# ‘Ghostly Sisterhood: The Supernatural Fiction of Vernon Lee, Edith Wharton and May Sinclair in an Age of Transition (1886 – 1926)’

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis demonstrates that the supernatural short stories written by Vernon Lee, Edith Wharton and May Sinclair – a ghostly sisterhood - utilise the ghost story to shape narratives that reveal a proto-modernist consciousness, going beyond the representational to construct narratives which challenge and unsettle conventional realism. This 'proto-modernity' can be closely attributed to the ideas developed by Lee in relation to aesthetics, particularly her use of the term 'empathy' when structuring debates about feeling and art around psychological terminology. Equally important to this early modernist work was Freud's 1919 essay on 'The Uncanny', which revealed a relationship between feeling, aesthetics, and the nature of the uncanny as experienced in art. Through this thesis I will investigate the interconnections between empathy and the uncanny as they relate to the work of Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair to demonstrate the extent by which writing supernatural fiction provided a means to radically explore the possibilities of women's imaginative literature. In exploring women's experiences on the very margins of realism with an interdisciplinary approach to fiction, these authors were able to branch out into areas of knowledge and experience beyond their art, ultimately rendering each as early examples of the intellectual women writers praised by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Additionally, the aesthetic ideas discussed by Vernon Lee in 'The Psychology of an Art Writer' (1903), 'Gallery Diaries' (1905) and, with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912), are examined in relation to the body and physical experience. This thesis considers that Freud's ideas of the uncanny are an extension of Lee's psychological aesthetic ideas, with close readings of key representative stories taken

from Lee's *Hauntings* (1890), Wharton's *Ghosts* (1937) and Sinclair's *Uncanny Stories* (1923) making the case for that these writers pushed the boundaries of what was possible in contemporary literature, arguing that they should be taken seriously as developing, prot-modernist thinkers active in a period of transition.

# DECLARATION

I hereby declare that my thesis entitled **'Ghostly Sisterhood: The Supernatural Fiction of Vernon Lee, Edith Wharton and May Sinclair in an Age of Transition (1886 – 1926)'** is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface, acknowledgement, and specified in the text, and is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or is concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Buckingham or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or is concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma, or other qualification at the University of Buckingham or any University or similar institution as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

**1st December 2023**

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# METHOD OF CITATION

The MHRA referencing style has been used:

*The MHRA Style Guide Online*, 3rd edition, online at **http://www.mhra.org.uk/style/**

[accessed 1 December 2023].

# Introduction

**'Writing short stories – stories of all queer lengths & all queer subjects; "spooky" ones, some of them. I like doing them!' – May Sinclair, 1910.**

This thesis is an analysis of the short fiction of Vernon Lee, Edith Wharton, and May Sinclair. Writing in a review of the publication of Vernon Lee's supernatural stories, the critic Karl Miller noted that Edith Wharton and Vernon Lee belonged to what he called 'a ghostly sisterhood which, from the 1880s onwards, was to be responsible for much of the interesting terror fiction.'[1] My focus is on the ways in which these women, which, following Miller, I call the Ghostly Sisterhood, opened up the possibility of the supernatural story so that it could become a medium for the exploration of new ways of seeing. Miller believed that the 'feminist ghost story' was a medium by which women could explore their own circumstances in a patriarchal world, evolving imaginative ways to confront dominant cultural narratives. Seen in this context, the supernatural fiction by women in this period was a radical engagement with gender, female sexuality, and identity. The focus on Wharton and Lee is justified by Miller, as they are acknowledged to be foremost amongst writers exhibiting elements of the gothic – terror, horror, and ghostly spectres. However, Miller also mentions several other figures who wrote ghost stories in the early twentieth century, such as E. Nesbit (1858-1924), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930). For the purposes of this study I have selected another of

[1] Karl Miller, 'Things', *London Review of Books*, Volume 9, No. 7 (2 April, 1987). https://www.lrb.co.uk [accessed: 25.08.2022].

these women who used the ghost story to probe human experience from a female perspective, May Sinclair, who I see as a later contributor to the sisterhood (*Uncanny Stories*, her first volume of supernatural fiction, was published in 1923), but belonging to the same generation of women writers as Lee and Wharton. I argue that it is important to include Sinclair in the 'sisterhood' because her supernatural fiction, which she turned to in the wake of the First World War, can be shown to continue the work of the ghostly sisterhood into the 1920s, when Wharton and Lee's reputations were beginning to be suffer from the rise the new generation of writers such as Joyce, Woolf, Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald.

The development of these authors' thinking and their supernatural fiction is important to our understanding of the cultural dynamics at play in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Analysis of their non-fictional prose and their short fiction sharpens our understanding of the progress of feminist perspectives and the way in which supernatural stories were the basis for an investigation of marginal experiences. From the earliest beginnings in aestheticism, through to Sigmund Freud identifying the uncanny as belonging to the study of aesthetics in his seminal 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', there was a realisation that the hidden processes of the mind were as much part of the experience of art as the faculty of sight. As Lee wrote in an essay on her friend the painter John Singer Sargent after his death in 1925: '*seeing* is a business of the mind, the memory and the heart, quite as much as the eye'.[2] To Lee, aesthetics are concerned with the emotional experience,

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[2] Vernon Lee, 'J. S. S. in memoriam', in The Hon. Evan Charteris, K. C., ed. by *John Sargent* (London: William Heinemann, 1927), p. 251, quoted in Catherine Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to 'Dionea': Vernon Lee's portraits', *Word & Image*, Vol. 13, No. 3, July-September 1997, 268.

which is considered to be of equal standing to the objective process of seeing. This is an understanding the essayist and critic Walter Pater, who was an important influence on Lee's development as a writer on aesthetics, incorporated into his own discussions of the experience of looking at the art of the past, where subjective responses were privileged with the aim of perfecting the insight provided by the impression. Whereas Pater's impressions were related to logical investigations, there is in the work of the women featured in this study a link to the appearance of the uncanny in life and literature. As they saw things, the present moment can be transfigured by the reappearance of something that has been lost, something, in other words, which originates in the consciousness of the individual through the action of the role played by memory. What has been lost reappears not simply as a regained memory, but as something which 'haunts' the present. The reappearance of this lost memory is ambiguous and potentially illusory, but at the same time creates the heightened effect of simultaneous experience of both the past and the present. The effect is to reveal what happens when time is not just a process of sequential events, but about spaces in which there is a shared experience of the past coexisting with the present. By investigating a range of their most significant and characteristic stories it is my intent to demonstrate to what extent the fiction of Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair responded to the early twentieth century through a shared use of supernatural themes and forms to go beyond conventional realism, and therefore revealing a distinctly female and uncanny sense a rapidly changing world, where linearity belongs to patriarchal structures of systemising human experience and are disrupted by intuitive realisations of the fluidity of time.

The works selected in this study are exemplify not just the ways in which these women were haunted by the past, but also how acutely aware they are of the hidden processes involved in aesthetic understanding and the subjective nature of historical interpretation, and that this understanding might be vital in the structures of power in a changing world. In this thesis I argue that these women writers in their supernatural fiction open up radical new perspectives through the creation of fictional spaces which explore the interaction between aesthetics and the uncanny. This study highlights how these women sought to both consciously and unconsciously enhance our awareness of the implications of Modernistic aesthetics in relation to female experience. This significance, largely obscured until the later part of the twentieth century, is now receiving a renewed cultural interest and their impact as proto-modernist writers is being further recognised, although the supernatural fiction of Wharton and Sinclair has not yet had its due in this respect.[3] Though they were not personally particularly close (Lee and Wharton knew each other and Wharton was acutely aware of Sinclair as one of their generation who had adopted a distinctly modernist outlook) and the ghostly sisterhood was not a deliberate or self-conscious school or movement, they were linked together through their reaction to each other's work (sometimes this was negative, but it was equally a stimulation to their mutual intellectual development) and their concern with uncanny states of consciousness. In consequence, deliberate or not, they shared an intellectual collaboration in how they made use of the supernatural tale to explore complex modes of thought and perception.

[3] For instance, academics such as Sondeep Kandola have drawn attention to the way Vernon Lee's work has attracted 'a new generation of readers whose various interests in the Victorian ghost story, the culture of the Victorian *fin de siècle*, precursors to the Modernist movement, literary depictions of non-normative sexualities and European identity have brought them in contact with this pioneering and inventive author.' Sondeep Kandola, *Vernon Lee* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 2010), p. 1.

These radical methods of going beyond conventional ideas of representation are related to the general move away from nineteenth century realism. At the time when they were writing, the development of modernism seemed the best hope for freer forms of expression, although in time the dominance of high modernist male writers such as T. S. Eliot tended to obscure the role played by women. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that May Sinclair was not just one of Eliot's earliest champions, but her story 'The Victim' also appeared alongside his epoch-making poem 'The Waste Land' in the first number of his magazine *The Criterion* in 1922, and yet she has suffered widespread neglect. From the position of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, we can see that the ghostly sisterhood were pioneers in examining the ways thresholds could be crossed and limitations transcended. Whilst new opportunities were in the process of being created that would bring greater freedom for women, it was amongst the supernatural fiction of this period that one of the most advanced ways in which women were able to express their imaginative energies might be represented; presenting a chance to peer beyond the restrictive society in which women lived. The process was by no means simple, however, and the work of these writers can at times appear to be somewhat contradictory. This is not so much a reflection on the limitations of the writers themselves, but testimony to the obstructions they faced at every level of society, as well as to their need to be truthful to their lived experience.

I shall also argue through this thesis that Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair are especially deserving of critical attention not solely because they wrote important, proto-modernist

fiction, but also because they wrote a significant body of non-fiction, characterising their work with a distinctly interdisciplinary approach. This is important because the link between storytelling and intellectual debate relates to and informs the ideas by which they investigate in their imaginative work. It is notable that they chose to explore these in relation to their supernatural fiction, suggesting that the form of the ghost story provided them with the freedom to engage with the full range of intellectual life. They should, I shall argue, be regarded as being women who were pioneers of culture, belonging to a generation who were not content to compose fiction alone, but who were 'voluble' – to use Virginia Woolf's word to describe writers who were active in writing on a number of different areas of knowledge.[4] Being 'voluble' meant that they had something to say about art and society, that they were thinkers and writers on a range of subjects. Having a voice in a patriarchal culture is something which Woolf wanted to stress as culturally significant, and in this context Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair were particularly active. This was a necessary distinction as Woolf felt that even by the 1920s, when there were a number of prominent women in print (Rebecca West, Katherine Mansfield, F. M. Mayor, Rosamund Lehmann, as well as Woolf herself, to name just a few), women writers were still not acknowledged sufficiently for the variety of their intellectual engagement. This was all despite the hard fact women had been demonstrating through their publications over the span of decades that they had views and opinions about all kinds of subjects; that they were no longer content to be marginalised, but wished to express themselves in writing that their ideas should to be taken seriously in the key debates of the time.

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[4] Woolf uses the word 'voluble' to describe male writers in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): 'if the male is still the voluble sex, it is certainly true that women no longer write novels solely'. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own & Three Guineas* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 74.

It was Wharton who was perhaps the nearest to being a purely imaginative writer, in the sense that her non-fiction is primarily concerned with the processes of writing and how other writers have gone about the task. Therefore, she is less clearly centred in other areas of knowledge outside the mechanics of writing fiction and its criticism, although her importance as a critic should be acknowledged - and her book *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) is testimony to the seriousness with which she analysed the techniques of writing. However, her interests in home and garden design, and her travel writing, demonstrate the variety of non-fictional writing Wharton frequently engaged with and help to confirm her place her within this unofficial trio. It is of further importance in this regard that she took some of her earliest directions as a writer from the development of aesthetic theory in the nineteenth century, following a path which Lee had already begun to explore. This interest, and in particular in the work of John Ruskin, was made manifest when she included him as a character in her late novella *False Dawn* (1924), the first of her *Old New York* series of stories charting the changes in New York society between 1840 and 1880. Although in this context the past is being subjected to analysis from the perspectives of the 1920s, rather than combining the past with the present in the same plane of time, there is a relationship between such a historical approach and the more ambiguous effect achieved in her short ghost stories. In both cases the writer seeks to hold two different perspectives – determined in terms of time (past and present) – in their mind at the moment of composition.

The range of interests which all three women demonstrate is directed towards an integrated view of the world in its totality, a totality which is seen to include an alertness to the subtle nuances of understanding time, transcending the strictly chronological to represent the way consciousness responds to the impact of that which has previously occurred in the immediate moment. To achieve such a diverse and nuanced view of the world they became writers who bridged different disciplines, displaying an interdisciplinary approach to life and art which was radical for women writers of their time. Indeed, this feature of their work indicates the seriousness with which they regarded their fiction and how it represented a decisive change from the manner in which Victorian women writers had been obliged to regard themselves. They were not the first to women writers to claim distinction for their intellectual work, with George Eliot (1819-1880) being an example among the preceding generation. However, Eliot's voice was largely an isolated one, and it was not until the early years of the twentieth century, as Virginia Woolf noted, that a significant number of women were able to demonstrate that they were writers with something important to say on a number of intellectual subjects, defying the assumption held by a patriarchal society that women were not suited to the processes of extended abstract thinking.[5]

What adds to the significance the grouping together of Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair is that, whilst - as has already been stated - they were not linked by membership of a specific movement or "literary set" they nonetheless formed an intriguing 'ghostly sisterhood', as they haunted each other's consciousness. In Wharton's Pulitzer-prize-winning novel *The*

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[5] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own & Three Guineas* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 74.

*Age of Innocence* (1920), she refers to Newland Archer as taking pride in his understanding of Italian art and being well read in 'all the latest books'. Among these she notably includes Vernon Lee's cultural history of the Renaissance, *Euphorion* (1884).[6] As I state later in this thesis, Lee was an important intellectual influence on the young Wharton, and her personal knowledge of her (in *A Backward Glance* she refers to her as a friend) must have been present when writing this passage.[7] It is safe to assume, therefore, that the listing of her name in *The Age of Innocence* as being part of Archer's reading resonates with personal attachments and memories, which the reader would not necessarily suspect without biographical knowledge. The effect of this 'haunting' recalls the effect of the earliest photographs, where the streets of Paris or London appear to be empty, but in fact it is the process of the long duration of the exposure which causes all moving objects to disappear, leaving occasional vague presences where a person has remained in the same position for enough time to be captured by the camera. Similarly, the fleeting contacts between these women have largely been lost leaving behind a residue of incomplete details to be found in letters and other biographical sources. These contacts were an active stimulant to their ways of seeing the world. This was the case even when their individual relationships to a changing world were distinctly different determined by unique experience and cast of mind. As I will demonstrate in this thesis, although Wharton took some of her aesthetic outlook from her encounter with Lee and Lee's work, she was particularly hostile to Sinclair, whom Wharton believed had adopted the position as a champion of literary modernism, a tendency which Wharton considered a threat to the kinds of fiction she

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[6] Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (Richmond, Surrey: Alma Classics, 2019), p. 59.
[7] Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: D.Appleton-Century, 1934), p. 129.

believed had been the most significant in the development of the novel.[8] The point I want to stress here is that these women were stimulants to each other, even when their reaction to one another was negative. I would go as far as to suggest that even when the expressed opinion might imply a rejection, the evidence of the texts themselves reveal a pervasive influence. Just as Wharton learnt from Lee's example in considering the aesthetics of design, so Wharton also clarified her own notions about fiction from her encounter with Lee. In relation to the challenge of her encounter with the younger school of writers, among whom were those Sinclair was championing during  First World War, we can see a similar attempt to clarify Wharton's notions about the nature of fiction. This process of inter-relationship characterises much of the way in which these women made sense of their consciousness of the world. Often this was manifested in textual production rather than explicit commentary, and taken together the fictions of all three reveal an uneasiness about the interaction between past and present.

These concerns about the interaction between the past and the present also emerged in overtly modernist writers, such as T. S. Eliot. In the work of Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair, we can see the development of these anxieties in relation to female creativity. In this thesis I argue that Vernon Lee's concepts about perception and aesthetics enable her to construct what Talia Schaffer describes as 'an eerie merging between past and present' that anticipates modernism's ambiguous sense of the modern world as being haunted by the

[8] Wharton takes a number of swipes at the term 'stream of consciousness' in her writings, a term that was given significance to modernist literature by May Sinclair in her review of 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson' (*The Egoist*, April 1918). In an essay on 'Tendencies in Modern Fiction' (1934), Wharton criticises modern writers for creating characters which are 'helpless puppets on a sluggish stream of fatality'. See Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Pimlico, 2013), p. 623.

past.[9] Wharton does not draw upon the past with the same attention to remote historical detail as Lee, nor does she take in such a long perspective of time, often locating her stories within limited time frames of short durations, wanting to dramatise the growth or decline of her characters. However, the very title of her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, gestures towards the desire to record her past experience, suggesting a look over one's shoulder might be occasioned by the uncanny sense that one is being followed or haunted – backward in time as well as appearing back behind oneself. She was equally concerned with the notion of civilisation as being measured by the cultural density to be found in places such as Paris, declaring that 'Culture in France is an eminently social quality'.[10] The challenge of modernism was that a point in time had been reached which seemed to threaten such notions of society, and the advent of modern technologies provided the means by which a new culture based on transient phases of progress might render knowledge of culture, in the sense used here of something built on the personal interactions of a body of people, obsolete. The discourse of high modernism is often related to the sense of fragmentation, and in particular the fragmentation of the kind of cultural homogeneity which Wharton found attractive in Paris. Lee's wide cultural interest in art and music might in this respect be assumed as symptomatic of the kind of learning dependent on a knowledge of the past which was threatened in the present, although in truth her relationship with modernism was more complex than this implies. Sinclair, on the other hand, who held perhaps the most 'modern' perspective, sought to take her narratives

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[9] Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville and London: The University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 62.
[10] Edith Wharton, quoted in Malcolm Bradbury, *Dangerous Pilgrimages: Transatlantic Mythologies and the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 260.

beyond historical so as to liberate her characters from the constraints of deterministic notions of reality, seeking absolute standards through idealist philosophy.

When the subject of the spectral is explored in relation to modernism it is usually related to Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). However, it should be noted that Vernon Lee's *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* was published eight years earlier in 1890, suggesting that, perhaps, *The Turn of the Screw* should be read as a response to the kind of fiction that Lee had already developed, rather than as a yardstick to measure her own productions of a similar kind. Yet the impact of Henry James's supernatural fiction was clearly an important influence on contemporary modernist writers, as expressed through reviews and essays by Virginia Woolf and May Sinclair. James can be said to have revived the tradition of the ghost story by situating the narrative in the context of the *telling* of ghost stories at Christmas, along with the addition of the implied ambiguity possible in a modern psychological reading of the narrative. The notion of the flawed narrator which James explores in the character of the Governess in his story, however, had already been introduced in Lee's 'Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover', which was first published in 1886 and then included in her *Hauntings* volume in 1890. As Catherine Maxwell has noted:

> James had appropriated or come to possess the stories [in *Hauntings*] in much more than a simple borrowing of motifs. In his own later supernatural stories he was to enlarge upon a particular feature of Lee's work […]: the margin of ambiguity she creates in her stories so that they can be read simultaneously as both psychological studies of obsessive states of mind and as supernatural occurrences.[11]

[11] Catherine Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to 'Dionea': Vernon Lee's portraits', *Word & Image*, Vol. 13, No. 3, July-September 1997, 268.

