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**Edith Wharton's "Book of the Grotesque":
Sherwood Anderson, Modernism,
and the Late Stories**

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With a few notable exceptions, among them "After Holbein," the much-anthologized "Roman Fever," and fine late ghost stories like "All Souls," Edith Wharton's late fiction has generally received little critical attention and even less critical respect. In their studies of the short fiction, Evelyn Fracasso and Janet Beer address some of the late stories but focus on the earlier ones, while essays on individual stories also favor those written earlier in Wharton's career, with the exception of work by Charlotte Rich, Carol Singley, and Jennifer Haytock on the stories of colonialism and empire. Barbara A. White goes further, lamenting the dismissal of the late stories by Edmund Wilson yet declaring that many of Wharton's late stories are "bad," in part because of what she sees as their distasteful humor (83). But Wharton was not the only American writer to choose distasteful subjects and treat them with a combination of humor, horror, and pity, for this combination also describes the short stories of an American modernist master of the short story form, Sherwood Anderson.¹ In "The Book of the Grotesque," the opening chapter of *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson explains his method through one of the parable-like stories that the book employs: an old man begins to write by picturing truths and the people who live by them. The truths them-

selves were beautiful, but "the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque, and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (26).²

Anderson's theory of the grotesque not only explains the theme of *Winesburg, Ohio* but also reflects standard concepts of modernism: the impossibility of knowing a single truth, and the sometimes destructive—or comic—effects of placing one's faith in reason's ability to discover it; the failure of language to express such truths; and the transcendent power of the epiphany. Wharton's works, too, focus on this issue of the truth in their exploration of moral dilemmas. For example, in the early stories, which read like earnest morality plays, characters agonize over questions of ethical choice, such as Birkton's concern over selling out artistically in order to provide for his sister's future in "That Good May Come" or Lydia Tillotson's hesitations over the lies involved if she marries her lover in "Souls Belated." But in several of the late stories, the protagonists' devotion to absolute values makes them grotesques in Anderson's sense of the word. Moreover, with its connotations of disability and distortion, of truths told incoherently and refracted through a fitfully comprehending listener, the term "grotesque" signifies not only a truth imperfectly told but one inextricably linked with the body, suggesting to modern readers Bakhtin's concept of "grotesque realism," which destabilizes realism and "discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world."³ The late stories are in this way

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different in genre but not in theme from the ghost stories, which likewise disclose “the potentiality of an entirely different world.” In both types of stories, fidelity to a single transcendent truth, like adherence to a single standard of reality, is undermined through the ironically rendered perceptions of the characters in the tale. Critics have been eager to see destabilizing and subversive elements in the ghost stories but have sometimes dismissed the possibility that such elements can exist in the late magazine fiction. Yet the late stories preach much the same message as the ghost stories: the nature of truth is never certain, as the nature of the spectral world in the ghost stories is rarely definite. In no realm is this uncertainty as clear, and as comic, as in Wharton’s non-ghost stories dealing with the dead.

Two of Wharton’s late stories, “The Looking Glass” (1936) and “The Day of the Funeral” (1933), display a mordant humor in their depiction of the grotesque and demonstrate the ways in which Wharton challenges standard features of modernism such as the epiphany. “The Looking Glass” features a frame story in which the Irish Mrs. Cora Attlee talks to her granddaughter Moyra, and an inner story, her tale of interactions with her employer, Mrs. Clingsland. One of Wharton’s pampered, superficial society women, Mrs. Clingsland, according to Mrs. Attlee, would have had “a loving nature, if only anybody’d shown her how to love” (849). As her name suggests, she clings only to the truth of her own beauty, a devotion that makes her obsessed with her reflection in the mirror, a truth-telling device that must always fail her. Like Mrs. Heeny from *The Custom of the Country*, Mrs. Attlee is a masseuse who can heal the wounded psyches of the rich through conversation, and she tries to help by listening to Mrs. Clingsland. But Mrs. Clingsland becomes inconsolable and grows thin after a botched face lift leaves her “looking like a ghost, with a pouch under one eye” (850). Her physical transformation into a grotesque is a literal and figurative manifestation of her obsession with the truth of her beauty, and she seeks out multiple looking glasses for comfort: the mirror, Mrs. Attlee, and finally the spirit world.

