

# Gender Conflicts in Ghostly Tales by American Women at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

**Autor:** Moreno Cánovas, Isabel (Graduada en Estudios Ingleses).

**Público:** Profesores de Inglés. **Materia:** Inglés. **Idioma:** Inglés.

**Title:** Gender Conflicts in Ghostly Tales by American Women at the Turn of the Twentieth Century.

## Abstract

Stories in which female authors utilize Gothic elements to address female concerns have been traditionally framed within the category of "Female Gothic". Edith Wharton is an American author who perfectly exemplifies the use of realist and gothic elements to expose realities that in her time would have been impossible to express explicitly. This article, then, aims at analyzing how Edith Wharton uses the ghost tale as a vehicle to examine issues that may have been taboo in her time. In particular, we will explore "Mr. Jones" since it reflects how Wharton uses the ghost story to express gender conflicts.

**Keywords:** American literature, female gothic, ghosts, gender conflicts, women's literature, patriarchal system

**Título:** Conflictos de Género en los Cuentos de Fantasmas Escritos por Autoras Americanas a Principios del Siglo XX.

## Resumen

Las historias en las que autoras femeninas usan elementos góticos para abordar preocupaciones femeninas han sido tradicionalmente enmarcadas en la categoría de Gótico Femenino. Edith Wharton es una autora americana que ejemplifica perfectamente el uso de elementos realistas y góticos para exponer realidades que habrían sido imposibles de expresar explícitamente en su época. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar cómo Edith Wharton usa el cuento gótico como vehículo para examinar cuestiones que eran tabú en su época. En particular, vamos a explorar "Mr. Jones" ya que refleja cómo Wharton usa el cuento gótico para expresar conflictos de género.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura americana, Gótico femenino, fantasmas, conflictos de género, literatura femenina, sistema patriarcal.

Recibido 2018-02-25; Aceptado 2018-03-02; Publicado 2018-03-25; Código PD: 093118

## INTRODUCTION

"Mr. Jones" can be read as a critique of the oppressive patriarchal code and how Wharton managed to express women's oppression and submission through what it seems to be a conventional ghost story. Thus, we should not think that the final goal of Wharton's ghost stories is just to terrify. The gothic allows her to reflect on social conflicts and taboos that she found difficult or impossible to articulate openly at the turn of the twentieth century. In her short stories, Wharton empowers some of her heroines and involves them in a battle against supernatural forces in an attempt to break with the traditional image of the pure, submissive woman thwarted by societal constraints. It is also remarkable that "Mr. Jones" was one of Wharton's last stories and it is not casual that in this story she introduces a type of woman that is not present in her previous stories: an active and independent woman. Thus, in "Mr. Jones", Wharton presents two different visions of women: Juliana represents the imprisoned woman who has suffered from male authority. However, as it will be illustrated, Jane contrasts with other female characters present in previous Wharton's ghost stories and I consider her to be a reflection of the configuration of "the New Woman", who is economically independent and who is in control of her own life. Thus, Jane embodies that type of women who emerged as consequence of the considerable changes in the role of women in society that were taking place in America between the last decades of the nineteenth century and 1928, when the story was published. This period was in fact a period of female liberation: women started to be more active in public life, they enjoyed more freedom and it was during this epoch when the number of women enrolled in higher education institutions and in profitable professions increased notably.

## EXPLORATIONS OF GENDER CONCERNS THROUGH AN ANALYSIS OF FEMALE CHARACTERS

"Mr. Jones" is a particularly good example of Wharton's use of the gothic genre with a critical purpose. This tale has been read by many authors as a critique of the oppressive patriarchal code which emphasizes the legacy of traditional women's roles. One of these authors is Dyman (1996) who reports that the ghost of Mr. Jones embodies repressed

tradition that has an unconscious hold on Jane in spite of her independent status. In Gilbert's words (1988-9), this story represents a faithful servant of patriarchal authority. Fedorko (1995) is another author who also sees this story as representing pathological, patriarchal control. Blackford (2005) also supports this idea, and he writes that the ghost of Mr. Jones symbolizes female anxiety for independence and freedom and that the modern Lady Jane is the one who fights against the servants for recovering Bells, the house she has inherited.

In this story, Lady Jane, the heiress of the estate of Bells must fight against the tyranny of the ghost of the servant Mr. Jones to recover the control over Bells. Although she is constantly impeded by the ghost of Mr. Jones, and by Mrs. Clemm, the current housekeeper, she investigates and finally discovers the secret that they have been trying to hide: the story of a female ancestor, Juliana, locked away, despised by her husband and married for her property.