Rather than deal exclusively with the contemporary world as James's narrative largely does, Lee's stories stress remote historical intrusions into the present in a way that suggests the juxtapositions encountered in the likes of T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' – with cultural references located in the remote past resurfacing in the present in such a way as to destabilise the text's presentation of time, with characters from history reappearing as if they inhabited the contemporary world. In contrast, James's interest is largely determined by the development of the realism of psychological fiction, wherein an author is more concerned with portraying the development of character and stressing complex psychological states of mind. There exists in *The Turn of the Screw* a tension between the suggestion that the Governess reads her experience as one of out-facing demonic possession to save Miles's soul, and the modern interpretation of the possibility that Peter Quint has sexually corrupted the boy. This is played out through a narration in which the authority of the Governess's narrative voice is questioned by the lack of completely objective evidence to support her claims of the presence of Evil. This narrative method then is concerned with the individual's identity, and the time frame is not stretched beyond the span of a few years. Where the past *does* haunt the present it is portrayed with the Governess acting as a detective, piecing together the evidence that remains at Bly, the remote country house where she has taken employment. There are parallels here with Wharton's 'The Lady's Maid's Bell', but James places his emphasis on the experience of an extreme situation in an individual's life rather than a questioning of culture through the interplay between the past and present. Wharton's story goes beyond this in certain respects because she makes the narrative carry the burden of analysing female experience.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton devoted a whole chapter to the writing of short stories, revealing the extent to which she responded to the example that Henry James provided in *The Turn of the Screw* and to the supernatural tale as a genre. She called James the 'last great master of the eerie in English', and regarded *The Turn of the Screw* as the one supernatural story that achieved the effect of 'maintaining the ghostliness of its ghosts not only through a dozen pages but through close on two hundred'. This is an important distinction as it indicates why she believed that James's story was a unique narrative and different from the type of story which she usually attempted, which might be wholly resigned to the realm of the short story, emphasising a more concentrated piece of fiction with, importantly, the aim of a specific effect. In contrast she drew attention to the relative length of James's narrative, whilst praising his 'perfect sense of proportion'. She believed that the ghost story provided the writer with the necessity of finding the 'subtlest artifice' in order to create the appearance of 'naturalness' so that, however improbable the story may be, it should nonetheless have the feeling of reality, avoiding what Wharton refers to as 'the appearance of improbability'. The aim of the supernatural story is, she suggests, one of 'quiet iteration' – the attention of the reader should be focused and not vitiated by too much multiplicity, and always there should be a sense of building towards a culmination. Coupled with these technical concerns was an understanding that the subject of a supernatural story should determine its form, and that the traditional ghost story provided a vehicle that was already familiar to readers. She was at pains to differentiate the genre of the ghost story from studies of odd or extreme states of mind, writing:

> We cannot believe *a priori* in the probability of the actions of madmen, or neurasthenics, because their reasoning processes escape most of us, or can at best

> be imagined only as belonging to abnormal or exceptional people; but everybody knows a good ghost when he reads about him.[12]

The sense of something supernatural is for Wharton not about the abnormal, but related to the conventions of the established formula of the ghost story – something that was already familiar to readers as a genre. The distinction between James's notion of the ghost story and Wharton's is necessarily complicated to tease out, as they share much of the same attitude even if differences can be seen. James is almost a candidate to join the 'ghostly sisterhood', but was prevented by his conscious masculine desire to reject fantasy in favour of 'a close connotation, or close observation of the real'.[13] In Wharton's view of *The Turn of the Screw*, it is felt that, although the story fits the pattern of the telling a traditional ghost story, its length requires a different set of objectives from the shorter ghost story. She seems to suggest that the key identifier about such stories is that, though they should not be concerned with exceptional individuals, they should be read for the particular thrill that the reader might expect something that is distinctly supernatural to occur. In other words, she places the emphasis on the special effect of a ghost story to produce some awareness of the strangeness of human existence, a sense of something beyond. It might almost be claimed that she sees the supernatural story as at its most vital when it stresses some form of concentrated magic or mysticism. Whilst the first book publication of *The Turn of the Screw* was in a volume entitled *The Two Magics* (1898) – the other narrative included being the nearly forgotten *Covering End* – James makes his story a vehicle for his tragic vision of existence, and one would hesitate to regard it as a fiction that easily fits in with the concentrated compass of the ghost story, as its implications pre-figure the modernist

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[12] Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 137.
[13] Henry James, letter to Vernon Lee, 27th April 1890, quoted in Maxwell, 1997, p. 267.

device of limited narrators. This leads us back uncannily to Vernon Lee, who had suggested such an approach to storytelling.

In his later story 'The Jolly Corner' (1908), James demonstrated again a sense of the past that is limited to the span of an individual's life, dramatising a study of the different potential outcomes in a situation where the protagonist is haunted by the possibility of a parallel life. Through its focus on a specific environment, James's story also reflects the way in which places can be haunted, but this is again limited to the period of an individual's memory, suggesting a process of self-haunting:

> He spoke of the value of all he read into it, into the mere sight of the walls, mere shapes of the rooms, mere sound of the floors, mere feel, in his hand, of the old silver-plated knobs of the several mahogany doors, which suggested the pressure of the palms of the dead the seventy years of the past in fine that these things represented, the annals of nearly three generations, counting his grandfather's, the one that had ended there, and the impalpable ashes of his long-extinct youth, afloat in the very air like microscopic motes.[14]

But James's concern here is not expressly with the remote cultural past existing in the present, so much as an impressionistic sense of the younger self as having been reduced to microscopic fragments of dust and seen in the context of a personal history. What is uncanny here is the notion of the double, of the self-seen in relation to an alternative outcome. As Ursula Brumm has writes, 'Brydon conducts the search for his *alter ego* as a ritual of "haunting" the house - in the basic sense of the word, which means to revisit

[14] Henry James, 'The Jolly Corner', *The English Review*, No. 1 (December 1908), 5-35 (11).

habitually as by a ghost.'[15] The old house in New York, the Jolly Corner of the story, is therefore the setting for James to explore the notion of the self as being divided between the person who may have remained in New York and become a successful businessman, and the cultivated man of leisure who has left New York many years previously and is the centre of consciousness in the narrative. James questions identity, but for all its eerie effect, the story works on the basis of the two destinies united in the same individual. Whilst Lee might share some of James's notion of individual anxiety, and we can cite her 'expatriate identity [that] kept her perpetually aloof and marginalized from the cultures she was writing about', she was concerned in her fiction and non-fiction with the invasion of the present by the remote and non-personal past.[16] Lee's interest in the past is closely related to her understanding of the experience of aesthetic knowledge, not with maintaining a character study trying not to depart from common experience. In developing this method Lee demonstrates that her interest lies not in the realism of a situation, but in the potential to open up portals through which characters are able to cross time boundaries, even though this is usually presented in relation to the consciousness of an individual.

May Sinclair's supernatural fiction gestures towards a cosmic sense of the absolute, but for all her admiration for James's tale her own supernatural fictions construct spaces where time, as understood by James, and individual experience has been transcended. In these stories the past does not so much haunt (in a sinister way) the present as the presence of the ghostly is a means of liberating the self from social constraints. This

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[15] Ursula Brumm, 'A Place Revisited: The House at *The Jolly Corner*', *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 7.2 (1997/98), 194-202, https://www.connotations.de/article/ursula-brumm-a-place-revisited-the-house-at-the-jolly-corner/ [accessed: 7.5.22].
[16] Sondeep Kandola, *Vernon Lee* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 2010), p. 4.

highlights a divergence from the tradition that James represents, for Sinclair should be placed in the context of the writers of the fantastic rather than those coming from a background steeped in realism. Her work has the characteristics of what Lizzie Harris McCormick, Jennifer Mitchell, and Rebecca Soares in *The Female Fantastic* refer to as an 'oppositional form', an implied rejection of the common line of descent that has been traced from Henry James to the major modernists – yet ironically, Sinclair knew James and was personally close to many of the modernist writers who took James as an author of the late Victorian period who carved a path towards later modernist modes, including Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot.[17] Sinclair is only mentioned in passing in *The Female Fantastic* as the book covers the period in which she wrote her *Uncanny Stories*, with the emphasis placed on her 'intermingling of the occult with psychoanalysis'.[18] The reason for this can perhaps be explained by the editors notion of the fantastic as a 'mode of writing that seemed to offer an opportunity to imagine a world whose contours were less definite and whose ways of life were less reified'.[19] There is a parallel sense of the universe, witnessed from a female perspective, where marginal or oppositional forms can be seen to confront a world based on the assumptions of male logic. This occurs at the same time as the widespread belief in supernatural phenomena was giving way before an increasing scientific and natural interpretation of the world. Sinclair was certainly attracted to the supernatural tale because it offered the opportunity to break free not only from the contours provided by conventional realism, but also from the established patriarchal order

[17] Lizzie Harris McCormick, Jennifer Mitchell, and Rebecca Soares, eds., 'Foreword', *The Female Fantastic: Gendering the Supernatural in the 1890s and 1920s* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), p. xiii.
[18] McCormick, Mitchell, Soares, 'Toward a Female Fantastic', 2020, p. xxxi.
[19] McCormick, Mitchell, Soares, p. xiii.

of society. She managed to align this radical approach with fictions that might be vehicles to explore her mystical and idealist understanding.

One of the key points I argue in this thesis is that Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair use the medium of the supernatural story in order to expand the range of what can be expressed in fiction. In this sense they interpreted the traditional ghost story in such a way as to explore the fantastic – areas of experience where the past is capable of coexisting with the present to open up new areas of understanding. They saw the fantastic as a means to liberate their interior worlds, and whilst it might seem that Edith Wharton was writing supernatural fiction similar to those by Henry James, her insistence on the ghost story as something which is universally recognised suggests that for her the mode was one which engaged readers with a mixture of the formulaic with the possibility of the mysterious. At the same time, the mode allowed her to transition away from the familiarity of genre fiction to puncture the comfortable realism in which her characters seem to be embedded. Yet while Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair often wrote narratives that are fantastic, displaying the 'power to open up space for new embodiments, identities, and relationships', they remained, as writers, committed to the notion that prose fiction should provide what Ezra Pound, in an influential essay on modernistic aesthetics, 'The Serious Artist', called 'our best data for determining what sort of creature man is.'[20] For these authors, the justification for art is to be found in its attempt to reveal the nature of human experience with the accuracy of the scientist. Their seriousness as artists is linked to and made manifest by their interdisciplinary range of intellectual enquiry, and this grants their work its importance.

[20] McCormick, Mitchell, Soares, 2020, p. xix. Ezra Pound, 'The Serious Artist', *The New Freewoman*, Vol. I, No. 9 (October 15th, 1913), 162.

In relation to the breadth of their intellectual engagement, my research has centred round the new ideas which Vernon Lee brought to the understanding of perception and aesthetic experience through her interplay between past and present. This is linked with the way in which Sigmund Freud's conception of the uncanny develops a new understanding of the supernatural as an expression of what Hugh Haughton refers to as the 'paradoxical mark of modernity' where the 'primitive' suddenly emerges in a context which is modern and contemporary and can be said to haunt it.[21] Lee's ideas were outlined in 'The Psychology of an Art Writer' (1903) and similar writings concerned with observations and art, and these essays explore questions of aesthetics and consciousness where Lee often finds the supernatural as a way of linking the two. The ideas explored by these essays provide a basis by which it is possible to investigate the manner through which Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair adopted the genre of the ghost story to push the boundaries of fiction, foreshadowing the development of modernist texts by revealing the way in which different states of consciousness can and do exist in juxtaposition, even across time with the merging of the past and present.

As I mentioned at the beginning, Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair were not a formally established group of writers, in the sense that they did not form a coterie or have a manifesto to promote their ideas. But they did share certain similar historical characteristics whilst eschewing the periodisation established by critics to review literary productions of male authors. The years after 1870 through which they lived were

[21] Hugh Haughton, 'Introduction', Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), p. xlix.

characterised by complex changes in society, years in which the conventional conception of the Victorian age was challenged by rapid changes in political and economic circumstances, profoundly altering the way people lived. All three lived through these changes, born in the middle of the nineteenth century and embarking on writing careers by its end. They went on to live through the First World War and to witness the rise of Fascism in Europe. They were all concerned with the role of women in society and were furthering the cause of feminist viewpoints in various ways, although only May Sinclair can claim to have been an active suffragette. All three can be now be considered as major writers, working in the different forms of the novel: *Miss Brown* (Lee), *The Age of Innocence* (Wharton), *Mary Olivier: A Life* (Sinclair); the short story: *Hauntings* (Lee), *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (Wharton), *Uncanny Stories* (Sinclair); and in the cases of Wharton and Sinclair, also published poets: *Twelve Poems* (Wharton), *The Dark Night* (Sinclair).[22] Perhaps of more significance, as I have already stated, is that they all wrote a significant body of non-fictional work, ranging from memoir, through travel writing and polemic, to works on aesthetics and philosophy. However, it is the significant body of their supernatural fiction which especially marks out their kinship, and this I would argue represents an important strand in their careers. It is not simply that they chose to write about the ghostly, but that in so doing they were developing a space in their fiction for the realisation of ideas which they were shaping in their other works. Indeed, it is my contention that it is in their supernatural fiction that they found the freedom to express their ideas most fully. These

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[22] Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1884), Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1920), May Sinclair, *Mary Olivier: A Life* (London: Cassell, 1919), Vernon Lee, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1890), Edith Wharton, *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (London: Macmillan, 1910), May Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories* (London: Hutchinson, 1923), Edith Wharton, *Twelve Poems* (London: The Chiswick Press, 1926), and May Sinclair, *The Dark Night* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924).

ideas differ in many ways, but they fundamentally reflect on the experience and insight of women who were living in a period of rapid societal changes, from the 1860s through to the 1920s and 1930s. Living through such a period and observing the ways in which the past had, on the one hand been superseded and yet on the other still survived in obscure places, must have contributed to their consciousness of the past haunting the present.

## The Supernatural and the Ghostly

Before we move on, something more needs to be said about the terms the 'supernatural' and 'the ghostly'. These are terms which, by their nature, refer to states of being that are difficult to define. The supernatural implies a general range of experience, defining not simply the belief in ghosts or the use of the ghost as an agnostic subject. The supernatural is anything that can be described as existing outside the known, natural world, and typically it may refer to experiences that challenge scientific evidence, including spiritual experiences. In contrast, the ghostly implies the presence of some more or less specific and identifiable *being*, someone who is no longer part of the material world. The ghostly can also be used to describe the places where you might expect to witness the presence of a ghost. On the whole, the supernatural is a more ambiguous and open ended term. The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines the supernatural as that which is 'beyond the natural or ordinary' and can refer to anything that exists outside that which can easily be explained by reference to commonly understood natural processes. Even those experiences which are not *literally* supposed to relate to the presence of ghosts (beings existing in a non-corporal state) but which are nevertheless manifestations of human experience, and

which go beyond what is commonly thought as 'normal', can be of use to demonstrate the existence of 'a supposed force or system above the laws of nature'.[23] In this sense, the term 'supernatural' can be more useful than the term 'ghostly' because it has a wider sense of implied meaning, incorporating both the specific and the general. And thus we begin to see how the supernatural might encompass the relationship between the past and present, each linked in ways which transcend what is normally understood as being natural – such as whatever remains of the past being located in particular time or place, whether the ghostly is present or not. As such, the term 'supernatural' will be more often utilised in this thesis, although on occasions it is still appropriate to refer to ghosts and the 'ghostly', as Wharton is arguably more inclined to define supernatural experiences in relation to particular ghosts. And while Lee does introduce specific ghosts in her stories, she does so in such a manner as to make manifest the culture of the past. In Sinclair's fiction the presence of the ghost is important not in relation to its own presence, but rather as a means to explore perspectives which fall outside the ordinary, including the continuity of existence beyond the body's life.

The concern with what remains of the past and how that can haunt the present in these women authors is a metaphor for what is lost or hidden. In this concern they are attracted to the supernatural as an expression of what is not physically present, but which still influences what we think of as reality. The supernatural in their works becomes as much about this heightened sense of reality as it does about ghosts. The personal or cultural memory is highlighted by the clash between the inanimate and the animate. Hugh

[23] *Oxford Shorter Dictionary*, Fifth Edition (Oxford: O.U.P., 2003), p. 3115.

Haughton suggests that Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' clarifies this notion by identifying the loss of spiritual belief with this modern awareness of a reality which includes that which has been lost, writing 'with the death of the supernatural, it is our own and our culture's disowned past that haunts us.'[24] Haughton claims that the supernatural as it was understood by older cultures in relation to the divine is a presence that has disappeared from people's lives, and its place has since been occupied in the individual and collective memory by a sense of being haunted. This haunting is partly constructed from impressions of what no longer exists; impressions which do not exist in the material sense, yet possess the power to influence the present moment. It is in this sense that we are haunted by the past. I argue in this thesis that the supernatural is primarily understood and explored by Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair in relation to the past haunting the present.

It is important to realise that these writers also saw the supernatural as a powerful tool for expressing their female sense of difference and a radical rejection of the conventional. For Lee, the idea of empathy, of feeling into an object, is fundamental to her notion of interpreting the world, as well as being the basis for her judgments about aesthetics.[25] Lee sought a framework for the expression of her individual consciousness, and at the same time she hoped to find some sort of method which would account for the relationship between the individual and artistic objects. Whilst in Freud's conception of the uncanny, it is the nature of repeated experience that provides the basis for significance given to the supposed supernatural encounter, positing that by the early twentieth century

[24] Hugh Haughton, 'Introduction', Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. xiii.
[25] For a fuller discussion of Vernon Lee's notion of empathy, see Kirsty Martin's chapter on 'Vernon Lee's Empathy' in her study *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2013), pp. 30-80.

mankind believed that it had '*surmounted* the uncanny effects associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish-fulfilment, secret harmful forces and the return of the dead' and had established trust in 'material reality' as the conditional ground for scientific understanding. Conversely, however, Freud notes that 'we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions; the old ones live on in us, on the look-out for confirmation.'[26] It follows from this point of view that, while the present seeks to move forward without any reference to the past, the experience of the individual is often haunted by the past.

**Transition between the past and the present in a period of change**

The period from the 1880s through to the 1930s was one characterized by significant changes in Western society. It was during this time that the stories in my study were first published: from Lee's *The Phantom Lover* in 1886 through to Wharton's 'A Bottle of Perrier' in 1926. These changes, towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, were experienced by many people as a threat to traditional life, with the notion of the traditional itself became an increasingly self-conscious concept in reaction to the process of progressive history. This manifested itself through the revival of interest in folklore and the desire to preserve aspects of human society that were understood to be most in danger of being lost.[27] It also accounts for the psychological presentation of the past as existing just under the surface of modern life and having the potential to reappear, as if haunting the present. Whilst technological progress had been an influence on cultural

[26] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 154. *Das Unheimlich* ('The Uncanny') was first published in *Imago* 5 in 1919. [Italics included in the original]
[27] The Folklore Society was founded in 1878.

life since the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century, it is possible to argue that the rate of progress in fact speeded up during this period, and that the consciousness and stress of these changes on individuals and culture were also expressed in the art and literature of the time. A pivotal moment in this transitionary period was the First World War, a conflict which helped to speed up the process of change whilst bringing about a profound cultural shock, the effects of which would haunt the post-war period in a renewed feeling of nostalgia for what had been lost. For these complex and sometimes contradictory reasons the period has been considered as an 'Age of Transition', as described by J. B. Priestley in his funeral address for H. G. Wells in 1946, referring to Wells as 'the chief prophet of this age of transition[28]', suggesting a contemporary use of the phrase to denote the impact of science. Later the title of the academic journal *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* applied this terminology as a useful tool in denoting the characteristics of the age, initially founded as *English Fiction in Transition* in 1957 by Hal Gerber (d. 1981), ceasing publication after 63 volumes in 2020, ending accordance with the founding editor's wish that it should not continue beyond a hundred years after the age of transition had come to an end. The rationale behind the journal is of relevance to my understanding of the period, and is stated in the background history of the periodical given by Robert Langenfeld in June 2020:

> He [Gerber] asked himself why were Thomas Hardy's novels taught in a nineteenth-century novel course, Hardy's poetry in a twentieth-century literature course? Don't the works of Conrad, Yeats, and Shaw, to mention a few, present similar dualities? "Apparently," Gerber said, "some writers have dared to bridge the centuries and defy the neat calendar division of literary periods in the MLA bibliography." What of those other writers: Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Sarah Grand, Arthur Symons, Olive

[28] For an extract from Priestley's address at H. G. Wells's funeral see John Hammond, *H. G. Wells* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), p. 84.

