sussex (34). In fact, such a heroine becomes an “organic and migrating formation,” and the trope of female detection traverses a number of literary forms such as realist or domestic fiction, before finding its way to crime fiction (Sussex 35).

### Female Sleuths and Female Gentlemen

Lady detectives of nineteenth-century texts were “independent, confident, clever women who variously use knowledge and observation of domestic environments and human behavior, female intuition, and their capacity for going unnoticed or being underestimated in solving crimes” (Gavin 258). Still, they usually turned to solving crime in order to clear their male relatives’ names or because they needed a job. And most of them generally ended their detective adventures with settling down and getting married.<sup>13</sup> It was not until the Golden Age of Detective Fiction that female protagonists and women writers finally matched the popularity of their male counterparts. Still, most of the heroines of the said period were “nosy spinsters or the helpmates of male detectives” (Reddy 193).

In *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: Female Gentleman*, Melissa Shaub examines works of popular female crime writers such as Agatha Christie or Dorothy L. Sayers and points out that a number of British women writers of the Golden Age of Crime Fiction created female sleuths who embodied the ideal of gentlemanliness. Even though after the First World War this idea became more ambiguous and debatable, still many popular cultural texts of the interwar period invoked the idealized version of this concept as a preferred condition for everyone, including women. With the rise of the bourgeoisie, the notion shed some of its aristocratic connotations, and at least theoretically became a condition that was open to the middle-classes. Shaub argues that far from disappearing in the interwar period, “[g]entlemanliness was still a desired state, and middlebrow novelists used its desirability to leverage their vision of women’s

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13 The examples of early detective fiction with female detectives include such disparate works as Catherine Crowe’s *Susan Hopley* (1841) and William Stephens Hayward’s *The Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1864) on the British scene, and *The Female Barber Detective* (1895) by Albert W. Aiken and Anna Katharine Green’s *The Leavenworth Case* (1878) across the Atlantic.

progress by co-opting it for their own use" (3). And in contrast with the earlier New Woman ideal which "sought to employ an essentialist definition of women as morally superior," the Female Gentleman reworks a certain androgynous amalgamation of male and female elements discussed by Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf (Shaub 24).

In a way, the "effeteness" of certain male detectives in the Golden Age novels (such as Hercule Poirot) was counterbalanced by a pronounced toughness, practicality and no-nonsense attitude of their female counterparts (Shaub 5). In the wake of the First World War, at a moment when the concept of gentlemanliness was all but dead, it was taken over by women writers as a way of representing strong females. According to the definition suggested by Shaub, the female gentleman is "competent, courageous, and self-reliant in practical situations, capable of subordinating her emotions to reason and the personal good to the social good, and possessed of 'honor' in the oldest sense of the term" (8). On the one hand, these traits situate the female gentleman in opposition to the Victorian Angel in the House, but at the same time they remain acutely "problematic for a twenty-first-century reader because of its emphasis on concepts like honor and birth" (Shaub 8).

Following Melissa Shaub's contention that many women detectives of the Golden Era of Crime Fiction personified the ideal of gentlemanliness, I would like to read Edith Wharton's protagonist in "Mr. Jones," Lady Lynke, in the same manner. Such a reading will reveal both the porous nature of the borders between the two genres as well as the invalidity of strictly gendered distinctions between certain conventions of generic fictions. Of course, Lady Lynke could only be read in terms of a transgeneric female sleuth whose origins may be traced back to Radcliffe's Female Gothic heroine. However, the figure of a female detective who also embodies the ideal of gentlemanliness exposes the intricate ways of creating and sustaining genre-specific versions of masculinity and femininity. Additionally, the concept of the female gentleman opens the floor for the discussion of class relations in "Mr. Jones" and, more specifically, how class distinctions functioned in the Golden Era of Detective Fiction.

### **Lady Lynke's Search for Gothic Crimes**

Edith Wharton's ghost story "Mr. Jones" effectively collapses generic distinctions between Gothic and crime fiction by utilizing the trope of a female sleuth, a figure who not incidentally also embodies the female gentleman ideal. Lady Lynke, who through a fortuitous coincidence inherits an abandoned estate in Kent, delves into the mystery of the last mistress of the said house, Lady Juliana

Thudenev, who is simply described on Lord Thudenev's tomb as "Also His Wife." Lady Lynke attempts to learn more about Lady Juliana who, as it turns out, was a deaf and dumb daughter of a West-Indian merchant, married for her money and later kept locked in the family mansion and supervised by her philandering and gambling husband's loyal butler, Mr. Jones. Lady Juliana was not, however, the only victim of Mr. Jones who continues to exert his power from beyond the grave. It is only on the final pages of the story that readers learn that the eponymous Mr. Jones, who has never been seen by Lady Lynke and who keeps bossing around the terrified female servants, is in fact a ghost. More than that, he is a ghost who strangles one of the female servants in retaliation for Lady Lynke's direct insubordination.