In despair at her ruined looks, Mrs. Clingsland calls on Mrs. Attlee’s psychic powers so that she can be comforted by the spirit of Harry, a young man who had admired her but had died on the Titanic. Worried that she cannot feed the insatiable appetite of Mrs. Clingsland’s extravagant self-regard in a properly convincing, educated voice—“you might as well have asked me to write a Chinese dictionary” (853), she tells Moyra—Mrs. Attlee recruits an impoverished young man, a former tutor, to provide the text for Harry’s spirit messages. Mrs. Clingsland swallows the compliments from the spirit world down “like champagne,” in language that establishes her as one of

Wharton’s psychological vampires. After telling Mrs. Clingsland that Harry had been “[b]linded by her beauty; struck dumb by love of her!” Mrs. Attlee comments, “Oh, but that’s what she’d been thirsting and hungering for all these years” (853). Mingling grotesque humor and pathos, the story comes to an Anderson-like ironic conclusion when Mrs. Attlee goes to pick up a letter, supposedly from Harry, that the tutor has written. But when she reaches his apartment, she discovers that the tutor has died, and since the letter is half hidden under the bed, she must get down and reach under it—as his body lies on it—to pick up the letter. When Mrs. Clingsland asks about getting more letters, Mrs. Attlee speaks a figurative truth that is also a literal truth: “I spoke very gravely. ‘It’s not an easy thing, ma’am, coaxing a letter like that from the dead’” (858).

The sentence reads like a punch line because it is one. The potential tragedy of Mrs. Clingsland’s delusional devotion to her own beauty has been transformed into comedy by Mrs. Attlee’s flat statement and by her unconscious punning (“gravely”). With this substitution of comedy for tragedy, the reasons for Wharton’s specifying Mrs. Attlee’s ethnicity, giving her a light Irish dialect, and making a lower-class character the narrator of the story, all unusual features in her fiction, become clear. On one level, “The Looking Glass” is really a joke of the familiar Pat and Mike variety. In Pat and Mike stories, the humor resides in having a literal-minded pair of Irishmen debating some point of obvious truth, blinded to the implications of their words by their cultural position as immigrants, their religion, their stupidity, or some combination of the three. This type of humor relies on Pat and Mike taking literally what is meant figuratively so that the reader perceives the irony. Wharton’s humor reverses that dynamic, as Mrs. Attlee tells a literal truth that she knows the desperate Mrs. Clingsland will take figuratively: it really *isn’t* easy coaxing letters from the dead. Yet at a deeper level, the story poses a serious question, the same Jamesian question at the heart of early and late stories ranging from “The Rembrandt” to “Her Son”: is it ethically correct to foster a comforting delusion even if the only way to do so is to perpetuate a lie? The entire story of “The Looking Glass” unfolds as a series of reflecting mirrors and deceptions in its pursuit of this idea. In the inner story, Mrs. Clingsland is tricked into a reliance on the spirit world partly by Mrs. Attlee but primarily by her own obsessive quest for reassurance about her beauty. At the level of narration, Mrs. Attlee deceives herself about the legitimacy of her involvement in the spirit world, despite her promise to Father Divott that she would give up such activities, by describing the comfort she has given to Mrs. Clingsland. Finally, at the level of the frame story, Moyra tricks her grandmother into telling the “unconfessed” (846) story by pretending an

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interest in the moral question of the case, when actually she just wants to hear about the “one grave lapse” (846)--another unintentional pun, this time on Moyra’s part--in her grandmother’s life.

As the looking glass or literally the medium (perhaps another of Wharton’s deadpan jokes) through which Mrs. Clingsland can see her beauty reflected in the eyes of another, Mrs. Attlee understands her role in the deception and worries about its consequences for her place in the afterlife. Yet at an extratextual level, the irony in Mrs. Attlee’s solution to her moral dilemma is evident to the reader. Although she worries about, and Father Divott forbids, dabbling in the spirit world and transmitting its false messages, she is comforted by her final deception of Mrs. Clingsland, getting her to pay \$100 for masses toward the soul of the impoverished tutor. “I had hard work making her believe there was no end of the masses you could say for a hundred dollars,” Mrs. Attlee tells Moyra (858). She never sees that she is herself deceived: like the false letters from the spirit world she conveys to Mrs. Clingsland, the purchase of masses in U.S. currency marks another incongruous intersection of the spiritual and material, an intersection that in terms of the story’s logic renders the masses an equally false system of consolation. “The Looking Glass” is not what it seems at first, a sentimental story in which a wise, self-sacrificing servant protects a foolish but lovable mistress by catering to her illusions. Wharton completely undercuts this sentimental plot, for Mrs. Clingsland remains tragically grotesque in her devotion to a warped truth, and Mrs. Attlee accepts her dual deception of Father Divott and Mrs. Clingsland. Both women remain so comically enmeshed both in the material world and in spiritual worlds that can be bought and sold that transcendent understanding—an epiphany—is impossible.