> Schreiner, George Moore? They were well known in their day. Little attention was given to them in the 1940s and 50s, even though the letters, notebooks, and autobiographies of figures such as Yeats were filled with conversation about them. The conventional wisdom ignored their influence on modern literature."[29]

What Langenfeld highlights here, elucidating Gerber's thinking about periodisation, is an ambiguity that has dogged the study of early twentieth century literature which, until the end of the century, was often told in relation to masculine high-modernist self-fashioning. Clearly there were writers who were difficult to place and who were often dismissed too glibly for not being sufficiently modernist unless they happened to be championed by the Modernists themselves. The ambiguity was often a direct result of the personal prejudices of a few influential critics, and as a method of dealing with this difficulty the term 'transition' is helpful in that it both avoids identifying with a narrow Modernist agenda, and yet at the same time acknowledges that the period was one of flux.

The period between 1880 and 1920 can therefore be regarded as a moment where surviving elements of the Victorian age coincided with the emergence of what we now think of as modernism. The industrial progress that had re-shaped British society in the early part of the nineteenth century was now common to all the economically advanced nations of the world, some of which were adapting to change at an unprecedented rate – as was the case in Germany and the United States in particular. In Europe, science was having an increasing impact not just on methods of communication – such as the railway, telegraph, and telephone - but also in the ways in which people thought about human behaviour. These new areas of development covered not just the mechanics of industrial

[29] See: http://www.eltpress.org/thejournal.html and 'ELT 1880-1920 & ELT Press: A Brief History': http://www.eltpress.org/history_elt.html [viewed 11 June 2021].

processes, but also the workings of the human mind, in both its mechanical operations the way in which individuals responded to, processed, and interpreted. As Benjamin Morgan has argued in *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (2017), this shift, as far as it influenced aesthetic understanding, began in Germany with Immanuel Kant, who in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) proposed that the assessment of the beauty of a work of art should be based on disinterested criteria, leading to new 'science-based interpretations of art and literature' founded on 'a new understanding [of the] mind and emotion as emerging from the brain and nervous system'.[30] By the end of the nineteenth century psychological aesthetics were being developed by Theodor Lipps and Karl Groos in a way that was analytical and theoretical. Around the same time in Vienna, Sigmund Freud was founding psychoanalysis with the publication of *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) with Joseph Breuer, and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).

## The Self and Aesthetic Experience

Vernon Lee's ideas concerning perception and the aesthetic experience outlined in 'The Psychology of an Art Writer' (1903) provide a basis from which it is possible to investigate the means in which Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair adopted the genre of the ghost story to push the boundaries of fiction to explore aesthetics, consciousness, and the uncanny, questioning the established social order and finding a space for female creativity. These explorations were associated with an awareness that the material world as it existed was largely a male construction with female identity confined to the margins. Lee

[30] Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (London: University of Chicago, 2017), pp. 7-10.

emphasised that the world of present appearances was haunted by the past, which was a metaphor for the lost history of women. The *femme fatales* who appear in her fiction are unquiet spirits speaking for all women who have been written out of history, and Lee's emphasis on aesthetics became closely connected what Dylan Kenny regards as Lee's 'theory of the self.' Kenny continues, 'The object of her investigations was the self. The stage of these investigations was the world, where tourists intrude, friends die, days are sunny, you have a tune in your head. All of this is possible evidence for what art does to us.'[31]

Lee developed her ideas about the body and aesthetics throughout her life and these ideas informed her fiction, with a particular focus placed on ways of communicating aesthetic experience with an understanding that it was something that could be expressed through the analysis of changes in mood as well as physical and social reactions. In such formulations the theory of beauty becomes something that is no longer about fixed values, but is linked to subjective experience – which is, by its very nature, not only about the objectively seen but also about what one carries in the consciousness and unconsciousness. Such 'baggage' influences the present moment and colours one's perspective, with the past haunting the present. I. A. Richards suggested in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) that, thanks to the advances made by what he terms 'modern aesthetics' (wherein Lee is referred to as being a proponent - although Richards is sceptical of an assumption that a formula for modern aesthetics can ever be truly established), the notion of the 'paralysing apparition Beauty, the ineffable, ultimate, unanalysable, simple idea, has at least been

[31] Dylan Kenny, 'The Real Self', Vernon Lee, *The Psychology of an Art Writer* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018), p. 18.

dismissed'.[32] In spite of Richards's claims, Lee was herself reluctant to offer any simple formula to explain aesthetic experience, increasingly believing that the source of aesthetic experience could be best understood in relation to the self, explaining her attraction to the concept of empathy. The challenge Lee faced was how to make such relativistic responses amount to something that can used to scientifically measure the significance of an interaction between the individual and an object. The records of her experience to document this are found in 'The Psychology of an Art Writer' (1903) and her 'Gallery Diaries' (1905; 1912), which stress that the vagaries of the moment, including what the self feels, have a real bearing on what we are able to process as aesthetic experience.

Freud noted that there was an interrelationship between theories of beauty and theories of feeling, coming to the realisation that both of these ideas were related to aesthetics. He deduced that aesthetics were not only concerned with what was capable of being understood as being beautiful, but could also be applied to that which was ugly or unpleasant. If a method could be established which could isolate the concept of beauty, then, by implication, a system based on beauty must reveal its opposite, the ugly. It would then follow that the pursuit of the beautiful must, at some point, represent a repression of what is regarded as ugly. Freud understood that there were implications in aesthetic discourse that could be related to various experiences that dealt with the kind of destructive anxieties felt by people as advances were made in technology, material life became more complicated to understand in material terms and organic means of interpretation were replaced by theoretical ideas based on science. Alongside these

[32] I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 14.

concerns, the direction of psychoanalysis was during the age of transition was moving towards a growing awareness of the role that the mind played in determining what was seen and understood, and questioning notions of objectivity. The focus of my attention has therefore been on the relationship between the implications that result from this new awareness of aesthetics, and on the role of empathy, in a period of transition when new concepts continually emerged to be replaced with ever newer ones, confusing the established, 'natural' rate of change with the rapidity of progress, challenging the established order of human understanding. I argue that it was in the supernatural fiction written by the women of the 'ghostly sisterhood' at this time that saw these ideas of the interaction between the past and present and how such notions relate to art develop and be tested in the experience of contemporary life, and that the result was a kind of fiction which challenged notions of conventional realism by blurring the differences between time past and time present.

**The Uncanny and Reality**

Freud observed that some forms of literature, citing the fairy tale as a particular instance, do not create a sense of the uncanny because it is assumed by the reader that what occurs in the narrative is not subject to the same laws and rules as what would be expected in real life. However, he suggests that 'if the writer has to all appearances taken up his stance on the ground of common reality' and still introduces elements which defy the logic of time and place then there is the potential that 'by doing so he adopts all the conditions that apply to the emergence of a sense of the uncanny in normal life'.[33] If the

[33] Freud, 2003, pp. 156-157.

writer's fiction creates the illusion of realism in their text, which the reader accepts as a convention for the representation of common human experience, then the introduction of anything which challenges that material reality can be said to be uncanny. Freud suggests that such an intrusion would operate in the same way in the text as it would as part of the individual's ordinary experiences of the world. He goes on to suggest that through the artist's role as creator it is possible to discover and communicate 'possibilities for a sense of the uncanny that would not be available in real life'.[34] Taking into account Freud's uncanny, it is possible to interpret the work of Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair as working within a general tradition of realistic fiction while bringing to this the more fantastic elements common to the ghost story, pushing the boundaries of conventional, realistic representation. It is still fundamental to the construction of these narratives that they should convince the reader of the existence of a reality through the artfulness of the text, something that stands for the reality of the recognisable world in which we all participate. Simultaneously, these narratives construct fictional spaces which allow for the expression of those aspects which belong to the realm of fantasy in the imagination, linked to the appearance of reality and yet adhering to a non-realistic sense of the world. This realm of fantasy offers an engagement with perspectives that are not limited to materiality, expressing hidden meanings in human experience that would not have been possible by other means, and in the process offer, among other things, the opportunity to articulate a female point of view.

[34] Freud, 2003, p. 157.

**The Past Haunting the Present**

One of the key aspects of these narratives is the survival of the past into the present. As Freud argues, one of the conditions that gave rise to the uncanny is what happens when 'primitive beliefs that have been *surmounted* appear to be once again confirmed'.[35] The notion that the present is haunted by the past is an important aspect of the texts I have concentrated on in this study. As has been indicated, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) can also be read in this way, with the sterility of the present related to the condition of a society being haunted by the dead of the First World War. Elements of past culture are also presented in the poem by fragments which recall moments enacted as if in the present, when in fact they refer to what has already occurred in the past.[36] Eliot wears a metaphorical 'mask' in public, leaving readers to speculate about the personal history that may have provided the emotional context to the poem, contributing to Eliot's famous regard for the importance impersonality holds for the poet.[37] Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair write in a different manner, being aware of what art can do in shaping personal experiences, and constructing the self. They were equally aware that the individual brings something to the text with each read, which can be an emotional response or the awareness of new ideas. But there is little sense that their supernatural fiction was a means of expressing in a confessional manner their personal experiences, even if it was indebted

[35] Freud, 2003, p. 155. [Italics appear as part of original text]
[36] Hugh Haughton also finds Eliot's *The Waste Land* relevant to his discussion of Freud's sense of the uncanny. See 'Introduction', Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003) p. liv.
[37] 'The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.' T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 30.

to a sense of self. Their private lives are masked by writing in the kind of narrative form which is recognised as being a genre – the ghost story – which is often constructed around certain established conventions, yet it is in these conventional confines of genre that they sought to express individual insights through narratives which articulate an aesthetic vision. The stories which resulted were ways to explore both personal and social experience, accounting for a perceived duality in which the realisation of the self could only be achieved through an encounter between the aesthetic experience enshrined in fiction (the creation of a vision of the self) and objective reality. They perceived that there was a dislocation between living in the present time and the haunting of the past, and yet in spite of this they felt most comfortable living in a state of consciousness that was out of time with the present. For Lee and Wharton this was manifested by a need to withdraw into the past for a sustaining vision of the present, while for Sinclair it was a need to inhabit a space that was neither past, present, nor future, but some other dimension that could resolve the difficulty of being in only one frame of time – a time which she felt was a restriction on the individual's capacity for growth, or more precisely the self's ability to see experience in the light of some absolute beyond time. In all three writers we find the past haunting the present, their roles as writers allowing them to develop, at an intellectual level, a degree of self-empowered resistance to patriarchal social norms. As Dylan Kenny remarks regarding Lee's explorations into aesthetics, 'A rich vision of art is a rich vision of the self'.[38] For Lee this was an awareness of the self in relation to aesthetic objects, an understanding that in the present moment all kinds of influences come to bear on our consciousness, which in minute and subtle ways complicate what we observe. These influences can be experienced

[38] Kenny, 'The Real Self', 2018, p. 19.

as hauntings, moments when the past can disrupt the present; when the contingency of the moment has the potential to disrupt the past. Such states of consciousness have the power to subvert the hegemony of materiality and of realism as an aesthetic construction.

## The Short Story

The fiction which is discussed in this thesis belongs to the history of the short story, the ghost story being recognised as a genre that was especially popular during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each form of writing has its own particular characteristics, and the short story in the late nineteenth century was seen as a form which was capable of serving the needs of writers in many different ways, as Frederick Wedmore, one of the earliest critics to discuss its possibilities, made clear in an essay first published in *The Nineteenth Century*. He suggested that it was necessary to understand that the short story was not simply a shorter version of a longer form, but that it had distinct characteristics that set it apart from the novel:

> In the first place, then, what is, and what is *not*, a short story? Many things a short story may be. It may be an episode, like Miss Ella Hepworth Dixon's or like Miss Bertha Thomas'; a fairy tale, like Miss Evelyn Sharp's: the presentation of a single character with the stage to himself (Mr George Gissing); a tale of the uncanny (Mr Rudyard Kipling); a dialogue of comedy (Mr Pett Ridge); a panorama of selected landscape, a vision of the sordid street, a record of heroism, a remote tradition or an old belief vitalised by its bearing on our lives to-day, an analysis of an obscure calling, a glimpse at a forgotten quarter.[39]

The stories written by Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair defy attempts to classify them in this way, although it can be seen that they share several similarities. For example, the stories can be related to the uncanny, and Lee's in particular use the form of the historic tradition or

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[39] Frederick Wedmore (1844-1921), 'The Short Story' (from 'On Books and Arts', 1899), in Derek Stanford, ed., *Critics of the 'Nineties* (London: John Baker, 1970), pp. 232-244 (p. 233).

belief that impinges on the present. But what does emerge from this discussion is evidence that the form of the short story was a vehicle for expressing that which is often considered to be understood in relation to the fleeting moment – it is interesting to notice how Wedmore identifies what might otherwise be termed as the elements of conventional realism, as instead the fragmentary parts of a whole that is now suggested rather than enumerated in detail, leading to episodic writing; the subjective presentation of a character within their owns terms of reference; dialogues; selected landscapes; visions; and glimpses. This suggests that the short story format is one which is suitable, at least in the view of late Victorian critics, for that which is not an attempt to provide the reader with the kind of totality of view characteristic of the Nineteenth Century novel.

The desire to reject a totalising viewpoint and replace it with a more fragmentary sense of nature or experience is key to the modernist sense of experience. In an analogous way the gothic genre is concerned with exaggerating a part of experience rather than offering a totality. Where the supernatural tale is concerned this is due to its being a narrative form which has recourse to the pre-established expectations that the reader brings to their experience of the text and the desire – perhaps unconscious - to be exposed to abnormal experiences rather than a broadly totalising perspective. The form dictates certain stock notions in fiction and these have contributed to the popularity of the ghost story, where the reader has come to expect certain features in the narration, and therefore may be more open to experiencing transference into a state of mind that is implied by the genre, with the imaginative world enlarged beyond the normal. Coupled with this is a desire to see how the individual author handles their material, how they can provide a

basis from which to transport the reader into new and unexpected states of mind; through careful manipulation of their material they can transport the consciousness to a new realm of understanding within the world. An important facet of these narratives is that they were published in a period when the short story itself was emerging as a self-conscious medium of expression, aided in part by the many periodicals that appeared during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These publications covered a wide range of audiences, from popular mass-audience periodicals like *The Strand Magazine* - perhaps one of the best-known due to its legacy as publisher of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's early Sherlock Holmes stories in its pages - to the more specialized magazines such as *The Yellow Book*, which was closely associated with advanced aesthetics and modern subjects. It is also the case that the short story afforded writers the possibility to compose narratives reflecting the notion that, as G. K. Chesterton asserted in 1906, 'existence is only an impression, and, perhaps, only an illusion'.[40] More recent critics have noted that the form of the short story allows a greater possibility for writers to express, as Clare Hanson has suggested, 'that which is marginal or ex-centric to society'.[41] Claire Drewery argues that the modernist short story incorporates both a tendency to aesthetically render human experience in terms of a concentrated unity and the opposing force of 'negotiating and transgressing boundaries'.[42] Such a definition is particularly apt when discussing the supernatural fiction of the ghostly sisterhood as it is the supernatural aspect which defined the kind of fantastic fiction which transgressed boundaries, allowing for an exploration of areas of

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[40] G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (London: Methuen, 1906), p. 264.
[41] Clare Hanson, 'Katherine Mansfield', *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 288-305, (p. 300).
[42] Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 1.

consciousness that would have been difficult to treat with the same freedom in any other form. May Sinclair wrote enthusiastically about short fiction in a letter in December 1910, claiming ‘writing short stories – stories of all queer lengths & all queer subjects; “spooky” ones, some of them. I like doing them!’[43]

The ‘spooky’ or supernatural tale has some similar characteristics to the adventure story as it existed in this period with its exploitation of the exoticism of imperialist experience. Both narrative modes are concerned with taking their readers outside their normal everyday experiences in a modernised and industrial society. The supernatural story rather than necessarily seeking an exotic location for the ‘adventure’ (Wharton’s ‘A Bottle of Perrier’ is an exception, although with the twist of making even the exotic an extension of the familiar) often finds evidence of strangeness in the more familiar surroundings of a domestic space.[44] Such an example can be taken from a piece by L. G. (Lucy Gertrude) Moberly (1861-1931), a popular romantic novelist whose short story ‘Inexplicable’ appeared in *The Strand Magazine* (No. 54, December 1917) and came to be discussed by Freud as the perfect embodiment of the uncanny in his ground-breaking essay. Moberly’s story is not especially distinguished, and Freud does not pretend that it is. (In fact, Freud does not name the author, merely stating that he found it in an English magazine.) Nicholas Royle suggests, in an essay published to mark the centenary of ‘The Uncanny’, that there is no pressing need to name the writer because ‘it isn’t (or wasn’t) a

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[43] Quoted in Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 115.
[44] Edith Wharton’s ‘A Bottle of Perrier’ is an exception, but it also domesticates the ‘exotic’ locale of North Africa.

great work of literature'.[45] The parenthesis is important, indicating, as it does, that in Freud's understanding of the uncanny there is an awareness that a published story provides a unique experience for each reader, one which goes beyond how well the fiction is constructed or imagined, or indeed whether it is truly a work of literature. The context in which the story is read can influence its ability to make an impact on the reader, and it is the impact on the reader that is most important - Freud's own experience of reading Moberly's story is a case in point. Moberly's 'Inexplicable' tells the story of a husband and wife who move into a fully furnished home and find that it contains an odd item of furniture, a wooden table carved with crocodiles. After dark they come to realise that the property is inhabited in fact by live crocodiles, which seem to evidence of the animation of the decorations of the inanimate table. In the tradition of the supernatural as outlined above, the parable at play in 'Inexplicable' tells a story about Empire. The young couple are haunted by an item that has come from New Guinea, making the sudden appearance of crocodiles in the domestic interior representative of the 'other', the alien and the primitive presented as an invasion force similar to those imagined by H. G. Wells in *The War of the Worlds* (1898). 'Inexplicable' is a story concerned with the anxiety around Imperialism and the proximity it provides for close contact with parts of the world that exist outside the conventional order of Western European experience and culture. Significantly, Freud recalls that he read the story during the 'isolation of the Great War' when established European culture was in the process of self-destructing.[46]

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[45] Nicholas Royle, 'The Uncanny in Literature', Ivan Ward, ed., *The Uncanny: A Centenary* (London: Freud Museum, 2019), pp. 16-21 (p. 20). See also Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 133-141.
[46] Freud, 2003, p. 151.

This additional literary context expands further on Freud's reading experience, as it stresses his own potential for anxiety as a reader of such a story – perhaps occasioned by the collective trauma of living through the sufferings of wartime. It is also noticeable that Freud's description of his reading highlights the sense that the people in the story are invaded by that which is alien and 'undefinable', suggesting a dramatisation of the workings of the unconscious forces influencing the characters perception of their home.

Moberly's story is particularly significant because, although Freud makes it clear that he recognises its naivety, he sees 'Inexplicable' as an example of the way in which 'psychical reality' usurps 'material reality' to create a dynamic situation.[47] The short supernatural fiction of Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair is significantly more sophisticated than Moberly's story, and they are writers who each have wider intellectual concerns touching gender, sexuality, narrative point of view, and social class, which arguably grants their fiction a greater social resonance. They are similarly concerned with the hinterland between fantasy and reality, and the potential of the supernatural as a manifestation of inner psychological disturbance to destabilise the outward aspects of life expressed in Freud's reading of 'Inexplicable'. These women writers find that the use of the mode of the supernatural story allows them to convey different aspects of perception that could not as easily be conveyed within the conventions of the realist narrative dominant in the patriarchal culture of the time.

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[47] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 217-256 (p. 243).