Lady Lynke intuitively knows that the history of Bells includes "the unchronicled lives of the great-aunts and great-grandmothers" whose histories were buried under, rather than alongside, the histories of their husbands, fathers and brothers (Wharton 175). As a fiercely independent woman Lady Lynke is naturally drawn to the mystery of Lady Juliana, whose identity was completely subsumed under her husband's name in a rather twisted interpretation of *couverture*. Determined to uncover the suppressed story of Lady Juliana, Lady Lynke disobeys Mr. Jones's orders and insists on getting access to the muniment room where the family archives are kept. And when she is finally able to enter the mysterious room, she finds the annals incomplete. As a result, she breaks the ultimate ban imposed by Mr. Jones and goes through a desk in Lady Juliana's old parlor where the butler kept his personal papers. Interestingly, the punishment for this offence is dealt not to her, but to the housekeeper, Mrs. Clamm, who was unable to stop Lady Lynke from looking through the drawers in the first place. His victim, Mrs. Clamm, who throughout the narrative acted as a messenger between Mr. Jones and her mistress, is also Mr. Jones's grand-niece.

With the murder of his own offspring, Mr. Jones becomes an emblematic patriarchal tyrant, and in this respect, a typical Female Gothic plot is revisited by Wharton. It could even be argued that the mystery that Lady Lynke and her friend Stramer are trying to solve is precisely a classic Gothic tale of female exploitation and submission. And as in a typical Female Gothic plot, the supernatural is explained away rationally, as Lady Juliana's vacant and miserable look on a 1818 portrait is revealed to result from her marital unhappiness and forced seclusion arranged by Mr. Jones. It is in the outer frame of the text, that is Lady Lynke's stay at Bells and her dealings with the undetectable Mr. Jones, that the supernatural erupts with full force in the figure of the elderly servant's ghost. Ultimately Lady Lynke's dealings with Mr. Jones stray from the prescribed Gothic plot, as she becomes obsessed with the locked room mystery in which both Gothic and detective elements are fused together. This motif is

thematically performed at several points in the narrative. First of all, the muniment room to which the key mysteriously disappears; secondly, the cold blue parlor room where Lady Julianna was imprisoned by Mr. Jones and which he supposedly still treats as his own study; and lastly, Mr. Jones's own room which cannot be accounted for. This typical detective fiction trope is, however, heavily imbued with Gothic elements, the most important being a suggestion of entombment.<sup>14</sup>

The humorous and slightly contemptuous portrayal of Gothic themes and the supernatural brings to the surface the self-reflexivity of Gothic-inspired fiction and the problematic nature of representation (Beer and Horner 270). Lady Lynke, upon arriving at her new estate, visits the family chapel where she finds the painting of the last master of Bells, Viscount Thudeney, whose visage is mockingly described as of "a young man with a fine arrogant head, a Byronic throat and tossed-back curls" (171). The sardonic voice does not spare Lady Lynke, who is described as a thirty-five-year-old woman who "had gone early from home, lived in London lodgings, travelled in tropic lands, spent studious summers in Spain and Italy, and written two or three brisk businesslike little books about cities usually dealt with sentimentally. And now... she stood ankle-deep in wet bracken, and gazed at Bells lying there under a September sun that looked like moonlight" (171). The sharp contrast between her businesslike demeanor and the romantic estate bathed in sunlight (which, as the Gothic convention would have it, has to resemble moonlight) exposes the parodic quality of the whole story. The Gothic line of inquiry is mocked or ignored by Lady Lynke who insists on the search for rational explanations and demands to meet Mr. Jones whom she perceives only as an obstinate and insubordinate servant rather than an adversary. In this respect, she resembles Sherlock Holmes with his disdain for the supernatural and his stubborn quest for rational truth amidst the seemingly uncanny facts.