Stories such as “The Looking Glass” and “The Day of the Funeral” are the flip side of the late ghost stories, for instead of the supernatural element amplifying the charac-

ters’ fears and illusions, the macabre humor deflates the significance of these illusions by providing a dose of reality. For example, grim comedy characterizes the first lines of “The Day of the Funeral”: “His wife had said: ‘If you don’t give her up I’ll throw myself from the roof.’ He had not given her up, and his wife had thrown herself from the roof” (669). The statement is arresting and darkly funny, but it also happens to characterize exactly the materialist perspectives of Ambrose Trenham, the intellectual college professor whose life for the twenty-four hours following his wife Milly’s death is the focus of the story.^{iv} “The Day of the Funeral” is a portrait of a relentless egotist, one of Wharton’s most selfish male characters in a body of work that does not lack for examples of self-regarding men. The truth to which Trenham clings, and that renders him a grotesque, is his belief that he lives a disinterested life of the mind and is able to judge his own motives rationally, a truth that the narration undercuts at every turn. For example, he believes that he is above caring about such mundane issues as leaving food on the table, saying “what does it matter?” even though his wife, Milly, abhors the practice because it attracts flies (671). But Trenham actually lives in a resolutely material realm in which he is interested primarily in food and sex. Unlike Hugh Millner of Wharton’s early story “The Blond Beast,” he never develops the imagination that would allow him to sympathize with another person or to deny any of his primal desires. Wharton emphasizes his bestial qualities through scenes of eating. After deciding to remove Barbara Wake, his lover, from his life for her annoying habit of wanting to talk to him, he finds himself hungry and demands food and consolation from the mild-mannered servant, Jane. Later, after an elaborate scene of sealing Barbara’s letters into a packet and writing her a letter terminating their relationship, he “dined hungrily” (674) as if to reward himself after the effort of the decision by symbolically eating the body of what he has killed.

“The Day of the Funeral” teases the reader by hinting at a redemption of Trenham that never happens, and as such it negates both the premise of nineteenth-century morality tales about the power of the deceased to reform the living and the modernist convention of the epiphany. In thinking about his wife as he had never done when she was alive, Trenham has enough insight to realize that her coldness “concealed a passion so violent that it humiliated her” (675). Yet he still blames her for the failure of their relationship, as he blames Barbara for attending Milly’s funeral, in his eyes a breach of decorum that will force him to break off his relationship with Barbara. Walking toward Barbara’s garage, their usual trysting spot, to return her letters, he decides magnanimously to give her another chance. His decision, however, is less motivated by morality than

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by a physical response. Seeing Barbara's "slim gloveless hand" as he enters the dark garage makes him recall his "kiss on the palm" when he had met her, and remembering that "sensuous elastic palm" makes him reconsider whether he wants to "carry on life without ever again knowing the feel of that hand" (676). Readers of "Beatrice Palmato" and of the carriage scene between Ellen and Archer in *The Age of Innocence* will recognize the erotic significance of hands and palms in Wharton's works: Trenham's decision to reunite with Barbara has less to do with duty than with his arousal at the sexually charged memory of her hands. As often happens in Wharton's stories, the discovery of the packet of letters, the tangible evidence of a dead love affair, seals his fate. Despite Trenham's change of heart and his wish to conceal the letters, they fall to the ground, and Barbara insists upon reading Trenham's letter breaking off their affair. When she questions him about his wife's knowledge of the affair, she is horrified by Trenham's indifference toward Milly's feelings and dismisses him forever. The epiphany is Barbara's, not Trenham's, as she recognizes him for what he really is.

Wharton follows this reversal of traditional plotting with another that resonates even more closely with her ghost stories. Late ghost stories like "Pomegranate Seed" pit two women, one living and one dead, against each other for the soul of the man they both love, with the dead one winning through the medium of letters. But Milly Trenham

is that rarity in Wharton's fiction, a woman who left no diaries or letters, and, as "The Looking Glass" establishes, "It's not easy coaxing letters from the dead." Instead of presenting two women vying for the attentions of a man, "The Day of the Funeral" asks what would happen if the dead woman and the living one joined forces along gender lines to challenge the callous indifference of the man they had loved. A greater man might learn something from their reactions, but Trenham is motivated only by physical comfort and an iron-clad sense of self-regard. Shrugging off his encounter with Barbara, Trenham returns home to the friendly ministrations of Jane, whose "friendly hand," rather than Barbara's sexualized one, "[shuts] him safely into" his house and his familiar life (686) as she prepares to take Milly's place. Like the characters of "The Looking Glass," Trenham will never experience the epiphany that the reader expects from a modernist story. The familiar plot of the intellectual saved through immersion in emotion (as in D. H. Lawrence's "The Horse Dealer's Daughter") is refuted, for "The Day of the Funeral" argues that it is possible to be an intellectual and a sensualist without possessing a soul. As Sherwood Anderson's characters discover, living in and through the body cannot provide salvation, nor can intellectual reasoning, unless human beings can communicate with one another. In embracing the single truth that life is wholly material and governed solely by reason, Trenham renders himself a grotesque without the