## Modernism and the Shifting of Cultural Paradigms

One of the problems contributing to the critical neglect of the ghostly sisterhood relates to the assumption that, by the critical standards of the next generation of writers, often now regarded as 'high modernists', they were not quite modern enough. More recent scholarship, however, has increasingly questioned whether polemical, critical works such as Virginia Woolf's 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' essay have distorted our view of those writers, male as well as female, who were active in the years of the Transition across the divide between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[48] For example, Anne Fernihough contends that Woolf's essay has been used to obscure those aspects of Edwardian cultural life that did not fit in with accounts which privileged certain writers at the expense of others:

> Woolf's 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924), the origin of so much of the prejudice, is one of the most frequently cited literary-critical essays of all time. It is now recognized, however, that its central argument, that the literary tools of the Edwardian period would have to be smashed up and discarded for modernism to come into being ('those tools are not our tools'), depends on a reductive and impoverished account of Edwardianism.[49]

The work of Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair has increasingly come to be seen by critics as varied as John Ashbery, Dennis Denisoff, Catherine Maxwell, Patricia Pulham, Hermione Lee, Carolyn Burdett, Claire Drewery, and Rebecca Bowler as part of a dynamic period of transition that should not be interpreted simply as a marker on the way to an alleged more achieved moment in literary history. But even where these authors have received attention,

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[48] Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924).
[49] Anne Fernihough, *Freewomen and Supermen: Edwardian Radicals and Literary Modernism* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2013), p. 23.

there has been a tendency to focus attention on their longer fictions, their works commonly represented in relation to the mainstream development of the Twentieth Century novel. This has the effect of suggesting that the realist novel was the measure by which achievement in fiction can be truly measured, the extent to which Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair would have disagreed, considering such an assumption open to debate, but it is necessary to stress that their work in the form of the supernatural short story is important in understanding what the fictional writer can do when they break free from a strictly realist narrative and allow a measure of fantasy to enter their imagination, and in so doing expressing an inner desire to challenge the status quo. Lee's supernatural fiction is increasingly seen to be important, although her novels have been rarely discussed by critics.[50] The supernatural short fiction of Wharton and Sinclair has received comparatively little analysis when measured against the critical interest in their longer novels. However, what unites Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair is their understanding that the short form of the ghost story offered them the freedom of scope to imaginatively explore territory where the past haunted the present.

## Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of three main chapters, each concentrating on one of the writers featured as subjects: Vernon Lee, Edith Wharton, and May Sinclair. These chapters focus in turn on stories which can be seen to exemplify each author's particular vision of the supernatural as it pertains to articulating a gender-based exploration of the ways in which narrative can be used to realise perspectives about human experience. The focus of this

[50] For more on recent studies of Vernon Lee's work see the section entitled The Literature Review.

experience is primarily, but not exclusively, related to the lives of women at the turn of the century. However, it should be noted that Lee often masks her same sex desire through the adoption of male narrative voices, and that Edith Wharton's 'A Bottle of Perrier' (1926), which, although the characters are exclusively male, still manages to critique the structures of patriarchal society in such a manner as to reveal a woman's perspective. The effect is to break through conventional ways of seeing based on realist forms of representation to gain greater freedom of expression producing narratives that transcend the masculine insistence on the real by questioning the individual's range of responses to external stimuli.

The first chapter – 'Vernon Lee: Aestheticism, and the Development of a Theory of Empathy' – sets out the background to my contention that the supernatural provides a window through which points of view are presented, revealing a desire to puncture the limitations provided by the dominance of realistic modes of art. The metaphorical aspect of these narratives is discussed and the implications of Vernon Lee's extensive travel writing is demonstrated as providing a means of interpreting her accounts of her own experience. As Dylan Kenny has observed, Lee was acutely responsive to the nuances associated with bodily engagement with aesthetic experience, whether this was travelling through a landscape or promenading through a museum observing art.[51] I also discuss Lee in relation to the work of Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Modernist writers, as well as her use of 'magic' and 'enchantment' in relation to Lee's interest in the occult during the age of transition. In particular my research centres on those hidden elements of memory and attachment to the past which can be the source of neurosis, and a close reading of her

[51] Dylan Kenny, 'The Real Self', in Vernon Lee, *The Psychology of An Art Writer* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018), p. 18.

stories from the *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890) volume demonstrates the way in which she is able to adapt the genre of the ghost story to illustrate an open-ended interpretation of what it means to be 'haunted'. The stories in *Hauntings* all deal with the interplay between the past and the present, using the supernatural to place, in a dramatic juxtaposition, elements drawn from different periods of time. Lee is concerned with the way in which a person responds to aesthetic experience, and this is shown in relation to gender, sexuality, and identity, exploring the psychological and bodily influence experienced through particular artefacts. She presents this in an individual and subjective context, wherein the narrative's structure can transcend through the communicative process of storytelling and enact a blurring of between the past and present.

The second chapter deals with 'Edith Wharton, Feeling, and the Supernatural'. I begin with the importance of Wharton's childhood reactions to ghost stories, explaining how and why such a primary element in her development is key factor to her later desire to become a writer of fiction. Wharton recounts such moments in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934), examining how her later fascination with ghost stories relates to her conception of her displaced Celtic roots, as well as the personal childhood trauma of ambiguous and abstract fear as reflecting Freudian notions about the anthropological implications of childhood. Her way of dealing with these parts of her life are tied again to Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' to highlight the extent to which Wharton used the medium of the supernatural story as a means of containment, to gain control over that which is struggling to break free and to express itself beyond what Wharton is prepared to admit in her public self. The significance of Vernon Lee in her life is also discussed, especially in

relation to her appreciation of continental Europe and the aesthetic experience of homes and gardens. There follows a close reading of the stories which represent the breadth of Wharton's supernatural fiction, from her early work through to the end of her career. These stories have also been chosen because they demonstrate how Wharton opens up new perspectives by breaking through the ostensible reality in which they are set. By seeing her supernatural fiction as a consistent feature of her writing we can see that her work represents not a marginal part of her fiction, but one which is central to her understanding of the importance of feeling in human interrelationships as well as in the development of her aesthetics.

My third chapter is focussed on 'May Sinclair: Borderlands, Consciousness, and Feeling in *Uncanny Stories* (1923)' and deals with Sinclair's interest in the ambiguous territory between different states of being and the liminal moments of consciousness. She is the most self-consciously modernist of the authors in this study, and the most inclined towards mystical interpretations of experience. Much of her work in the short story form deals with the thresholds that exist between different states of consciousness, and it becomes clear she relished the opportunity afforded by the supernatural tale to explore those areas of knowledge, such as was opened up by psychoanalysis and Idealist philosophy – areas that interested her in her non-fictional writing. Contemporary academic research is increasingly interested in Sinclair's work outside of her literary fiction, as is typified by Rebecca Bowler and Claire Drewey's *May Sinclair: Re-Thinking Bodies and Minds* (2018). Sinclair was interested in psychic events and in the transformative power of belief in the supernatural beyond the material, as can be seen in her friendship with Evelyn

Underhill. Her career is examined and an account is given regarding her early fame and later neglect as a writer of reputation in literary and academic circles, with especial importance placed on her work as a thinker and critic (her support of the imagist poets and her highly influential use of the term 'stream of consciousness' is discussed), with her writing often described in relation to its 'interdisciplinary' nature (a term used by Bowler and Drewery to emphasise that her work should be understood not in terms of her fiction alone, but in relation a large number of intellectual pursuits). In this manner, Sinclair's book *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) is discussed at length, as is her interest in the development of Freudian psychoanalysis. Her collection, *Uncanny Stories* (1923), has received relatively little attention by critics and is therefore discussed in my thesis with a close reading of some of the most significant stories, with particular emphasis on those which illustrate her intellectual engagement with modernist aesthetics. The key works discussed in this study dramatise moments of epiphany to illustrate her desire to reconcile interior and exterior existence through the mode of fiction, and in so doing question the nature of reality itself. In pursuing this approach, Sinclair was able to liberate her creative energies and empower her vision of resistance to orthodox notions of the experience of time.

## Conclusion

The argument put forward in this thesis is that the supernatural story was adapted by Vernon Lee, Edith Wharton, and May Sinclair to break through conventional ways of interpreting the world, providing a woman's vision of reality that was significantly different from the modes of thought and feeling of the dominant patriarchal society, and articulating how an understanding of the consciousness of time became complicated by the feeling the past haunted the present. Their writing manifested a self-empowered resistance to conventional notions about the role of women in society, understanding that they were restricted by the limits of their moment in history, looking forward with uncertainty and backwards with regret. As Lee suggested, the written text produces a different effect from a medium which depends on pure form, such as a painting or sculpture, because it requires the writer to represent the 'entourage of feelings and ideas associated' with the moment of reality described.[52] This process evokes a similar effect to being haunted by the past, as the conjuring of memory brings with it other influences to bear on the present, and can be read as an instance where time past and time present manifest simultaneously. Sinclair similarly noted this complexity, suggesting that the supernatural tale provided a means of handling such difficulties and should not be regarded as an inferior genre, as it was 'a perfectly legitimate form of art and at the same time as the most difficult'.[53] She wanted the reader to accept that conventional notions of reality were no longer sufficient in presenting the range of human experience as felt by the individual consciousness, which she believed went beyond what could be stated in terms inherited from previous generations, due to this sense of the multiplicity of time, being witness to simultaneous past, present, and future.

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[52] Lee, 2018, p. 33.
[53] May Sinclair, 'Dreams, Ghosts and Fairies', *Bookman*, December, 1923, 142-149 (144).

The supernatural tale, with its potential to liberate the imagination, was therefore as important as other, more highly celebrated forms of literature. Rather than simply being a form that granted an author the licence to write anything they wanted, it was an exacting form to master that required the ability to hold the reader's attention and to enlarge their experience into areas where the author might challenge conventional notions. The tradition of nineteenth-century realism, which was the dominant fictional mode in the period when these women begun their writing careers, was the background from which they hoped to escape by developing new ways of seeing the world. As Virginia Woolf observed in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', the materialist realism of the Edwardians simply reproducing that which already existed through its celebration of the 'facts of life' was no longer a satisfactory vehicle for the expression of the complex and modern experience of *being*, nor the aspiration to go beyond that experience to encounter the full range of female potential which the imagined future promised to provide.

Steven Connor has claimed something similar, noting that the changes had already begun before the end of the nineteenth century: 'the 'supernatural' was no alternative or other world, but rather an image, annex or extension of the imposing, ceaselessly volatile real world of the nineteenth century.'[54] This was, by extension, true during the Age of Transition, when much of material life was in the process of being changed forever through the adoption of new technologies – the motor car, the aeroplane, the telephone, moving pictures and the wireless. At the same time there existed a comparable change taking place in the way individuals interacted with the world and interpreted their experiences, such as

[54] Steven Connor, 'Afterword', in Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell, eds., *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 258-277 (p. 258).

the personal experiences of the individual in relation to the perspectives afforded through the consciousness. It is my contention that by engaging with new perceptions about the nature of human responses to aesthetic experience, Lee outlines ways in which, as Carolyn Burdett puts it, she was able to articulate 'new types of thinking about selves [which are now] associated with […] Modernism'.[55] ThisI new type of thinking can also be found in Freud's writing about the uncanny, where he demonstrates that there is a curious relationship between the subjective and the objective in human understanding and interpretation of existence. This concern with finding something beyond conventional notions of reality is closely connected with feeling, with the desire to communicate that which is just outside the range of a fully rational consciousness. This *something* is experienced as fragmentary and elusive, forever evoking a sense of being that exists as a threshold between the known and unknown – the liminal moment.[56] The ghostly sisterhood explored this territory and found that it was a means by which they could extend fictional modes to incorporate female experiences and understanding.

In what follows I trace how this awareness informs the work of Lee before moving on to how a similar concern with feeling underpins the supernatural fiction of Edith Wharton and May Sinclair. Lee's vision relates to the expression of 'odd, enigmatic, half-hidden vestiges' of the human soul, and this is linked to what Freud later identified as being

[55] Carolyn Burdett, '"The Subjective Inside Us Can Turn into the Objective Outside": Vernon Lee's Psychological Aesthetics', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 12 (2 June 2011), 1-31 (25-26) http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/view/610/712 [accessed: 12 July 2020].
[56] See Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield. Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), particularly 'Introduction: The Liminal Aesthetic in the Modernist Short Story', pp. 1-13.

the uncanny – the moment when 'the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred'.[57] This blurring of boundaries was closely related to a sense of the past haunting the present. By referencing Lee's works of aesthetic thought, I demonstrate that the writings of the ghostly sisterhood of Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair were able, thorough short supernatural fiction, to give expression to new ways of seeing that went beyond the kind of materialism associated with nineteenth-century realism. They understood that the future, like the present, would encompass a sense of time that would be haunted by the past. These women should be regarded as belonging to the moment when a distinctly modernist sensibility emerged, but it was a sensibility that, however much it stressed the need for the contemporary moment, it could not do so without a sense of other times haunting their texts. However, they also look forward to the way in which literary texts can serve to open up the real and provide portals to different ways of seeing through the means of fantasy. In the context of the supernatural they were striving towards the kinds of freedom of expression that is not linked to strict realism, but anticipates the way in which, in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, many of the most important, imaginative writers have explored human experience through magic-realism or fantasy fiction – writers such as Gabriel García Márques, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, and Terry Pratchett.

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[57] Vernon Lee and Clementia Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), p. viii. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 150.

**Literature Review**

Research into the work of women writers and supernatural fiction have both experienced growth in recent years. Beginning with the rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a process of rediscovery of literature by women, supported by scholarly interest and the activities of radical publishers such as Virago. This in turn has led to the closer examination of those women writers who were already seen to be canonical, such as the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf. However, in many ways, the most striking aspect of this change of emphasis has been the recovery of the great number of women writers, often popular in their own day, who have been excluded from literary history. This process can be traced from early figures such as Mary Wroth and Aphra Behn up until the late twentieth century.

In many cases, works by the female writers who are examined in this thesis have undergone a re-evaluation, either to reveal their historical significance or to read them in the light of contemporary socio-political ideas. It has been observed that the reasons for their neglect are complex, as the subject matter that has sometimes attracted women has not easily fitted in with traditional notions about significance in accounts of literary history, which have privileged different characteristics than those to be found in fantasy fiction. The driving force behind this academic resurgence has been linked to the awareness that there is a distinctly female set of perspectives that traditional male-centred academic discussion had previously marginalised. One aspect of this has been the re-evaluation of what, for convenience, has been labelled fantasy fiction. This did not begin as an exclusively feminist approach, but as part of the recognition that there were areas of human experience

expressed in more fantastic literature that could not be straightforwardly captured in adequately in realist narratives. An early example would be Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a story that stretches the notion of what was realistically possible at the time, and in doing so shed light on a part of the human psyche that could not be adequately dramatised in the contemporary realist manner. These works can be understood as belonging to the tradition of the Gothic Romance – a genre that had become very popular by the end of the eighteenth century and is especially associated with Ann Radcliffe. In the nineteenth century, many women writers continued to compose stories dealing with the Gothic, although these were not often highly regarded in a fiercely patriarchal society. However, as A. Susan Williams has rightly argued, women in the Modernist period responded to the 'doubt and confusion' that they experienced in the greater establishment by giving expression to their sense of consciousness, often in the context of the 'bitter and painful reality of women living in a world run by men'.[58] More recently, Nicholas Daly has indicated in the foreword to the Lizzie Harris McCormick, Jennifer Mitchell, and Rebecca Soares' edited volume on *The Female Fantastic* (2019), that there is a distinct relationship between the fantastic mode of writing and a female desire to re-imagine the world in such a way as bypasses the conventional notions of literary history, amplifying the point that forms of writing which were once held to be of lesser significance and fell outside what was then deemed the mainstream of 'serious' literature, are now being increasingly read in relation to a more comprehensive understanding of the literary past.[59] Williams cites Wharton and Sinclair in this context, and my study develops further on these themes while

[58] A. Susan Williams, Introduction, *The Penguin Book of Classic Fantasy by Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. ix.

[59] Nicholas Daly, in Lizzie Harris McCormick, Jennifer Mitchell, and Rebecca Soares, eds., *The Female Fantastic: Gendering the Supernatural in the 1890s and 1920s* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. xiii.

also investigating the work of Vernon Lee as her fiction and developing theories of aesthetics prefigures the wider discussion on the nature of consciousness. Lee's importance in the history of aesthetics is increasingly being acknowledged, yet there is another reason for her importance and in that she was a direct and personal inspiration to Wharton.

The literature relating to Vernon Lee, May Sinclair, and Edith Wharton has increased since the 1990s. Of the three, Wharton was the first to receive a critical reassessment, beginning in the 1970s and continuing throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and into the twenty-first century. This exploration of her career has followed the pattern of the scholarly inquiry that has made the work of many women available to succeeding generations through the production of extensive criticism. An early stimulation to this was the making available of her archive at Yale University in 1968, which in turn led to R. W. B. Lewis's 1975 Edith Wharton biography. As greater attention was afforded to what has often been considered Wharton's most important works - *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) - her status as a major writer during the early years of the twentieth century has been established, and her reputation as a writer regarded a disciple of Henry James has been rightly reassessed, emerging as a major figure in her own right. This analysis has led to the rediscovery of her other fiction – novels such as *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Summer* (1917), and *The Buccaneers* (1938) – which have since been published in the Oxford World's Classics series with critical introductions.

However, Wharton's shorter fiction, her ghost stories in particular, received little critical attention until the 1990s. This follows the assumption that writing that deals with elements of fantasy is less highly regarded than other forms, often considered by the literary and academic communities of the twentieth century as belonging to supernatural genre, thus their being marginalised as less important than fiction dealing directly with factual reality. This is a position that has been increasingly challenged in the last twenty years, with studies giving prominence to the Gothic and the ghostly in relation to modernism. Anglo-American literary criticism was dominated for much of the twentieth century by the work of F. R. Leavis and his circle associated with the periodical *Scrutiny* and also by the rise of New Criticism. Both of these schools of critics were grounded in the literary practice and ideas propounded by the high modernists, particularly the literary theories of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. This led to a tended assumption that their positions were representative of an elite culture that was in the process of being undermined by mass culture. The supernatural tale has been traditionally associated with popular forms of literature, becoming marginalised in critical discourse. However, studies like *Gothic Modernisms*, edited by Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (2001).[60] John Bramble's *Modernism and the Occult* (2015),[61] and Matt Foley's *Haunting Modernisms* (2017)[62] have demonstrated that rather than modernism being a topic that excludes discussion of the Gothic and supernatural, it is an area where the Victorian notion of the Gothic interacts with new ideas about perception and consciousness, which has wider implications for how we read modernism that I explore further in my thesis. As Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace

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[60] Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, eds., *Gothic Modernisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).
[61] John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
[62] Matt Foley, *Haunting Modernisms* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

have observed, the 'Gothic text and modernist text are joined […] by their fascination with the potential erosion of moral value, and with the forms that amorality can take'.[63] Those 'forms of amorality' are, I argue, closely related to the development of aesthetics and of the dialogue concerning consciousness in the fiction of this thesis's core subjects.