In "Mr. Jones", Wharton introduces two female characters: Juliana and Lady Jane, through whom she explores the roles of women in a society primarily dominated by men. Although they belong to different generations, both Juliana and Lady Jane have lived in the same house and have been threatened by the authority of the same male figure: the butler Mr. Jones. Apart from this, they seem to have nothing in common. In fact, each one represents a completely different type of woman. Stansberry (2003) distinguished two types of women in Edith Wharton's supernatural fiction: those who were imprisoned and those who were empowered. This author considers Lady Jane an empowered woman who reflects the changing position of women at the turn of the twentieth century. Criticism about the story of "Mr. Jones" focuses on the character of Lady Jane and what she represents, however, the character of Juliana has been left apart unnoticed. Therefore, I want to discuss the role that these two different female characters play in "Mr. Jones" and how they reflect Wharton's anxieties about the position of women in society. Furthermore, it should also be noticed that both empowered (Jane) and imprisoned (Juliana) women appear in the same story.

Lady Jane is the first character that Wharton introduces in the story. "Mr. Jones" opens with a description in which we learn that:

Lady Jane Lynke was unlike other people [...] she had led an active, independent and decided life. One of several daughters, moderately but sufficiently provided for, she 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 business-like little books about cities usually dealt with sentimentally.

Therefore, unlike the subjugated Juliana, Jane is depicted as an independent woman that contrasts with the traditional view of women at the turn of the twentieth century who were confined in the domestic sphere. Following Fedorko's ideas (1995), Lady Jane gains her right to control her own body by confronting Mr. Jones and entering the house to recover what by law, belongs to her. She reclaims from male control her house and at the same time, the lives and stories of women attached to that house. For Fedorko, Jane struggles with her internalized patriarchal dominance that has the power to keep her silent and constrained if she allows it to.

In this line, Stansberry (2003) argues that Lady Jane represents what Wharton wished for them, that is, equality. As he states, the strong and resolute character of Lady Jane suggests the idea of a change in the role of women in society. Thus, he coincides with Fedorko in that Lady Jane's endeavors to enter Bells are seen as her first struggle against the reigning patriarchal system.

As opposed to the former female proprietor, Jane is going to question Mr. Jones' male authority ignoring the fact that Mr. Jones says that no one is allowed to visit the house. From the moment Jane ignores Mr. Jones' orders and enters the house, she is fighting male oppression. However, entering the house is not enough for Jane and she defies Mr. Jones' authority until the end. Another proof of her resolution is the fact that she has the courage to enter the Blue Room. This room is an area of the house in which anybody is allowed to enter because of Mr. Jones' will. It is in the Blue Room where she finds some letters and learns the truth about Juliana. This act is another step Jane takes in the battle against male tyranny at Bells.

There at Bells, she gets involved in two tasks. Her first task is to uncover the mystery that is hidden in the house and guarded by the ghost of Mr. Jones; and her second mission is to confront Mr. Jones himself, who seems to be the source of female oppression on the estate. In fact, she is successful accomplishing these two tasks. Lady Jane is not afraid of Mr. Jones' supernatural nature and she is capable and ready to rule her own household despite the fact that Mr. Jones' male authority is going to persecute her and try to displace her from the estate. By confronting Mr. Jones male authority and uncovering the hidden secret of the life of Juliana, she breaks down generations of patriarchal power that had prevailed at Bells and exposes the reality of women who had to endure the injustices of male authority. Therefore, she is the

empowered woman in the story who has the strength and possibility to end with the legacy of women's oppression at Bells and represents what Wharton desired for women.

If Wharton uses the character of Lady Jane to present an image of what she wanted women to be, then, Juliana's role is to denounce the injustices suffered by women at that time. Thanks to some old letters that Mr. Jones had been keeping for years, Lady Jane learns that Juliana was the heir to Thudenev (Bell's former owner) and that her husband married her just for her lot in the inheritance. During her marriage, she was kept isolated in the house, watched over by Mr. Jones until she died. Despite Juliana's letters to her husband pleading for his return to Bells, he did not reply and left her alone. In fact, he wrote to Mr. Jones, ordering him to keep Juliana locked away until she finally died childless after several years of tortures and imprisonment. "Think of it. Day after day, winter after winter, year after year. . . speechless, soundless, alone. . . under Mr. Jones's guardianship": these are Jane's thoughts after reading the letters. These letters play a crucial role in the story, since they contain the sordid story of Juliana and through them; Wharton shows readers the injustice that many women suffered because of male repression.

Furthermore, Juliana's physical imprisonment is not the only manifestation of women's repression. She also suffered from an illness that left her deaf and dumb. Juliana's disability symbolically represents women's inability to express themselves and communicate openly with the world. Therefore, as many other women, Juliana has been silenced and kept alone at home by their husbands and she represents the reality of many women deprived from any possibility of making their voices heard and expressing themselves.

Another instance of the invisibility and the role that women played in society can be found in the passage of the story in which Lady Jane reads the inscription on the tomb of Juliana and her husband:

Peregrine Vincent Theobald Lynke, Baron Clouds, fifteenth Viscount Thudenev of Bells, Lord of the Manors of Thudenev, Thudenev-Blazes, Upper Lynke, Lynke-Linnet" so it ran, with the usual tedious enumeration of honours, titles, court and county offices, ending with; "Born on May 1st, 1790, perished of the plague at Aleppo in 1828." And underneath, in small cramped characters, as if crowded as an afterthought into an insufficient space: "Also His Wife".