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Edith Wharton Collection Research Award

Deadline: March 15, 2011

Each year the Edith Wharton Society offers a Edith Wharton Collection Research Award of \$1500 to enable a scholar to conduct research on the Edith Wharton Collection of materials at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Prospective fellows for the 2011-2012 award are asked to submit a research proposal (maximum length 5 single-spaced pages) and a resume by March 15, 2011 to Margaret Murray, (murraym@wcsu.edu) Western Connecticut State University.

The research proposal should detail the overall research project, its particular contribution to Wharton scholarship, the preparation the candidate brings to the project, and the specific relevance that materials at the Beinecke collection have for its completion. The funds need to be used for transportation, lodging, and other expenses related to a stay at the library. Notification of the award will take place by April 15th and the award can be used from May 1, 2011 through May 1, 2012. A final report will be due June 1, 2012.

We are pleased to announce that the winner of the 2010 Edith Wharton Research Award is:

Dr. Irene Goldman-Price
for her project:

Tonni and Herz: Forty Years of Correspondence from Edith Wharton to
Anna Catherine Bahlmann

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possibility of the understanding that some of Anderson's characters manage to achieve.

Rather than seeing the late stories as "bad," as White suggests, they can be considered as commentary on, and critique of, the kind of absolute adherence to truth that modernism had shattered. The result for Wharton and Anderson is modernist stories that end in a manner that is sometimes comic, often ironic, and always appropriately unsatisfying. With their use of dark humor and multiple ironies, "The Looking Glass" and "The Day of the Funeral" undercut sentiment in ways that help to produce an alternative vision of the reality that their characters experience. In short, when considered as Wharton's own "Book of the Grotesque," the late stories seem less like unsatisfactory examples of a realist mode than sophisticated variations on a modernist one.

Notes

ⁱ Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) centers primarily on the experiences of young George Willard, whose encounters with the townspeople reveal to him, a future writer, their secret isolation and despair.

ⁱⁱ Wharton's library contains a copy of Anderson's *A Story Teller's Story* (1924) given to her by Walter Berry.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bakhtin adds that grotesque realism, which "discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life . . . leads man out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable" (48).

^{iv} Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls this opening "several of Wharton's funniest lines" and sees the story as proof that "Edith Wharton had decided not to retire into permanent grumpiness" (384), but White contends that "all the characters and even the basic situation are repellent" (85).

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"Land of Contrasts," Land of Art: Morocco and the Imagination of Edith Wharton

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Edith Wharton's *In Morocco* documents her 1917 visit to the French colony under the auspices of its Resident General, Marshal Louis-Hubert Lyautey. The invitation was a show of gratitude for Wharton's philanthropic work on the western side of the Great War's trench line. Both coinciding with, and helping to facilitate, the author's final tour of Morocco, the war figures prominently in the travel narrative that Wharton published almost two years after the armistice. Along these lines, many critics have observed that *In Morocco* looks rather like a work of propaganda. Charlotte Rich, for example, understands Wharton's "idealization of the colonial enterprise" as the function of a "political agenda" that involves the author's "deep concern for French culture and civilization, threatened by World War I at the time of her travels" ("Edith Wharton and the Politics of Colonialism" 8). In fact, Wharton's preface for *In Morocco* begins with a reference to the four-year interruption of European normalcy: "Morocco still lacks a guide book," she laments, a "deficiency" that Wharton "should have wished to take a first step toward remedying" were it not for the conditions that prevented "leisurely study of the places visited" (vii).

Of course, the inconveniences of travel comprised only a small part of the war's effect on Wharton. As Julie Olin-Ammentorp explains, Wharton's letters reveal her "gradual acceptance of the reality of war, as well as her shift from excitement to horror and fatigue" (29). The war marked a dividing line for Wharton, as it did for so many, and her growing wartime anxieties come to parallel the confluence of unfamiliar experiences and sensations that grew out of her trek through colonial North Africa. Nearly every commentary on *In Morocco* has noted Wharton's ambivalence toward this place where east intersects with west, where past merges with present, and where beauty

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