Significant among the new approaches to Wharton's short stories which emerged during the 1990s was Monika Elbert's essay 'T. S. Eliot and Wharton's Modernist Gothic' in the *Edith Wharton Review* in 1994.[64] This marked a new willingness to not only examine Wharton's lesser-known genre fiction, but to also place her alongside the likes of Henry James and other major figures from the early twentieth century Modernist movement. This shift in understanding repositions Wharton as a witness to the emergence of several different literary generations and notes Wharton's critical responses to contemporary literary innovations quite removed from her own fiction. It also marked a fresh attempt to read modernism in the light of the Gothic. Jenni Dyman's *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (1996) was the first book-length study to discuss Wharton's supernatural fiction, and is still perhaps the most comprehensive study of her supernatural stories.[65] Through close examination of a number of her ghost stories, Dyman posits that Wharton was able to articulate ideas in these narratives that had also emerged in her more self-consciously *serious* fiction of manners, capturing the experience of women and men in relation to the deadening effects of conventional social attitudes. However, in her supernatural fiction Wharton was able to go further in some respects than in her novels to

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[63] Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, 'Introduction: Gothic Modernisms: History, Culture and Aesthetics', *Gothic Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 1-10 (p. 3).
[64] Monika Elbert, 'T. S. Eliot and Wharton's Modernist Gothic', *Edith Wharton Review* 11:1 (Spring 1994), 19-23
[65] Jenni Dyman, *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

explore a range of experience and treatment of it that transcended conventional ideas about formulas and what was considered acceptable by the critics of the day. Dyman sees Wharton's use of the supernatural as a way of 'drawing energy from the "wild zone" of the supernatural tale and the "wild zone" of women's culture'.[66]

Further biographical knowledge has been established through the publication of Hermione Lee's biography in 2007, which sees Wharton's work as subverting the assumption that she was a writer primarily celebrating a golden age that had already passed.[67] Instead, Lee demonstrates the extent to which Wharton engaged with contemporary culture, a period that saw the development of modernism and challenged stereotypes. For instance, Wharton stated that she enjoyed living in Paris in the period immediately before the outbreak of the First World War, declaring that it 'offered no treasures comparable to the Isadora Duncan of 1909-10, to the Russian ballet, to the first reading of Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann*.'[68] Her chapter on Proust in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) attests to this enthusiasm for pre-war experimentalism in the arts.[69] Also of importance has been the publication of Wharton's further correspondence, particularly the letters to her German governess, Anna Bahlmann (2012), and to her publisher Macmillan (2007).[70]

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[66] Jenni Dyman, *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 7.
[67] Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Pimlico, 2013).
[68] Quoted in Bradbury, 1996, p. 260.
[69] Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (New York: Scribner's, 1925).
[70] Edith Wharton, *Dear Governess: The Letters of Edith Wharton to Anna Bahlmann*, edited by Irene Goldman-Price (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), and Edith Wharton, *The Correspondence of Edith Wharton and Macmillan, 1901-1930*, edited by Shafquat Towheed (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

In spite of this growth of interest in her work, the shorter fiction has still received much less attention by critics, with recent investigations concentrating on her stories in relation to the literary marketplace. Wharton's stories from 1891 to 1937were collected in two volumes in the Library of America series in 2001, edited by Maureen Howard.[71] This was followed by *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, edited by David Stuart Davies, in the Wordsworth Editions series of inexpensive Tales of Mystery and the Supernatural in 2009.[72] The introduction to this volume sets out some of the biographical background and context for Wharton's ghost stories, and usefully summarises some of the key features of the more significant ones selected. Since I began work on this thesis two further editions of the ghost stories have been published by Virago (2019) and by the New York Review of Books (2021), testifying to the growing interest in Wharton's supernatural fiction that will lead to yet further explorations of their significance.[73]

The recent work of Jennifer Haytock on Wharton and modernism is of particular value – *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism* (2008) and the chapter 'Modernism' in the volume edited by Laura Rattray, *Edith Wharton in Context* (2012).[74] These writings situate Wharton in relation to her younger contemporaries and demonstrate the extent to which she responded to their work, as well as to the issues of the period concerning gender, sexuality, and the self – particularly in connection with Eliot's

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[71] Edith Wharton, *Wharton: Collected Stories 1891-1910* and *Wharton: Collected Stories 1911-1937*, edited by Maureen Howard (New York: Library of America, 2001).
[72] Edith Wharton, *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, Selected and Inroduced by David Stuart Davies (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2009).
[73] Edith Wharton, *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, introduced by Kelly Link (London: Virago, 2019) and Edith Wharton, *Ghosts* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2021).
[74] Jennifer Haytock,, *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and Laura Rattray, ed., Rattray, Laura, ed., *Edith Wharton in Context* (New York: C.U.P., 2013).

essay 'Tradition and The Individual Talent'. Haytock's assertion that Wharton was 'more invested in modernist aesthetics and concerns than perhaps she saw' is important, although she ignores the significant influence of Vernon Lee to these issues.[75]

In contrast, Vernon Lee has only enjoyed a much more belated revival of interest, which has seen her work emerge from a marginal position in the history of aesthetics as well as a creative writer. For too long her work was treated as already superseded in her lifetime by the modernist generation of artists and writers and there was a tendency among critics to look on her work unfavourably and to regard it as old-fashioned. This is very far from the case, as the recent publication of her early letters (2016)[76] and *The Psychology of An Art Writer* (2018), along with the inclusion of excerpts from her Gallery Diaries, have revealed the extent to which Lee was an original thinker, linking the appreciation of art to the experience of the body and experience and that, as Dylan Kenny has suggested, 'a rich vision of art is a rich vision of the self'.[77] The re-evaluation of her work has really developed in recent years, but Peter Gunn's biography (1964) is still of value. His work has been supplemented by Vineta Colby's later literary biography (2004), and by recent research by Catherine Maxwell, Patricia Pulham, Denis Denisoff, and Carolyn Burdett. Kirsty Martin's *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence* (2013) places Lee's thinking about empathy in the context of major modernist writers, stressing that whilst her own work may have been limited to certain nineteenth-century modes of thought, she nonetheless provided an interpretative model by

[75] Jennifer Haytock, 'Modernism', Laura Rattray, ed., *Edith Wharton in Context* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2012), pp. 364-373 (p. 372).
[76] Vernon Lee, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935: Volume I, 1865-1884* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).
[77] Dylan Kenny, 'The Real Self', *The Psychology of an Art Writer* (New York: David Zwirner, 2018), p. 19.

which Woolf and Lawrence developed their own modernist aesthetics. Martin underestimates Lee's importance to the development of aesthetic ideas in their own right, however. Recent work, such as Lene Østermark-Johansen's 'Life is Movement': Vernon Lee and sculpture', *Word & Image* 2018, reveal the extent to which these ideas are now being explored.[78] Other books and articles that have been of value to my research are: Catherine Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to 'Dionea': Vernon Lee's portraits' (1997); Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (2000); Hilary Fraser, 'Interstitial Identities: Vernon Lee and the Spaces In-Between' (2004); Kristin Mahoney, 'Haunted Collections: Vernon Lee and Ethical Consumption' (2006); Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (2008); Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (2009); Sondeep Kandola, *Vernon Lee* (2010); Carolyn Burdett, 'Modernity, The Occult, and Psychoanalysis' (2014), and; Kristin Mahoney, 'Ethics and Empathy in the Literary Criticism of Vernon Lee' (2016).[79] Lee's work on empathy is also re-examined by Benjamin Morgan in *The Outward mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (2017), where he correctly notes that 'Lee is among the few thinkers whose work seriously

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[78] Lene Østermark-Johansen, 'Life is Movement: Vernon Lee and Sculpture', *Word & Image*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2018), 64-72.

[79] Catherine Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to Dionea: Vernon Lee's Portraits', *Word & Image*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1997), 253-269; Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Hilary Fraser, 'Interstitial Identities: Vernon Lee and the Spaces In-Between' in Marysa Deemor, ed. *Marketing the Author* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 114-133; Kristin Mahoney, 'Haunted Collections: Vernon Lee and Ethical Consumption', *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* Vol. 48: No. 1 (Winter 2006), 39-67; Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (London: Routledge, 2008); Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Sondeep Kandola, *Vernon Lee* (Horndon, Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 2010); Carolyn Burdett, 'Modernity, The Occult, and Psychoanalysis' in Laura Marcus and Ankhi Mukherjee, eds., *A Concise Companion to Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Culture* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), pp. 49-65; Kristin Mahoney, 'Ethics and Empathy in the Literary Criticism of Vernon Lee', *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 43, 1-12 (2016), 193-210.

engaged with Pater's aestheticism and Richards's aesthetics'.[80] As the journalist André Gerard has stated in a recent article,

> [Lee's] reputation has undergone a major re-evaluation. Interest in Lee and her work has come from several directions. Modernist scholars trying to gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between modernist enterprise and Victorianism are interested in the way she straddles and bridges both modernist and Victorian ideas and ideals.[81]

He goes on to note that Lee's work has also attracted the interest of queer theorists and feminist scholars.

Although May Sinclair's best-known novels were revived by Virago Press in the 1980s, it was not until the publication of Suzanne Raitt's academic biography *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* in 2000 that she began to attract serious scholarly interest.[82] Important recent studies include: Andrew K. Kunka and Michele K. Troy's *May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern* (2006); Claire Drewery's *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal Tradition in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (2011), and; Rebecca Bowler and Claire Drewery's *May Sinclair: Re-Thinking Bodies and Minds* (2018).[83] These studies have stressed Sinclair's varied writing career, indicating her personal involvement in the intellectual and literary life of her times, particularly her role in the promotion and development of understanding key modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Dorothy Richardson – as well as the Imagist poets – which aided

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[80] Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 220.
[81] Gerard, André, 'A Violet Lily: Virginia Woolf and Vernon Lee' (September 6, 2022), http://berfrois.com/2022/09/andre-gerard-on-vernon-lee/ [accessed 08 Oct 22]..
[82] Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: OUP, 2001).
[83] Andrew K. Kunka and Michele K. Troy, eds., May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), Claire Drewery, Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal Tradition in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011); Rebecca Bowler and Claire Drewery, eds. May Sinclair: Re-Thinking Bodies and Minds (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

me in formulating some of my ideas. The publication of *Uncanny Stories* in the Wordsworth Editions series in 2006, together with an informative introduction by Paul March-Russell, has made her short fiction accessible.[84] Further evidence of interest in her short supernatural fiction is demonstrated by her inclusion in Victoria Margree's *British Women's Short Supernatural Fiction, 1860-1930* (2019), which focuses on the way in which gender relations and the depiction of the changing circumstances that women were experiencing during the Age of Transition.[85]

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[84] May Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories*, edited by Paul March-Russell (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006).
[85] Victoria Margree, Victoria, *British Women's Short Supernatural Fiction, 1860-1930: Our Own Ghostliness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

# Chapter One

## Vernon Lee: The Supernatural, Aestheticism and the Development of a Theory of Empathy

### Introduction – The Ghost Story, Supernatural Fiction, and the Sensation Novel

Vernon Lee claimed in 'The Psychology of an Art Writer' that 'all literary description is based on images stored up in the memory'.[86] Such images can be found manifested in Lee's fiction, her stories haunted by the past and linking them to the traditions of the supernatural tales popular during nineteenth century. It is perhaps more useful to call these fictions 'supernatural' rather than 'ghost' fiction, because by this the term 'ghost' can be felt to be too limiting, failing to convey the extent to which these narratives rely on exploiting ambiguities about the experiences presented. When Julia Briggs adopted the term 'English Ghost Story' to define the genre in her influential study *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (1977), she was trying to situate these supernatural narratives within a tradition that has lasted many centuries.[87] In this study the focus is on manifestations of the supernatural which can be described as 'uncanny' as much as they are concerned with the conventionally *spectral*, the sort of narratives lampooned in Oscar Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost' (1887). When summarising Lee's varied achievements, Sondeep Kandola notes that Lee had attracted the attention of 'a new generation of readers

[86] Lee, 2018, pp. 32-33.
[87] Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977).

whose various interests' included 'the Victorian ghost story'.[88] While it is true to say that Although Lee's supernatural fiction has garnered much interest for its approximation of Victorian horror conventions, it would be wrong to think that her stories easily fit within such a narrow label. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the usage of the term 'supernatural' is more often effective when attempting to define the eclectic nature of these types of stories. When Karl Miller reviewed a number of books related to the ghost story, including Lee's *Supernatural Tales* (published by Peter Owen with the significant subtitle 'Excursions into Fantasy', in 1987), he noted that a change had occurred in the ghost stories that started to appear towards the end of the nineteenth century: 'the ghost stories of the modern world declare themselves the testimony of the overworked, the ill, the mad', whilst also observing that this was 'a madness which expounds a metaphysics.'[89] This opening up of the ghost story to embrace more complex states of mind, as well as making room for other kinds of perceptions of the world, was part of a larger shift towards the revaluation of the processes by which interpretations of consciousness take place, as well as the growing scientific explorations of the unconscious itself. In this regard the label of the 'supernatural' proves more effective in capturing the essence of the type of fiction which is as much about psychology and perspective than the mere horror of the conventional nineteenth-century 'ghost story'. Even its use in this thesis is unstable because there is no clear distinction between these terms. As is demonstrated in the volume of Lee's fiction mentioned by Miller, the notion of the fantastic brings with it that which is clearly distinct from the purely metaphysical. Miller himself, when addressing

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[88] Sondeep Kandola, *Vernon Lee* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2010), p. 1.
[89] Karl Miller, 'Things', *London Review of Books*, Vol.9 No. 7 (2 April, 1987). [Online version accessed 25.08.2022].

what he calls the 'feminist ghost story', also brings into use another rival label, 'terror fiction',[90] which allows for a freer interpretation of what is meant when we refer to ghosts in fiction, because the genre has been used to capture presences that do not aptly fit with the clichéd view that readers might have of earlier ghost stories. However, it should be noted that Julia Briggs also uses the term 'supernatural', not as an alternative to the term 'ghost story' to define the genre, but to signify a more general awareness in things that appear to lie beyond a purely rational interpretation. And it is in this sense that Vernon Lee understood her stories. Stefano Evangelista has usefully named Lee's approach to the supernatural as a form of 'spectral classicism' in which fantasy enables a 'loosening of firm outlines' which 'is for Lee the necessary condition of the supernatural',[91] as is evident from the comments that Lee makes in the Preface to *Hauntings* (1890), to which I will return later in this chapter.

Before looking in more detail at Lee's writing it is important to recognise that her work in the field of supernatural fiction has a place in a wider cultural phenomenon – that a surprisingly large number of writers of supernatural fiction in the nineteenth century were women. Jessica Samuelson has suggested that 'as much as 70 per cent of the supernatural fiction in Victorian periodicals was the work of women'.[92] This poses the question, How did such a situation arise? One reason can be related to the rise of the 'sensation novel' of the 1860s, following the success of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860). Similar sensational fiction authored by women at the same time, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's

[90] Miller, 1987.
[91] Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 81.
[92] J. A. Salmonson, ed., *What Did Miss Darrington See?* (New York: Feminist Press, 1988), p. x.

*Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), were commercially successful and helped to establish a market for highly dramatic narratives with female protagonists. These were significant because they gave the writer scope to explore issues relating to the lives of women that would not have been possible in any other public way in the restrictive culture of the time. The issues explored could range from the law regarding marriage, particularly in relation to property, or could be expressions of female sexuality in ways that challenged standard Victorian norms. Typically, the sensational novel depicted unconventional relationships and pushed the boundaries of Victorian public morality. Eve M. Lynch argues that not only were many of the writers of Victorian tales of the supernatural women, but that there was a tendency for these fictions to be set in domestic spaces:

> Ghost stories most frequently take place within the bounded space of the home, perhaps because the most ardent producers of these tales throughout the Victorian era were women. Writers such as J. S. Le Fanu, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Arthur Conan Doyle have been famous in the twentieth century, but it was writers such as Amelia Edwards, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Catherine Crowe, Rhoda Broughton, Charlotte Riddell, Mrs Henry Wood, Margaret Oliphant, Vernon Lee, Rosa Mullholland and Edith Nest who filled the volumes of the *Belgravia* and *Cornhill Magazine* to popularise spectral tradition.[93]

Lynch uses the term 'spectral tradition' here to denote that in the later nineteenth century there was a recognisable tendency to deal with themes that can be labelled as supernatural. Her emphasis is on the popularising of a tradition that can be traced back into narratives that are part of a tradition of folklore in a pre-industrial culture. By the late nineteenth century, however, these traditions had been exploited by an emerging mass market

[93] Eve M. Lynch, 'Spectral politics: the Victorian ghost story and the domestic servant', in *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), edited by Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell, pp. 67-86 (p. 69).

entertainment industry. The means of this popularization were the many printed magazines that aimed at a popular audience and had large circulations, and in this context the supernatural tale was converted into a form more suitable to excite readers with narratives that made use of sensation, surprise, and shock. By using the term 'spectral', Lynch places an emphasis on that which is incorporeal, something which lacks physicality, and is therefore shadowy and seemingly not of this world. The writers of this kind of story were part of what Briggs identified as a particularly nineteenth century obsession with the ghostly, an obsession that seems to run counter to the scientific progress that was perhaps the greatest phenomenon of the age.[94] Briggs goes on to suggest that this proliferation of writing and printing ghost stories was a reaction to the loss of faith in Christianity caused by, among other things, the advances of science. The privileging of Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Arthur Conan Doyle, the male writers mentioned by Lynch, perhaps can be related to the fact that, although ghost stories and supernatural fiction featured in their work, it is not considered to be amongst their primary achievements. Writers such as Catherine Crowe, Rhoda Broughton, and Charlotte Riddell, meanwhile, are primarily known by their supernatural fiction. This distinction highlights that male and female writers could be writing in the same period, both genders choosing to write about the supernatural, and yet their reputations are determined by different considerations. Chief among these is the assumption by critics that the supernatural tale is of less importance. In accepting the gift of the volume of Lee's *Hauntings* in 1890, Henry James wrote to her that

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[94] See Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 19.

> The supernatural story, the subject wrought in fantasy, is not the *class* of fiction I myself most cherish (prejudiced as you may have perceived me in favour of a close connotation, or close observation of the real, or whatever one may call it, and the familiar, the inevitable).[95]

Henry James is reinforcing the dominant prejudice in favour of realism that characterised the nineteenth century. However, it should be pointed out that Dickens disrupts the mutual exclusivity between the 'serious' novel and the supernatural tale by using the motif of the ghost at Chesney Wold in *Bleak House* to suggest that Lady Deadlock is haunted by her own past. Perhaps the only one of these female writers to have undergone a significant revival has been Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915), and this has been largely in relation to her novels as successful examples of sensation fiction.[96] Yet many of the supernatural tales by these other writers have been reprinted in recent years and there has been a growing interest in the popular fiction of the period as well as in the canonical writers.[97]

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[95] Henry James letter to Vernon Lee, 27th April 1890. Quoted in Catherine Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to 'Dionea': Vernon Lee's portraits', *Word & Image*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (July-September 1997), 253.

[96] Between 1987 and 1999 Oxford University Press issued critical editions of a number of her novels, and more recently Victorian Secrets and Valancourt Books have issued other titles. In 2014 the British Library published *The Face in the Glass and Other Gothic Tales*, edited by Greg Buzwell, which highlighted the extent that Braddon was also a writer of ghost stories, mostly written for magazine publication.

[97] The Brighton-based publisher Victorian Secrets have brought out critical editions of a number of volumes of these ghost stories by women. Most notable are: Rhoda Broughton, *Twilight Stories*, published as *Tales for Christmas Eve* (1873, Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2009, edited by Emma Liggins). Charlotte Riddell , *Weird Stories* (1882, Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2009, edited by Emma Liggins); and the anthology *Avenging Angels: Ghost Stories by Victorian Women Writers* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018, edited by Melissa Edmundson). Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920) was the niece of Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873), who has been credited for giving currency to the supernatural tale during the late nineteenth century. See Gary Hoppenstand, *Popular Fiction: An Anthology* (New York: Longman, 1998), p. 31.

**Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, The Past and The Present**

Among the names listed by Lynch is Vernon Lee, the pseudonym of Violet Paget (1856-1935), an author who is often classified with the Aesthetic Movement, as a cosmopolitan writer of studies into the history of Italian art and music, an influential travel writer, developer of aesthetic theory, and the introducer of the term 'empathy' into everyday English. Her supernatural fiction has perhaps been proven to be the most accessible part of her numerous and varied writing, but it may nonetheless come as a surprise to see her name included in Lynch's list.[98] *The Victorian Supernatural*, on the face of it, may not be thought of as featuring the type of supernatural tale with which Vernon Lee is associated (many of which are more often situated in a richly imagined exotic place and time), but her work actually fits in with the assumption that women write mainly about ghosts inhabiting the familiar domestic space of the home. This might principally be attributed to Lee's experience not conforming to the common experiences of women in her time, as she had 'the benefit that her nomadic upbringing in France, Switzerland and Germany and her education at the hands of various European governesses' afforded her.[99] The majority of women had restricted lives and their experiences were based on those few, isolated localities where they were allowed to be active. Yet, as we shall see, the homely is not always simply about finding the potentially threatening in the midst of the familiar. A fundamental aspect to Sigmund Freud's discussion of the uncanny is the notion of

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[98] In an article published in 2002, Patricia Pulham suggests that, 'Lee's collections of supernatural stories remain relatively unexplored'. The more recent publication of the Broadview edition of Lee's supernatural fictions (2006), edited by Patricia Pulham and Catherine Maxwell, has changed this circumstance and contributed to the wider accessibility of these stories. See Patricia Pulham, Pulham, 'The Castrato and the Cry in Vernon Lee's Wicked Voices', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2002), 421-437.