This inscription invites us to think that the differences and inequalities between men and women persist even beyond life. Vincent Theobald will be remembered for all the honors and titles acquired during his life, while his wife will be remembered just by the mere fact of being "his wife". Behind this inscription lies a critique of women's inequalities and their loss of identity when they marry their husbands, since the role of women is limited to losing their property and identity and becoming someone else's wife.

I will also like to highlight the fact that Juliana is not the only woman in the story who has been the victim of male oppression at Bells. Along with Juliana, these other subjugated women have also been ignored by critics until now.

As Jane remarks, many generations of women have endured the same fate as Juliana's. She reflects about the past and the lives of the people who have lived in Bells before her arrival and she thinks that she will just add another chapter to the story of the unchronicled lives of the great-aunts and great-grandmothers buried there so completely that they must hardly have known when they passed from their beds to their graves. She compares the women who have lived at Bells previously to dead leaves "piled up" forming layers "to preserve something forever budding underneath." Here, Jane's description of the lives of the former female inhabitants of the house suggests that Juliana's situation is not just an isolated and punctual case, but that every women living at Bells would suffer the same injustices and that their presence would be shadowed over by men (Smith, 1980). Jane feels that this is her inevitable fate. She fears that she will live a monotonous life, and then she will be buried and forgotten without being noticed, whether dead or alive.

But there is still one more female victim of Mr. Jones' tyranny. The story ends with the mysterious death of Mrs. Clemm, the housekeeper. Clemm's niece assures that Mr. Jones is responsible for her death. Thus, there is a suggestion that Mrs. Clemm's death is a punishment for not having prevented Lady Jane from entering the Blue Room and discovering Juliana's letters.

This sense of repression is intensified by the architecture of Bells itself. As Billy (2002) noticed, women writers used the Gothic mansion and rooms to reflect their concerns and feelings about the situation of women, as opposed to male writers (from Edgar Allan Poe to H.P. Lovecraft, to cite two eminent examples) whose descriptions of houses tend to reflect extreme states of consciousness. For this author, Wharton often uses haunted houses and tomb-like rooms to represent the matrimonial predicament of women in her era. In the case of "Mr. Jones", Wharton depicts the estate of Bells as a museum and compares it to "an aged cedar spreading immemorial red branches." Moreover, Lady Jane's first

impression of Bells is that it is “as mute and solitary as the family vault”. In Female Gothic fiction, the domestic setting serves as a vehicle to illustrate patriarchal oppression (Weinstock, 2008; Lundie, 1996). The isolation of Bells estate is a metaphor that illustrates the isolation of the lives of its female inhabitants. The house has served for centuries as a silent vault which has witnessed the family’s sins and has kept her female dwellers prisoner. Wharton challenges the traditional view of the house as a shelter where women can find solace; instead she represents it as a prison where both ghosts and women are trapped.

## CONCLUSION

Wharton’s ghost tales are as worthy of study since they provide a crucial insight of her literary career and, as I have illustrated, they are reflections of its author’s internal concerns about gender in the Progressive Era, as historians have called the period ranging from the 1880s to the 1910s.

In “Mr. Jones” we find the figure of a different female that we cannot find in previous short stories: Lady Jane. She is different from previously found female characters: she is independent, economically emancipated, and she does not live her life shadowed by a man. This new type of female character that appears in the last stage of Wharton’s career can be seen as a reflection of the changes that took place in the United States which granted women more freedom and opportunities to participate more actively in what was widely regarded a male-dominated society.

## Bibliografía

- Billy, T. (2002). Domesticated with the Horror: Matrimonial Mansions in Edith Wharton’s Psychological Ghost Stories. *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures*, 25,3, 433-38.
- Dyman, J. (1996). *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Fedorko, K. (1995). *Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Gilbert, S. (1988-89). Angel of Devastation: Edith Wharton on the Arts of the Enslaved. In S. Gilbert & S. Gubar (Eds.), *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (pp. 123-68). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lundie, A. (1996). *Restless Spirits: Ghost Stories by American Women*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Moers, E. (1977). *Literary Women: The Great Writers*. New York: Anchor Press.
- Smith, A. (1980). Edith Wharton and the Ghost Story. In J. Todd (Ed.), *Gender and Literary Voice* (pp.149-58). New York: Holmes and Meirs.
- Stansberry, T. (2003). “Imprisoned and Empowered: The Women of Edith Wharton’s Supernatural Fiction.” (Ph. D. dissertation; East Tennessee State University). Retrieved from <http://dc.etsu.edu/etd/792>.
- Weinstock, J. (2008). *Scare Tactics: Supernatural Fiction by American Women*. New York: Fordham University Press.