The Gothic trappings notwithstanding, it is also possible to read Lady Lynke as a female gentleman taken straight out of classic whodunits from the 1920s and 30s. As a woman of independent means, she is described as a typical gentleman, traveling to Spain, Italy and other far-off places, studying abroad, and writing businesslike books. Lady Lynke "was unlike other people" and when she heard about her inheritance "she borrowed a motor and slipped away alone to Thudeney-Blazes," which even by interwar standards would hardly be considered a typically feminine course of action (Wharton 170). When one of her female

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14 At one point Lady Lynke discovers that one of the walls of the blue parlor was furtively added for no apparent reason.

guests forgets her handbag, Lady Lynke refuses her male colleague's offer to fetch it, and resolutely comes back to the unlit blue parlor unafraid to deal with whatever (or whoever) is lurking in the shadows. Angered by her servants' lack of cooperation, she hires a locksmith to help her get into the muniment room, and when that fails, she threatens to "break in that door myself, if I have to" (186). In a rather comic twist of events, it is Lady Lynke who enters first all the potentially haunted spaces throughout the narrative, while her male friend, Stramer, follows meekly "in her wake" (Wharton 192). In a way, whereas she plays the role of a rational "male," her male companion acts as the more intuitive and hesitant of the two, hence he is the one culturally coded "female." What is more, it is Stramer who intuitively suggests, albeit in a half-joking manner, that Mr. Jones might in fact be a ghost.

As a female gentleman, Lady Lynke also exemplifies some of the concept's more problematic features, specifically a prominent class short-sightedness. Karen J. Jacobsen in her analysis of Wharton's ghost stories rightly notes that Lady Lynke actually does not know much about her family's history and how exactly they managed to amass so much wealth. The only thing the heroine recalls is that her family "had never greatly distinguished themselves; they had gathered substance simply by holding on to what they had, and slowly accumulating privileges and acres. 'Mostly by clever marriages,' Lady Lynke thought with a faint contempt" (171). Contempt or not, she is more than happy to finance her independent lifestyle with the money accumulated by her female ancestors. Even though it is easy to read this particular Wharton story as an example of a feminist disruption of patriarchal tyranny represented by Mr. Jones, I find it much more interesting to examine their conflict in terms of the servant-employer relationship. Seen from this angle, Mister Jones becomes "Master Jones usurping power from the Lynkes of Thudency who have owned Bells for six hundred years" (Jacobsen 110). Instead of perpetuating the stereotype of a doggedly faithful servant, Mr. Jones supersedes the last lord of Bells (and Lady Juliana's husband) and takes over not only the estate but the household staff as well. The marked tension between the two classes is rarely one-sided in Wharton's short stories and even while presenting Mr. Jones as a renegade servant, Wharton continues to subvert Lady Lynke's authority by describing her as someone who is able to slip ever so easily into the role of an exacting mistress and who treats her servants with growing impatience and irritation. The heroine follows the ideal of gentlemanliness to the letter by flouting her class superiority, and by being convinced that all her demands must be met by all her servants, even the dead ones. Through Lady Lynke and Mr. Jones' conflict, Wharton was able to signal some of the ways in which the servant-master relationship was becoming increasingly strained in the interwar period.

## Conclusion

In a way, Lady Lynke does not fare well as a Female Gothic heroine, as she is unable to see the reality for what it really is, and her intuitive perception fails her miserably. Still, the fact that she clings so tenaciously to the laws of physics and logic, may mark her as a twentieth-century female sleuth who in her practicality and will to knowledge resembles Miss Marple rather than Gothic heroines. By placing the rational and the logical before the intuitive and the emotional, she thus thwarts the essentialist stance which construes her as a feminized subject representing not the mind, but the body; not culture, but nature. As a female sleuth, Lady Lynke embodies the legacy of nineteenth-century fiction in that her character chooses rationalism and scientific inquiry over the Victorian "melodramatic imagination." At the same time, Wharton suggests that being a gentleman detective is not enough to solve certain mysteries, and a sleuth lacking intuition and sensitivity will ultimately fail. It is thus possible to argue that "Mr. Jones" offers not only a parody of Gothic tropes, but also a critique of ultra-rational classic detective subject. Lady Lynke's gentleman-like behavior, with its connotations of rationality and calm demeanor, ultimately betrays her, as she remains blind to the irrational elements and persistently disregards Gothic warnings.

"Mr. Jones" provides a fascinating example of how even such a highly codified and canonized Gothic genre as the ghost story could be influenced by other literary forms as late as the 1920s and 30s. Wharton demonstrates her ease in navigating smoothly between the two fictions and their genres: a ghost story, a detective story, a haunted house tale, a mystery. Written at a time when crime fiction and its genres were being codified and stripped of any ties to their nineteenth-century sensational and Gothic predecessors, "Mr. Jones" proves a polymorphous theory of genre formation developed by Alistair Fowler in *Kinds of Literature: an Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, which postulates an organic growth of genres and "denies a mutual exclusiveness between genres," as genres do not possess explicit and fixed boundaries (Ascari 8). And just as generic conventions prove to be open to mergers and exchanges, so do the gendered distinctions of generic protagonists. Consequently, the tropes of female sleuths and female gentlemen illustrate an often-overlooked feature of crime and Gothic fictions which alongside the stereotypically gendered characters often include protagonists whose expressions of femininity and masculinity are pliable and subject to change.



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