[99] Kandola, 2010, p. 3.

something opposite to the homely; something, as Freud states, 'not belonging to the house, not […] familiar, tame, dear and intimate, homely', but which is in fact 'unknown and unfamiliar'.[100] As Kristin Mahoney has claimed, Lee was interested in 'relationality and contact with otherness' throughout her career, and 'almost always writing about how we encounter and engage with alterity'.[101] It is therefore a crucial aspect of her thought that understanding the interaction between the individual – the self – and that which is *other* is at the heart of aesthetic knowledge. This fundamental awareness of an encounter taking place between a person's mind and manner in which their body responds to external objects is the basis of Lee's developing concern with psychological aesthetics. Such contact can be found in the immediate environment inhabited by the person, but the otherness of these encounters in Lee's fiction is dramatised through a contact with what Kristin Mahoney characterises as being 'the historical otherness of the cultural relic', establishing a relation between the immediate and that which has been long dead.[102] In this sense, Lee's first collection of short fictions was entitled *Hauntings*, highlighting a relation between the everyday reality of the contemporary world and the past. In particular she chose to focus this encounter on some physical object, creating what Mahoney describes as an awakening to 'the sanctity, the otherness, the separateness of objects', relating this to what she terms 'historicized consumption', noting that:

> Lee's attempt to infuse consumer practices with a sense of morality and history serves here as a representative example of late-Victorian pragmatic compromises with a culture of consumption and as an indication that the late Victorians'

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[100] Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 124-125.
[101] Kristin Mahoney, 'Ethics and Empathy in the Literary Criticism of Vernon Lee', *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 43, 1-12 (2016), 193-210 (195).
[102] Kristin Mahoney, 'Haunted Collections: Vernon Lee and Ethical Consumption', *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* Vol. 48: No. 1 (Winter 2006), 39-67 (39).

> increasing concern with consumption does not amount to a capitulation to consumerist ideology.[103]

This argument is based on the notion that Lee's career developed in a period of transition between Ruskinian Ethics and Modernist Formalism. This is an important aspect of her encounter with otherness, but I want to focus on another consequence of her articulation of 'alterity', as noted in Mahoney's later essay (2016) on Lee's literary criticism. Here, Mahoney stresses less the transitional nature of Lee's work, but more the extent with which there was continuity between the outlooks of the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century:

> Lee's thinking shifts and changes in relationship to shifts in aesthetic discourse as the century turns, but her trajectory indicates the points of continuity between nineteenth- and twentieth-century approaches to literary criticism, the extent to which one does not constitute a break with the other. These methodologies, while privileging disparate elements of the literary experience, its potential beauty, its morality, or its form, are often working within the same set of concerns, a shared belief in the ethical relevance of that experience.[104]

Mahoney concludes that there is a continuation of the emphasis on the value of the engagement with art that is consistent between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In an essay called 'Of Writers and Readers' quoted by Mahoney, Lee argues that the significance of reading is enhanced because it enables personal experiences to 'mingle […] with something foreign to our own experience' making life 'double, interwoven of absent and present'.[105] This echoes Lee's fictional exploration into the relationship between the past and present. As Evangelista has stated:

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[103] Mahoney, 2006, p. 40.
[104] Mahoney, 2016, p. 197.
[105] Lee, 'Of Writers and Readers', *New Review* 5 (1891), 528-536, quoted in Mahoney, 2016, 193-194.

> The desire to know the past has always something of the fantasy of seeing ghosts. The ghost is a figure of the violent separation between past and present and in the ghost story the spectre is a historicising device through which the present comes to *see* the past, and perhaps to understand it and deal with its own unresolved conflicts with it, seeking harmony and reconciliation. The ghost reveals the meaning of the past in the present.[106]

Such a conception underlines the way in which Lee strove to resolve the tension between her aesthetic awareness and her historical scholarship. In particular, 'the ghost reveals the meaning of the past in the present' is crucial, directing us towards the complexity of Lee's conception of art as being conditioned by the physical contact made between the aesthetic object and the subjective individual – an understanding of art Lee developed through her relationship with Clementina Ansruther-Thomson and recorded in her diaries. It is notable that Lee needed another's bodily experience apart from her own to help shape her understanding in the ways through which one engages with art in real life situations, not in a merely intellectual manner wherein the mind forgets, or chooses to ignore, the body. This process of observing reactions in another, effectively becoming a double of the observed, suggests all sorts of complex interactions. As Avery Curran has indicated, in highlighting Constance Classen's observations on the role of the senses in nineteenth-century aesthetics in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Empire*, Lee believed that the senses were inextricable from the 'corporeal and mental whole' and did vital 'cultural work' in stimulating the creative aspects of the imagination.[107] There was an awareness from Lee of the kinds of physical reactions experienced by Anstruther-Thomson when encountering works of sculpture, producing 'a series of inhalations and exultations, and her plastic body

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[106] Evangelista, 2009, p. 81.
[107] See Avery Curran, 'Correspondences: Vernon Lee and Emanuel Swedenborg', *Swedenborg Review* [online], Summer 2019, https://www.swedenborg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/flipbook-min.pdf [accessed 8 Nov 2022].

often imitated, or realized, rather than merely recognized, the sculptural form being contemplated.'[108] These bodily responses were unconscious in the sense that they were not directly apparent to the person experiencing them, but were observed by another (Lee). These encounters facilitated a repositioning of the process of interaction between the individual and the object contemplated. It was no longer possible to consider an idealised experience as being purely representative of the aesthetic experience, which was now seen to be compromised by all sorts of material factors concerning the way in which the work of art was seen. As Talia Schaffer suggests, Lee 'managed to use aesthetic diction to produce serious investigations of specific historical moments framed by personal experience' in her writings about the past.[109] Schaffer draws particular attention to Lee's *Juvenilia* (1887), noting that she 'uses the newest literary techniques to create an eerie merging between past and present.'[110] This includes developing 'the effect of a stream of consciousness, whereby the reader follows every fleeting thought, every half-conscious association, to build up a compelling image of an infinitely complex past.'[111] Such a nuanced approach to the past allows Lee to penetrate beyond the tendency of contemporary critics to read the past in terms of the dominant cultural norms of the nineteenth century with their reliance on notions of realism. The advantage of this approach was that it questioned the ways in which people of the past related to aesthetic objects. It was a feature of Lee's writing that she was able to engage with the art object in ways which demonstrated an ability to imagine herself into quite different periods of time, understanding the subtle and

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[108] Lene Østermark-Johansen, ''Life is Movement': Vernon Lee and Sculpture', *Word & Image*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2008, 64-72 (64).
[109] Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia, 2000), p. 62.
[110] Schaffer, 2000, p. 62.
[111] Schaffer, 2000, p. 63.

unfamiliar emphasis that previous cultures enacted in their art with their own conceptions of beauty, conceptions which were at variance with those of her own time. This ability to read the past in terms of the past rather than judging it from the present moment was due to the extent in which Lee was able to immerse herself into the context she was observing, giving her work the quality of something that was decidedly 'uncanny'. That these essays were written around the time in which she was working on the stories that would come to be collected into the *Hauntings* volume indicates the extent to which her critical thinking about aesthetics was linked to her creative imagination. Hilary Fraser has suggested that there was a relationship between Lee's conception of the importance of the visual sense and her notion of the role played by imagination, noting that she had written in her *Juvenilia*, 'the delightful semi-obscurity of vision and keenness of fancy of our childhood'.[112] This would seem to indicate the influence of Romantic literature on her work, attaching an importance to the faculty of imagination developed in childhood, which is certainly given her beginnings as a writer started when Romanticism was still the dominant aesthetic.

There has been some attention focused on the manner in which Lee developed a sophisticated and very modern way of interpreting the past. As Fraser has pointed out, there is a sense of 'modernity' in Lee's 'conceptualisation of history, of her keen awareness of the fact that perceptions of the past are culturally positioned, and that history is a construction, ''only a creation of the present'' (Lee, *Spirit of Rome*, 142).'[113] This perception sits on the reverse of the coin that has already been discussed above, inverting Lee's

[112] Quoted in Hilary Fraser, 'Interstitial Identities: Vernon Lee and the Spaces In-Between' in Marysa Demoor, ed., *Marketing the Author: Authorial Personae, Narrative Selves and Self-Fashioning, 1880-1930* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 127.
[113] Fraser, 2004, p. 123.

awareness of the past as the past. Fraser posits the opinion that Lee's approach to history is largely conditioned by her experience as someone who encountered history through art, particularly visual art, writing that Lee's 'approach to history, like her experience of art, is framed by a consciousness of visuality', carries with it, as Fraser suggests, an awareness that is 'distinctively modern in its sceptical questioning of referential fidelity and its ironist awareness of simulation.'[114] There is undoubtedly a point of reference to be found in Lee's reaction to art that is, to a significant degree, conditioned by her responses to her experience of art. These experiences were in the context of the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a period of transition between Romanticism and Modernism. It is her position on the cusp of new thinking that informs her most radical engagement with understanding based on the ways in which aesthetic knowledge is formed by sensory interactions between the individual and the art object, and yet also can hold onto an appreciation of how the past was different, what Fraser refers to as Lee's 'synergy of mind and body, of vision informed by imagination and feeling.'[115] It is Fraser's contention that Lee was fascinated by 'the conditions and the mechanics of vision as a dynamic exchange between observer and observed informs her art criticism',[116] placing the weight of her argument on the visual element in Lee's response to works of art. This is in part justified, but perhaps exaggerates the sense of sight in Lee's conception of her aesthetic consciousness. It is clear from her discussion of the work of Walter Pater that Lee was critical of 'impressionist historiography', to use a phrase coined by Sondeep Kandola

[114] Fraser, 2004, p. 123.
[115] Fraser, 2004, p. 128.
[116] Fraser, 2004, p. 129.

characterising Lee's 'moral criticism' of Pater's influence.[117] In her own study of the Renaissance, *Euphorion* (1884), Lee was keen to make known her doubts about what she termed the 'half-artistic pleasure' that was in danger of replacing what she understood as fully realised historical knowledge.[118] It can be noted that Lee is wary of the seductive nature of giving total power to the work of art to exert an impression, understanding the limitations of such an approach, which is further testimony to her complex understanding of the interactions between the individual and the object that is fundamental to her interpretations of the beautiful. The extent that Lee wished to subject the responses of the individual to analytic scrutiny is a symptom of her attempt to record all the circumstances which condition aesthetic engagement. These circumstances cannot only be instances of visual appreciation as Lee was also a significant interpreter of the beauty to be found in music as well as in painting and sculpture – the story 'A Wicked Voice' is an example of her concern with the aural rather than the visual. Fraser is closer to the essential value of Lee's work when she writes:

> [For] a travelled and cosmopolitan observer such as Lee, as she herself writes, 'our imaginative emotions, our glimpses of the Genius Loci, multiply themselves like views in opposite mirrors' (Lee *The Tower of the Mirrors* 202). It is an image that also speaks of the dialectical processes by which subjects are made, of the liminal spaces in-between, of the endlessly self-reflecting selves that make up the borderland identity of Vernon Lee in that *fin-de-siècle* 'moment of transit' of which Bhabha writes, 'where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion' (Bhabha 1).[119]

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[117] Sondeep, 2010, p. 24.
[118] Vernon Lee, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884), Volume I, pp. 12-13.
[119] Fraser, 2004, p. 131.

Lee's cosmopolitanism is important in that it is closely related to her ability to engage with the past as something which is separate from the self; something that can nevertheless be experienced through travel, and which has subtle influence on the present. Lee's view of the past is radical as it demonstrates the present moment as a particular instance of co-existent with which she attempts to see time not just as something which can only be experienced sequentially, but that places often share a simultaneous past and present. This was a problem which Lee puzzled over, and her most successful solution was to develop a method of uniting through the activity of the imagination the lost remoteness of the past, and the modern relativism of a history created in the present.

Ideas relating to the supernatural and the feminine consciousness are embedded in Western culture – from the sibyls depicted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel ceiling to the figure of the tall nun in Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'. Karl Miller has noted, in response to the notion that women have been accused of imagining things when their views may have clashed with the narratives of a dominant patriarchal culture, that 'women imagine things. And they have been able to imagine and describe what it is that women imagine, what their weakness is, and to say how it could be defended.'[120] In the genre of the supernatural tale, 'imagining things' is turned into an advantage, articulating not just the imagination, but also intuition. The very mention of the word 'intuition' can arouse the suspicion that the unquantifiable has entered the discourse. The supernatural could also provide a basis from which to craft narratives that obliquely gave voice to female desires and to find ways in which they could be realised in the culture of the

[120] Miller, 1987.

time. Lee's work, as we have seen, is more often thought of in relation to an awareness of the past, as the realization of the way in which the historical spectre inhabits a particular time, and these tales are usually located in Italy, which might further remove them from what Victorian readers would understand as being domestic and homely. As Angela Leighton has suggested, Lee's ghosts have a 'historical specificity normally lacking in the run of Victorian family spooks.'[121] This highlights the way in which Lee's fiction is often set in the same locations that can be found in her travel writings. As an authority on Aestheticism with a cosmopolitan family background and, apart from her wandering existence as a girl, someone domiciled in Italy for many years, it is from this perspective in particular that Lee was known in the English-speaking world in which her books were published.

Lee is increasingly seen as one of the most important writers who spanned the years between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. As Andre Gerard has indicated, a major re-assessment of her work and personality has resulted in 'Modernist scholars trying to gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between modernist enterprise and Victorianism' to become 'interested in the way she straddles and bridges both modernist and Victorian ideas and ideals.'[122] Evidence that she should be considered in this context can be found in that her story 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' was first published in English in Ford Madox Ford's *English Review*, where it appeared alongside writings by Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy, and Walter de

[121] Angela Leighton, 'Ghosts, Aestheticism, and " Vernon Lee"', *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2000), 1-14 (1).
[122] Andre Gerard, 'A Violet Lily: Virginia Woolf and Vernon Lee', *berfrois* (September 6, 2022), http://berfrois.com/2022/09/andre-gerard-on-vernon-lee/ .

la Mare[123]; early works by Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and D. H. Lawrence were also published by Ford during the following months. Later on, Lee's *The Poet's Eye* (1926) was published by Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf at the Hogarth Press, one of the publishers most closely associated with Modernism. In the 1920s the Hogarth Press also published the first English translations of several of the writings of Sigmund Freud, including *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1922), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922), *The Ego and the Id* (1927), and *The Future of An Illusion* (1928).

Lee was a follower of Walter Pater and her interest in ideas and aesthetics, added to her practice as a creative writer, demand serious attention. It has been stated by Kirsty Martin that Lee was 'the first English novelist to use the word "empathy", translating it from the German *Einfühlung*, meaning "feeling into"'.[124] She was also an independent woman of letters at a time when such a position was very rare, generating a renewed interest in Lee's work amongst contemporary feminist academics. Increased attention to Lee's work has also been further stimulated by John Ashbery, the influential American poet, who was influenced by her imaginative work. The publication of her selected letters in the Pickering Masters series is testimony to this continued revaluation of Lee's work, further aiding our understanding of her many activities, with the first volume (covering the years 1865-1884) edited by Amanda Gagel published in 2017 and the second volume (covering the years 1885-1889) in 2020.[125]

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[123] *The English Review*, January-February 1909, 453-465 (223-233). The story had first been published in French in *Feuilleton du journal des débats du Samedi* (8-14 February, 1896).
[124] Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2013), pp. 30, see also p. 78.
[125] Amanda Gagel, editor, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935*, Vols. I and II (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, 2020).

**Vernon Lee and The Supernatural**

In the Introduction to Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell's study of *The Victorian Supernatural*, it is stated the 'Victorians were haunted by the supernatural.'[126] It was an age characterised by rapid industrialisation, the sweeping destruction of the environment caused by the building of mills and factories which belched the smoke of coal furnaces into the atmosphere, and by the expanding process of urbanisation encroaching on the countryside. These factors meant that the new all too often blotted out the past at the same time confidence in conventional religious explanations for the origins of the world were being eroded by scientific discoveries – all of which generated a contrary reaction alive to the possibility that the present might be haunted by the past. It was also an age troubled with a sense that the supernatural could be discovered in unlikely places. The twilit world of the suburbs and the gas-lit streets of the metropolis were locations which could give imaginative life to more traditional notions of the uncanny.[127] It was an age of rapid technological progress, and yet the inventions of modernity – the telephone and electricity, for instance – seemed to suggest a world that was not only modern, but also mysterious. Mysterious because understanding how the new technology of the day worked was the province of a class of engineers and inventors who had acquired specialist knowledge, and was therefore beyond the conception of the general public. In this way, it might seem that the ghost was in the machine; that the inexplicable was not simply born out of an ignorance for the scientific or mechanical, but that there was something present

[126] See Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell, 'Introduction', in Brown, Burnett and Thurschwell, eds., *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2009), pp. 1-19, (pp. 1-10).

[127] It can be argued that Arthur Machen (1863-1947), another writer who wrote about the supernatural during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, exploited this aspect of modernity in works such as *The Great God Pan* (1894), *The Three Impostors* (1895), and *The London Adventure* (1924).

that was incorporeal and unknowable, and as a result often deeply frightening.[128] This modernity could sometimes seem inexplicable, and the changes it wrought in society were unsettling, yet the possibility some vestiges of the past survived, encountered as fragments, to haunt the present evoked the possibility of a reimagined society.

As I have suggested, this was an age in which traditional Christian religious belief was coming under increasing scrutiny in Western society. Darwin, and to a greater extent his followers like Herbert Spencer, envisaged a new age in which scientific rationalism would replace religious belief.[129] With Sir Charles Lyell's discovery of geological evidence that challenged the hitherto accepted literal truth of the Bible, scholars had begun to examine sacred texts with the methods of modern textual criticism, in part as an attempt to bring the methods of scientific analysis into the realm of the arts.[130] However, a reaction was also emerging towards the end of the century wherein the sometimes simplistic doctrines of Spencer and the Positivists were increasingly subject to criticism. Nietzsche was one such critic who questioned the simple faith of the Rationalists, pointing out that much of what was mysterious in mankind was not so explicable as had been claimed.[131] He wrote:

> What, indeed, does man know of himself? Can he even once perceive himself completely, laid out as if in an illuminated glass case? Does not nature keep much the most from him, even about his body, to spellbind and confine him in a proud,

[128] The phrase 'ghost in the machine' was coined by Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976) in *The Concept of the Mind* (1949) in a critique of the work of René Descartes to describe the action of the mind as separate from the mechanics of the body.
[129] See Michaela Giebelhausen, 'Holman Hunt, William Dyce and the image of Christ', in Bown, Burdett and Thurschwell, eds., *The Victorian Supernatural*, (2009) pp. 173-194, (pp. 177-78).
[130] For more about the significance of Lyell's work see The Lyell Centre at Heriot Watt University, www.lyellcentre.ac.uk [accessed 2nd February 2019].
[131] See John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 8-10.

> deceptive consciousness, far from the coils of the intestines, the quick current of the blood stream, and the involved tremors of fibres?[132]

All the factors mentioned by Darwin, Spencer, Lyell, and Nietzsche created an environment in which even rational phenomena could seem to be the result of the mysterious or supernatural. Bown, Burdett, and Thurschwell point out that a notion of the 'metaphorical supernatural' has been a part of twentieth-century critical thinking when applied to the theoretical writings that emerged in the nineteenth century, including the work of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.[133] In the introduction to *The Victorian Supernatural*, the authors suggest that Marx and Freud, whose ideas shaped much of the modern world, often had recourse to examining the hidden – the hidden areas of the unconscious (Freud) or the dead weight of cultural tradition weighing down on the current generations of the oppressed (Marx).[134] In these formulations the supernatural is conceived as representing that which is not present in the material world of the present time, but which nonetheless exerts an influence on it. These hidden influences create a sense of something having been lost, and as Bown and others suggest, there is often something left over from these loses that exist as a fragmented remainder which, in turn, are 'imagined as a haunting.'[135] This can be related to the kind of ghostly presences that Lee writes about in her fictions and travel writings, where the dead are not dead and their spectral otherness is seen to occupy particular places. Indeed, the supernatural can be interpreted as a way of giving a voice to that which lies beyond the scope of any simple conception of reality or that which relies on

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[132] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), quoted in Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: C U P., 2007), p. 21.
[133] Bown et al., p. 10.
[134] Bown et al., pp. 10-11.
[135] Bown et al., p. 10.

external material appearances as it serves to provide, instead of a non-literal interpretation of the haunting, one which relies on a figurative expression of that which is hidden. Freud suggested that 'the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar'.[136] Bown et al. also suggest that instead of focussing on a collective hidden, as in Marx, it is possible to historicise the supernatural in each of its manifestations: 'the ways in which the supernatural signifies differently at different historical moments'.[137] Clearly the supernatural signifies something in relation to the ghostly sisterhood that differs to the way in which Dickens engages with the supernatural in 'The Signalman' (1866), for example. For Lee the way in which she was able to draw upon a detailed understanding of the cultures of the past to articulate a highly-nuanced sense of the self in relation to a fragmentary relationship with material reality is fundamental to her conception of a historicised supernatural.

Lee's fiction offers a way of looking at the world which takes the reader away from the conventions of the traditional ghost story. They do this, as has already been suggested, by revealing her extensive knowledge of European art and aesthetics and her great love of Italy, as well as by revealing that her interest is in the psychological states of mind more than in the supernatural – and it is Lee's interest in the psychological aspects of human interpretation and its limitations that marks her work as being different from the 'spectral tradition'.[138] Instead, for Lee the ghostly can be seen as something more than the reanimation of the human dead in the present (though it may be that as well), rather it can

[136] Freud, 2003, p. 124.
[137] Bown et al., p. 12.
[138] Eve M. Lynch, 'Spectral Politics: the Victorian Ghost Story and the Domestic Servant', in Bown, Burdett, Thurschwell, eds., *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2009), p. 69.

highlight different ways of seeing, and alternative ways of experiencing the world. We can read the 'ghostly' as representing that which does not exist in material terms in the present and the future, and therefore represents what is lost. For instance, we may read T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) as an example of a text in which past and present merge: 'The river sweats/Oil and tar […] Elizabeth and Leicester/Beating oars'. In this sense the evoked presences of Elizabeth and Essex on a boat in the Thames do not exist in the same phase of time as the oil and tar floating on the water, but read as 'ghostly' presences reanimated in the contemporary industrial world. In this manner, Eliot suggests what has been lost by juxtaposition between what is present and what is past.

In the period from the 1860s through to the end of the nineteenth century, Aestheticism was, if not the dominant form of artistic expression, at least a recognisable and competing tendency that attracted censure from those who were culturally conservative. However, it soon began to be a fashion – and success inevitably led to the commercialisation of its basic ideas and principles. This tendency for aesthetic objects and attitudes to become fashionable continued until the 1890s, when the idea of a decadent movement emerged in the writings of Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, and John Gray, and when the Wilde trial shocked rather than titillated the general public. John Bramble has suggested that Modernism was a search for 'the antithesis of the moneyed bourgeois', and is seen in part as a reaction to the ways in which leading aesthetes, most obviously Wilde, had become such celebrities that their fate had become part of the public experience of art and literature.[139] This would account for the way in which Wilde was

[139] John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 20.

regarded with ambivalence by the leading Modernists, and it can be argued that Eliot's insistency on the impersonality of the poet is a rejection of the Wildeian adoption of a public persona.[140] Vernon Lee's position was largely that of the expatriate scholar, removed from the more sensational aspects of public culture, and her works were designed to appeal to either a cultured elite or to those who aspired to be amongst such an elite. Through her fiction, however, Lee at least attempted to reach a wider audience, though as her first biographer, Peter Gunn, has stated, 'even her delightful short stories met with limited response'.[141] So Lee's position was sometimes that of an outsider, and she could at times observe the cultural imperatives of the time with detachment. As evidence of this is her critical assessment of the Victorian age: 'One of the characteristics of the central Victorian spirit was a tendency to substitute a certain more or less satisfied seriousness for the extremes of tragedy and comedy.'[142] It is statements such as this that make her read as an early Modernist rather than as a Victorian writer.

Bramble demonstrates that Nietzsche was one critic of the nineteenth-century mindset who felt that there was a need to re-engage with primal forces to reinvigorate artistic activity, to avoid a 'culture' that had he felt become merely a plaything for the moneyed classes. Whilst Lee clearly felt dissatisfaction with the nineteenth century, she

[140] The relationship between Wilde and the leading Modernists is complex. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (Penguin, 1991), by choosing to include the 1890s in their conception of Modernism, see Wilde as a Modernist. However, some Modernist writers who were emerging during the period found that the fame of Wilde and his trial had a harmful impact on the arts. Ford Madox Ford, in an article published in *The Saturday Review of Literature* in 1939, recalled the period: '… Wilde and Oscarisms, in their several kinds, were the preoccupation of that metropolis almost to the exclusion of all other intellectual pabula. And, beneath the comfortable strata of Society, growled the immense, frightening quicksand of the Lower Classes and the underworld, with ears all pricked up to hear details of the encounters of their own Fighting Marquis, a toff called Wilde, and the riff-raff of the Mews.' Ford Madox Ford, 'Memories of Oscar Wilde', in *The Ford Madox Ford Reader*, edited by Sondra J. Stang (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), pp. 138-145 (p. 138).
[141] Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee, Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: O.U.P., 1964), p. 3.
[142] Quoted in Gunn (1964), p. 9.

had been brought up as the product of a refined intellectual and artist elite. In contrast, Nietzsche was to reinvigorate intellectual life by engaging with the primitive, which was one of the themes expressed in *The Will to Power* (a book assembled from his manuscripts published posthumously in 1906, first translated into English in 1910). It was a book that made its first appearance in English at the very moment when literary modernism was emerging into consciousness, and traditional perceptions about the appearance of the physical world were being challenged. As Bramble demonstrates, it was Nietzsche's view that: 'the domestication (the culture) of man does not go deep – where it does it at once becomes degeneration'.[143] What Nietzsche is giving expression to here is the belief that a return to the 'primitive' would be a means of re-engaging with nature, to turn away from what has become sanitized or what has become domesticated in the late nineteenth century.[144] But if Nietzsche is putting forward a case of a return to some kind of pre-industrial society, Lee is steeped in European Renaissance culture. Her debut as a writer was as the author of *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), which dealt with the music of the period, when secular themes were replacing the sacred. In the same historical moment that Nietzsche was criticising the domestication of man, Lee was intent on establishing an understanding of the history of culture that he was apparently keen to knock down. In a book of essays called *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908), Nietzsche was one of the targets of her criticism. However, as Freud and others have suggested, the belief in the

[143] Quoted, in Bramble, p. 21. It should be noted that *The Will to Power* was published in an English translation as part of an edition of the collected works contemporary with Virginia Woolf's often quoted assertion in her essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (Hogarth Press, 1924) that: 'On or about December 1910 human nature changed' (p. 4).

[144] A related sentiment is expressed by D. H. Lawrence in his travel book *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), where he implies a similar desire to reengage with primitive cultures within Western Europe: 'They say neither Romans nor Phoenicians, Greeks nor Arabs ever subdued Sardinia. It lies outside; outside the circuit of civilisation. […] It lies within the net of this European civilisation, but isn't landed yet.' *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence: Sea and Sardinia*, edited by Maria Kalnins (Cambridge: C.U. P., 1997), p. 9.

supernatural is another form of the 'primitive' experience. There is a tension between modernist conceptions of the primitive which emerge out of the ideas developed by Nietzsche and the association of the ghost with the haunting of familiar domestic spaces. As we have already seen, this genre has often been regarded as something particularly associated with female writers and female readers.[145]

### 'Odd, enigmatic, half-hidden vestiges': Vernon Lee's Supernatural World[146]

When considering the special uses that the modern author could make of supernatural elements in their fiction, E. F. Bleiler observed that the supernatural could, for instance,

> [...] convey strange states of mentality, odd processes in the cosmic order, symbolic actions and events of various sorts, and a host of other concepts that the ancients never considered. At its heart is a deliberate inversion of a materialistic concept of the universe, and such supernaturalism is essentially a literary device.[147]

Clearly such a reading of supernatural fiction is based not on a belief in the supernatural as such, but on a way of communicating which gives expression to the fugitive and elusive; that which may be spiritual in the widest sense, but does not necessarily require the author to have any special claim to mystical or religious knowledge. It speaks of that which cannot be presented in materialist terms alone, but must instead make its appeal to the imagination through the ability to convey something that transcends the objective world.

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[145] Magazines such as *Temple Bar*, which published much supernatural fictions, were successful in appealing to a female audience.
[146] Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, 1912, p. viii.
[147] E. F. Bleiler, *Supernatural Fiction Writers: Fantasy and Horror,* Volume I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), p. xiii.

One way to approach Lee's work that can give us a greater understanding of the way in which the supernatural functions in her fiction and demonstrates how the past haunts the present, is to look at her non-fictional writings. For instance, her travel writings were much praised by her contemporaries, including Edith Wharton.[148] In an essay called 'The Hills of the Setting Sun', published in the collection *The Sentimental Traveller: Notes on Places* (1908), Lee comes close to seeing the landscape near Venice in terms of a mystical experience, but the supernaturality of the experience described only occurs in relation to what is presented as a subjective exposure to a landscape in certain atmospheric conditions. It is her use of language that enhances the sense of something which is outside the explanation of rationality, and therefore can give us an understanding of the way in which her mind responded to the spirit of the place, and that which might be suggested by the place, but which is not materially outside the intuitive imagination.

Lee begins her essay: 'It became evident to my mind in those recent days (now so woefully distant!) that the Euganean Hills were a country of spells, of magic.'[149] Several things need to be commented on here. Firstly, the Euganean Hills have a literary history, being once a place where the poet Petrarch had lived, as well as being celebrated in a poem by Shelley, 'Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills' (1818). Appropriately for a self-consciously aesthetic piece of writing, the reader is entering a domain which, far from being remote from Western culture, is deeply imbedded within Western cultural tradition

[148] Dylan Kenny, 'The Real Self', in Vernon Lee, *The Psychology of an Art Writer* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018), p. 20.
[149] Vernon Lee, 'The Hills of the Setting Sun', in *The Religion of Beauty: Selections from the Aesthetes*, edited by Richard Aldington (London: William Heinemann, 1950), p. 137. Aldington was one of the Imagist poets, and was for a time married to H.D., another of the foremost Imagist poets. See Peter Jones, *Imagist Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982). May Sinclair, a friend of Aldington, was associated with them and wrote defending their work in essays published in *The Egoist* and *Little Review*.

and myth. However, at the same time, this region, known for its volcanic hills, is one that was once thought of as being on the margins of Romano-Greek civilisation, the Euganean people having been conquered by the Romans and forced to conform to their values. It has also been given a mythical significance by the Greeks – 'The Garden of the Hesperides' – as a region on the margins.[150] These layers of knowledge are, in Lee's writing, absorbed into her subjective experience, and the essay follows this viewpoint. What is particularly characteristic is that the text gives the reader the sense that she was attempting to be objective in her account of her processes of thought and her emotional reaction to the things she sees. We also notice that the perspective is really of a double experience, bearing witness to recent events and expressing regret that the experience has now passed, existing only in memory. Such a regret is linked to Lee's notion of empathy, although here it is through the passage of time encoded as a form of imaginative sympathy located in what has passed. For somebody of an intellectual and meditative cast of mind, she may have felt more comfortable viewing a situation in retrospect, and, as Kirsty Martin claims, Lee 'insisted on the calming and subduing of emotion through distance and time'.[151] Later in the piece it is stated that: 'during all the days I spent there, the magic nature of those hills became, for me, more and more an article of private belief and a reason of secret superstition.'[152] This insistence on the magical and the occult is repeated throughout the rest of the essay, with the emphasis placed on the region as having the characteristics that lead her to describe them as being 'unreasonably enchanting' – creating a place in time that

[150] 'The Garden of the Hesperides' (1892) was the title of a painting by Lord Leighton, which also drew upon the Ancient Greek myth of a garden belonging to three nymphs, who were associated with the golden light of the evening sunset.
[151] Martin, 2013, p. 78.
[152] Aldington, 1950, p. 138.

has an attraction beyond what the mind can explain.[153] These places in Lee's memory have a permanence that suggests that they exist not merely in the past but can exist in the future as well – being securely contained by their magic within the imagination.

The effect of this is that it brings the writer and the reader closer to the experience of the environment that retains a sense of mystery or magic. These are the kinds of experiences that had been eroded by a reductive modernity, reviving the spiritual over the concern for the everyday aspects of an experience - a notion that we encounter in the high Modernists like T. S. Eliot. The leisure that she permits herself to indulge in moments of revelation is a feature of her writing, which perhaps legitimises the reader's enjoyment of her prose, acting as a release from the contemporary world. It is, however, significant that the essay ends with the spell having been broken and the experience being viewed from the vantage point of a moving train, a reminder of the return to the contemporary material, modern world. By this method, Lee breaks the frame of the reverie and reveals it to be of the nature of a fantasy; of a fiction. The aesthetic experience becomes an isolated moment that has been superseded by a more prosaic reality.

Lee's interest in the supernatural can also be found in many of her other non-fictional works, as the title of her book of essays *The Enchanted Woods, and Other Essays on the Genius of Places* (1905) suggests, with its stress on the magical element in the use of the term 'enchantment'. Almost always such magic is occasioned by the past haunting the present. In fact I would argue that Lee's work is frequently concerned with 'intellectual

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[153] Aldington, 1950, pp. 139.

transformation' – the transformation of a place through the activity of the imagination so that it is made to resonate with associations (memories), suggesting a dialogue with the past. It is not sufficient for her to create without some context and, spite of this tendency, Lee asserts that for her it is not possible to escape from the experience of the mind contained in the body. Martin states that in Lee's understanding of the world, the mind 'is in the end connected to things around it, given over [...] to the sun and the wind'.[154] For example, in an essay 'The Gorgons in the Surrey Lane' from a later volume of essays, *The Golden Keys and Other Essays on the Genius Loci* (1925), Lee states that:

> I do not like this new-fangled seeing of Fairies and Oreads, and am well satisfied I never have seen any; and that for me the spirits immanent in lawns and trees and waters should have remained trees and lawns and waters, disdaining human shape.[155]

It is precisely because she refuses to see the world in relation to conventional metaphors that marks Lee's work out as being modernist in a way that goes beyond seeing and understanding her work in terms of the aesthetic movement, and reveals that her concern is with objective reality, as experienced in a contemporary context. That is not to say that she does not share some of her ways of looking with the Aesthetes, and the emphasis of her work begins with a concern that art is the embodiment of feeling. However, Lee points into other areas of awareness where it is difficult for her to find an adequate expression. In 'The Gorgons in a Surrey Lane', she gives expression to what is mysterious in nature, and it is clear that her concept of the natural world is one that reveals the environment not through personification but through an awareness of elements in the environment which stimulate

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[154] Martin, 2013, p. 80.

[155] Vernon Lee, *The Golden Keys and Other Essays on the Genius Loci* (London: John Lane, 1925), pp. 113-29 (p. 113).

feeling - a feeling that can be located in domesticated spaces, such as lawns and gardens, as well as in more exotic landscapes. In this respect, Lee's use of homely spaces can be understood in relation to Nietzsche's desire for a 'cure from culture', as she uses the inspiration that she receives from nature as an antidote to artificial sophistication of culture.[156] In Lee's vision the supernatural is associated with the suggestiveness which can be found in a particular place, or in any combination of sensory experiences that can stimulate the imagination. There exists a form of immorality in her insistence on the sensual aspect of individual responses that is held in check by a desire to find and explain in her writing on aesthetics what Martin calls, 'communal forms of feeling'.[157] Therefore, the supernatural or ghostly in her work is not the ghostly that appears in the works of more conventional writers, but can be identified with that which is hidden, or exists beyond what is knowable. She suggests that these 'secrets' are ones that only the mind can discover.[158] Her ghosts are, according to the Preface that she wrote for the first publication of *Hauntings: Fantastic Tales* in 1890:

> They are things of imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions, litter of multi-coloured tatters.[159]

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[156] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, quoted in John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 21. Lee had written about 'Nietszche and the Will to Power' in the North American, 179 (December 1904), pp. 842-59, reprinted in *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908).

[157] Martin, 2013, p. 31.

[158] In this context of the use of the intellect and the need to explore altered states of mind, it is not surprising that Aldous Huxley took an interest in her work. Huxley, Peter Gunn states, had met her at Garsington during the First World War through Lady Ottoline Morrell, and he wrote to her in May 1925 expressing his admiration for her travel books, having just read *The Golden Keys*. His observation on her interpretation of the places she has known is illuminating: ''How much I like, too, your generalizations about the Genius Loci! One may be born a worshipper of more spectacular deities – from Jehovah to D. H. Lawrence's Dark God, from Dionysus to the object of Boehme's ecstacies – one may be born but it is useless to try to make oneself, consciously, a worshipper at such shrines. For most of us, I fancy, Wordsworth's Natural Pieties are the most decent and satisfactory thing. Of the theory and practice of the Natural Pieties your books are a most delicate and beautiful exposition."' Quoted in Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: O.U.P., 1964), p. 184.

[159] Vernon Lee, Preface, reprinted from *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1890) as *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, edited by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada:

How remarkably these words suggest not so much the world of her contemporaries or in particular the aesthetic movement, but point towards modernism – these are words and phrases that we might more frequently associate with W. B. Yeats ('half-rubbish, half-treasure'), T. S. Eliot ('fragmentary') and Ford Madox Ford ('impressions').

In this same Preface, Lee claims that: 'My ghosts are what you call spurious ghosts [...] of whom I can affirm only one thing, that they haunted certain brains, and have haunted, among others, my own.'[160] This may be seen as an insufficient statement about the nature of the supernatural, as it suggests that when she refers to a ghost that she has in mind something that has only a subjective reality in consciousness rather than evidence of something that might be said to be found by objective analysis. However, as we have noted, this expression of that which defies a simplistic materialist interpretation can be understood as an expression of the supernatural, where the supernatural is understood to represent that which evades easy categorization, and may in the final analysis be 'the radiance of life shaped in the image of man' that she suggested was the end of her and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson's search for beauty.[161] In this way, Lee's fiction is concerned with the Victorian fashion of the ghost story only in so far as it provides a framework with which to explore areas of experience that concern the mental stimulation provided by that which is not physically present, but forged in the interaction between the

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Broadview Editions, 2006), pp. 37-40, (p. 39). This Broadview edition reprints the four stories originally published in the 1890 *Hauntings* volume ('Amour Dure', 'Dionea', 'Oke of Oakhurst', 'A Wicked Voice') along with three later stories ('Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', 'A Wedding Chest', and 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers').

[160] Vernon Lee, Preface, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, edited by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Editions, 2006),pp. 37-40 (p. 40).

[161] Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), p. ix.

human mind and the external world. Indeed, she is at pains to state in this preface that the tales collected in *Hauntings* are not of the kind that might be of interest to science or the law, and would not be of any interest to the Society for Psychical Research.[162] Lee knew something of these attempts to use the methods of scientific research to investigate cases where ghosts had allegedly appeared, as her friend Edward Gurney (1847-1888) was one of the Cambridge scholars who had founded the society, and who, in 1886, had co-written with Frederick W. H. Myers and Frank Podmore *Phantasms of the Living* (1886).

## Empathy and Modernism

To appreciate the development of Lee's aesthetic consciousness it is crucial that we concentrate on the idea of 'empathy'. The introduction of the word 'empathy' into the English language has long been closely attributed to Vernon Lee, with the Oxford English Dictionary crediting the its first appearance to a diary entry dated the 20th of February, 1904, quoting Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (1912).[163] It is worth quoting the entry in full:

> Empathy: **1904** 'V. Lee' *Diary* 20 Feb. in 'Lee' & Anstruther-Thompson *Beauty & Ugliness* (1912) 337 Passing on to the æsthetic empathy (Einfühlung), or more properly the æsthetic sympathetic feeling of that act of erecting and spreading. **1909** E. B. Titchener *Lect. Exper. Psychol. Thought-Processes* i. 21 Not only do I see gravity and modesty and pride · · but I feel or act them in the mind's muscles. This is, I suppose, a simple case of empathy, if we may coin that term as a rendering of *Einfühlung*. *Ibid.* v. 185 All such 'feelings' · · normally take the form, in my experience,

[162] Established in 1882. In contrast May Sinclair was a member from 1914 and was clearly interested in the scientific attempt to establish whether ghosts could be proven to exist.

[163] There is some debate about whether this citation is based on a mistake. See the O.E.D. (second edition) quoted above. Her first use of the word was only published in 1912 in *Beauty and Ugliness*, by which time the American professor E. B. Titchener had already used the term (1912). A fuller description of the way in which Lee took up the concept and engaged with German theorists can be found in Dylan Kenny, 'The Real Self', Lee (2018), pp. 16-18. See also Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 30.

> of motor empathy. **1912** *Academy* 17 Aug. 209/2 [Lipps] propounded the theory that the appreciation of a work of art depended upon the capacity of the spectator to project his personality into the object of contemplation. One had to 'feel oneself into it'.· · This mental process he called by the name of *Einfühlung*, or, as it has been translated, *Empathy*. [164]

It is important to note that empathy is defined to be an active rather than a passive response. It is not simply a feeling that is derived from an external source, but something that engages the mind in a process of feeling. It is defined in relation to the application of the term to the ability of the spectator to discover within themselves a sympathetic response to external reality, and the word is given a specifically theoretic context by the German philosopher, Theodor Lipps (1851-1914). Kirsty Martin has suggested that Lee struggled during her career to clearly articulate her personal awareness of empathy with her belief that it was necessary to go beyond the individual response, to discover a quasi-scientific theory that could be applied in such a way as to be foundational to an understanding of aesthetic experience not limited to the particular person, but was true for the majority.[165] Martin suggests that, rather than of a more universal concept, Lee could only express 'her empathy discovery in terms of fragments'.[166] In fact, as Dylan Kenny argues, although 'Lee was fascinated by the foundations of aesthetic experience, [...] she refused to reduce it to those foundations'.[167] In other words, whilst she strove to find an overarching principal in her studies of aesthetic responses, the value of Lee's aesthetic theories is to be found in her non-scientific works, such as the *Gallery Diaries, 1901-1904*,

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[164] *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition (1989). [Accessed 14th February 2019]
[165] Martin, 2013, pp. 31-32. Carolyn Burdett charts the development of Lee's thinking in regard to empathy and her relationship with the ideas of Darwin and Spencer in '"The Subjective Inside Us Can Turn into the Objective Outside": Vernon Lee's Psychological Aesthetics', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 12 (2011), 1-31. http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/view/610/712 [accessed: 12th July, 2020].
[166] Martin, 2013, p. 32.
[167] Dylan Kenny, 2018, p. 18.

where she is able to express her observations of the process free from the need to fit her findings into a scientific formula. In this respect she is a transitional figure in the history of aesthetics, looking back to an empirical past whilst anticipating a theoretic future. The result is that Lee emerges as someone who collects fragments of aesthetic understanding, and is able to fashion new perspectives from her experience, which further expands on her appeal as a proto-modernist. Carolyn Burdett states that Lee's 'strange process of empathy, and with it [the argument] that beauty was essential to life' was at the core of her thinking: by adopting such a stance and by making aesthetics central to her understanding of the world, Lee was also giving prominence to the notion of form, as Burdett goes on to state, , she espoused *form*, [which] is one of the things which makes Vernon Lee such an intriguing figure in thinking about a modernistic aesthetic to come.'[168]

Modernism was often concerned with the idea that there was a division between the present and the past, and that the technology that had developed in the last part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century – the telephone, the motor car, the aeroplane, etc. - had created an opportunity to recreate the world in a new way. Although Vernon Lee has appeared to be on the periphery of debates relating to this kind of modernity, her engagement with the problems of aesthetics can be seen as key in trying to understand the dynamics of maintaining an authentic register of complex responses to a world that is constantly in flux. Martin has written on what she calls the 'rhythms of sympathy', and has attempted to demonstrate how 'rhythm becomes crucial to early-twentieth-century understandings of feeling for others'. Rhythm is conditioned by space, and this implies that

[168] Burdett, 2011, p. 29.

the individual has to relate to other individuals in particular spaces. However, she suggests that 'Vernon Lee's understanding of empathy is tentative – it requires the modernist techniques of Woolf and Lawrence for its full expression, and Lee remains concerned about what she fears might be the innate selfishness of emotion'.[169] This last accusation is a fair point and it is difficult to see how Lee, born in 1856, could have shared the iconoclastic freedom enjoyed by those born in the 1880s, like Woolf and Lawrence. On the other hand, neither Woolf nor Lawrence attempted the kind of theoretical examination of empathy for which Lee is remembered, and then there is the question of to what extent such freedom can be tolerated by organised society with its collective responsibilities. Nonetheless, emerging from the method of Lee's discussion of aesthetics was the adoption of perspectives that anticipate modernist practices and, as Martin has claimed, her style 'at its best embodies the difficulty of feeling by a style both fragmentary and suggestive.'[170] This style finds effective expression in Lee's supernatural stories.

In Jonathan Freedman's view, the period in which Lee was writing was one 'in which new definitions of the aesthetic and its relation to the social were negotiated and renegotiated.'[171] John Ruskin had famously challenged James McNeil Whistler's art as an attempt to evade what Ruskin believed to be the necessity of a work of art to have a purpose. Lee was interested in Ruskin's thought, even if she had, at the beginning of her career, been inclined to dismiss his work as 'dogmatic, moralistic, irrelevant in the modern

[169] Martin, 2013, pp.28-29.
[170] Martin, 2013, p. 80.
[171] Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture*, p. xii.

world'.[172] This provides evidence of Lee's sense of modernity as being something relativist without the assumed superiority and assertive confidence of the high Victorian age. Indeed, her own work in the field of art criticism placed emphasis on a sophisticated awareness of the perceptions of how the body and the aesthetic object relate to each other.[173] The recent translation and reprinting of her essay on the 'Psychology of an Art Writer (Personal Observation)', originally written in French in 1903, is a key document in the development of this approach.[174] As Dylan Kenny's illuminating introduction makes clear, the beginning of Lee's work on aesthetics is grounded in the individual's personal experience and her relationship with the artist and writer Clementina "Kit" Anstruther-Thomson (1857-1921) under whose inflience she began developing her theories on the 'effects of art on the body of the beholder.'[175] Lee was not someone who was very comfortable with her body, and it may have been that her devotion to writing and scholarship was symptomatic of this sense of insecurity.  Anstruther-Thomson, however, was confident in her body, becoming the source of Lee's particular concerns with how the body responds to works of art. Together these women began to speculate about the nature of beauty and whether there was a primary set of responses that the individual could feel in relation to objects of art that were not wholly conditioned by mental processes, but were instead founded on bodily sensations. In as far as these perceptions were based on physical, seemingly 'primitive' responses to physical stimulation - a clear symmetry between these ideas and those

[172] Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), quoted in Martin, *Modernity and the Rhythms of Sympathy*, p. 45.
[173] See recent studies that have explored her aesthetic theories: Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, eds., *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics* (Basongstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
[174] Vernon Lee, *The Psychology of an Art Writer*, translated by Jeff Nagy with an introduction by Dylan Kenny (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018).
[175] Lee, *The Psychology of an Art Writer*, p. 13.

developed by Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*. According to Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, pleasure, which they understood to derive from the contemplation of what they thought of as beauty, would be located in a physical reaction to works of art. A collaborative essay from these speculations was called 'Beauty and Ugliness' (1897) and would be at the heart of Lee's aesthetic theories. In fact, the relationship between Lee and Anstruther-Thomson did not last long after the completion of this work, as the latter suffered a nervous breakdown and they separated. In the research that followed on from this early work, Lee came to the conclusion that there must be a mental reaction that existed prior to a bodily reaction, and it was this that she chose to define as 'empathy'.[176] The result of her work on empathy and aesthetics can be found in *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics*, including the joint essay 'Beauty and Ugliness' (1912) and *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (1913), both of which were later mentioned by Virginia Woolf when referencing Lee in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) as a writer of 'books on aesthetics'.[177] Woolf goes on - with additional reference to the writings of the classical scholar Jane Harrison (1850-1928) and the archaeologist and travel writer Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) – to note that the present age was at last allowing women to write books that were not just novels, but had as their subject serious, intellectual topics. She suggests that, 'it is certainly true that women no longer write novels solely' before going on to stress the observation that novels, or fiction of any kind, were no longer the only area where a woman writer was forced to work; 'novels themselves may very well have changed from association with books of a different feather.'[178] Woolf implies that the

[176] See the O.E.D. (second edition) quoted above.
[177] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own & Three Guineas* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 74
[178] Woolf, 1996, p. 74.

business of writing fiction will be improved by the writing of other works, suggesting that now women can be writers who are artists rather than having only their personal experiences to use as subjects for their novels. When we consider, then, the work of Vernon Lee, we can feel justified in Woolf's assertion that the activities of the fiction writer and the non-fiction writer, whether in her travel writings or in her writings on aesthetic psychology, can be mutually beneficial. It follows that Lee's fictions are best read in the light of her non-fictional works, and in particular her work on aesthetics and empathy.

**The Self and the Past in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890): Aesthetics and Temporal Co-Existence**

Henry James was in no doubt that Vernon Lee was a formidable presence, and in 1893 went so far as to suggest to his brother William that he should be wary of her, as she was 'as dangerous and uncanny as she is intelligent'.[179] What he precisely meant by this statement can be up for debate, but it seems that he wanted to convey the sense that her understanding of different areas of knowledge meant that she was somebody - a female somebody - who could be highly intellectually challenging.[180] The use of the term 'uncanny' also hints at some ability to see beyond what others could see, to perhaps reach into hidden or undetected areas of human experience. I would argue that James is trying to say that Lee's process, building upon her reading of Walter Pater, was beginning to take on a more mystical character. In the Preface to *Renaissance Studies and Fancies* (1895), Lee notes that

[179] Quoted in Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: O.U.P., 1964), p. 2.
[180] See Catherine Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to 'Dionea': Vernon Lee's portraits', *Word and Image*, Vol. 13, No. 3, July-September 1997, 253-269, (268-269).

her essays were 'mainly the outcome of direct personal impressions of certain works of art and literature, and of the places in which they were produced'.[181] However, in the 'Valedictory' which is a summary of her conclusions about art and the relationship between the past and the present, she declares that art is more than the 'expression of man's thoughts or opinions on any one subject'. Instead, 'Art is the expression of man's life, of his mode of being, of his relations with the universe, since it is, in fact, man's inarticulate answer to the universe's unspoken message.'[182] This demonstrates how Lee's theories had developed since her earlier book on Renaissance Italy, *Euphorion* (1884), where she had earned the praise of Henry James for 'a prodigious young performance, so full of intellectual power'.[183] In that book of essays she had attempted to follow Pater as a 'student of aesthetics', trying to account for the experience of beauty through the differing cultural perspectives of England and Italy.[184] It is suggested by Dylan Kenny that the 'Valedictory' section of *Renaissance Studies and Fancies* was 'the conclusion of one phase in her study of aesthetics'.[185] If we accept this view, then we may claim that the stories contained in the *Hauntings* volume may demonstrate the development of her ideas between the two books of Renaissance studies. Of particular note are the ideas she articulates at the end of the latter book are a key to understanding Lee's evolving theories of the study of aesthetics. It is clear that Lee was engaged in a process by which she was attempting to find a method to account for the power of art, and she did so by the study of personal response to aesthetic

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[181] Vernon Lee, *Renaissance Studies and Fancies* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1895), p. ix.
[182] Lee, 1895, p. 233-. [I have not been able yet to confirm the pages from this book, as the version available online does not have page numbers included.]
[183] Quoted in Gunn, 1964, p. 99.
[184] See Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry; The 1893 Text*, edited by Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. xix. For a discussion of *Euphorion*, see Peter Gunn, 1964, pp. 91-95.
[185] Dylan Kenny, 'The Real Self', in Vernon Lee, *The Psychology of an Art Writer* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018), p. 13.

experience. She believed that there was a correspondence between mankind and the universe, between the individual's interior life and their ability to interpret the feelings of others, and this was as she understood it the basis of the most fundamental understanding of aesthetics. Such a notion goes beyond the idea aestheticism is confined to 'art for art's sake' and is presented as an almost occult belief. As Lee writes:

> Moreover, I maintain that we have but a narrow conception of life if we confine it to the functions which are obviously practical, and a narrow conception of reality if we exclude from it the Past. And not because the Past has been, has actually existed outside someone, but because it may, and often does, actually exist within ourselves. The things in our mind, due to the mind's constitution and its relation with the universe, are, after all, realities; and realities to count with, as much as the tables and chairs, and hats and coats, and other things subject to gravitation outside it.[186]

Lee posits that if the past can exist within the mind as part of its consciousness, then it ceases to be something which is remote and worthy of purely academic study, transitioning into a part of the present, influencing thoughts and feelings before taking on its role in the construction of identity and becomes personal. In conceiving the world in this fashion, Lee is demonstrating that her thinking places her theories alongside writers, such as Virginia Woolf, who were concerned with representing with minute accuracy of the interior world:

> As regards my own case, I began by believing I should be an historian and a philosopher, as most young people have done before me; then, coming in contact with the concrete miseries of others, called social and similar problems, I sought to apply some of my historical or philosophic lore (such as it was) to their removal; and finally, life having manifested itself as offering problems (unexpected occurrence!) not merely concerning the Past, nor even the abstract Present, but respecting my own comfort and discomfort, I have found myself at last wondering in what manner thoughts and impressions could make the world, the Past and Present, the near and the remote, more satisfying and useful to myself. Circumstances of various kinds, and particularly ill-health, have thus put me, although a writer, into the position of a reader; and have made me ask myself, as I collected these fragments of my former studies, what can the study of history, particularly of the

[186] Lee, 1895, p.

> history of art and of other manifestations of past conditions of soul, do for us in the present?[187]

These are the thoughts that would lead Lee to develop her own ideas regarding a whole new area of research, the study of aesthetic psychology. These theories would be further explored in 'The Psychology of an Art Writer' (1903) and 'Gallery Diaries' (1905), but what is withheld from this account is the extent to which her ideas had developed was not simply down to ill health, but also to her relationship with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, which had begun in 1887. This led to the development of what Kathy Psomiades describes as an 'aesthetic in the feminine perception of a feminine body' that characterized their collaborative work in the key essay 'Beauty and Ugliness', published in the *Contemporary Review* in 1897.[188] This perception was achieved through Lee's almost voyeuristic observation of her lover's bodily responses to the experience of art. As Psomiades writes, in an analysis of an account of the two women visiting London art galleries in Lee's introduction to the posthumous collection of writings by Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man* (1924), it is Lee who appears as 'the watcher, characterizes herself as spiritual, intellectual, and existing in a state of bodily insufficiency and lack', in contrast to the physical and bodily-confident reactions of her partner.[189] If we then can apply this perception to what Lee writes in the conclusion to *Renaissance Studies and Fancies*, we can see that when she discusses making her understanding of art and history more useful to

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[187] Lee, 1895, p.
[188] Kathy Alexis Psomiades, '"Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace": Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics', in Richard Dellamora, ed., *Victorian Sexual Dissidence* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 21-41 (p. 22). Vernon Lee and Clementina Astruther-Thomson, 'Beauty and Ugliness', *Contemporary Review* 72 (October and November 1897), pp. 544-688.
[189] Psomiades, 1999, p. 31.

herself and of relevance to the present, she is attempting to sublimate her own erotic lesbian impulses.

These conclusions about the nature of Lee's understanding of the individual's reaction to art and its basis in female same-sex desire, and the importance of acknowledging the role played by consciousness and feeling, can be related to her experience as a writer of supernatural fiction. The importance of the same-sex desire in this way of perceiving the world is located in the way Lee's view is structured around her erotic desires and sublimates them into her intellectual framework. This is in agreement with what Psomiades claims in regards to Lee's contribution to *Art and Man*, that her fictional texts enact 'a body-centred erotic practice in its own right' – with the qualification, if we situate the narrative voice in the body of the writer.[190] There is a correlation between language and what Benjamin Morgan sees as the 'object-oriented empathy [that] configures the relationship between mind and body in a particular way, depicting bodily changes as taking place before and in certain cases directly causing aesthetic feelings'.[191] This is what we find taking shape in the stories to be found in the *Hauntings* volume of stories, as well as some of her later supernatural fiction.

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[190] Psomiades, 1999, p. 37.
[191] Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 231.

**Fantastic Fictions: Aesthetic Knowledge, Sympathy and 'what is beyond the human'[192]**

The first story in *Hauntings*, 'Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka', is constructed through a narrative purporting to be the experiences of an impressionable scholar conducting research in Italy.[193] It is presented as a series of entries in a research diary wherein the supposed writer records their observations. It soon goes beyond this historical research to also record experiences that have no direct part to play in the studies, but which form an account of the actual life lived by the narrator in a contemporary Italy of the mid-1880s. This method allows for the development of a story in which the past and present become blurred, first this presenting a semi-comedic catalogue of someone who has long dreamed of going to Italy, but whose knowledge of the country, based on a romantic reading of the past, leads to disappointment. This highlights Lee's ability to contrast a subjective identification with the past and to an ironic sense of the present as a means to critique the kind of hedonism associated with the desire to see the past through the lens of romanticism. The contrast between the past and the present is seen by the narrator with conventional eyes, and although there is some light-hearted and self-conscious satire at the expense of German 'scientific' historians with their indifference to the past, there is also an acknowledgement of the innocence of the narrator:

> I had longed, these years and years, to be in Italy, to come face to face with the Past; and was this Italy, was this the Past? I could have cried, yes cried, for disappointment when I first wandered about Rome, with an invitation to dine at the German Embassy in my pocket, and three or four Berlin and Munich Vandals at my

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[192] Martin, 2013, p. 61. Martin suggests that 'For Lee, invoking what is beyond the human provides a way of gesturing at a more sidelong form of knowledge and sympathy'.

[193] 'Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka' appeared in Murray's Magazine, No. 1, in 1887. It had originally been planned as a novel-length piece in the early part of the 1880s, but was cut down to meet the requirements of magazine publication, making it a work of fiction that belongs to the period before Lee met Anstruther-Thomson.

> heels, telling me where the best beer and sauerkraut could be had, and what the last article by Grimm or Mommsen was about. (p. 41)[194]

It should be noted that nationality plays an important part in this passage, as Lee engages with ways in which conventional notions of identity are constructed around culture. As a writer with a cosmopolitan background and interests, Lee was acutely aware of the nuances of national identity, but her view of these forms of identity highlight that notions of national belonging are in fact abstractions and her narration acts to subvert these nationalistic norms, taking the reader into new engagements with a complex reality. The newly-established Kingdom of Italy (it had only been a fully united country since 1871) is equated with the past, as if it had no present worthy of mention. As a historian it is the past, what used to inhabit these places but does no longer, that is the focus of Trepka's mind. Yet underpinning his absorption into the past is an unconscious recognition that there is a sense in which the activity of historical research finds contemporary legitimisation in the collective self-consciousness of a new nation, one eager to establish continuity with remoter periods of time. The German scholars are presented as being more interested in their material comfort in the present moment rather than in any romanticised view of the past, reflecting an approach to history justified by scientific method. The identity of the narrator is also related to nationality, described as Polish and from a region that had been absorbed by Prussia in the eighteenth century, and so he writes from the perspective of the colonized mixing with the colonizers, 'a Pole turned Prussian Professor' (p. 43), and is therefore at a critical distance from those with whom he is associated. His identity is mixed

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[194] Page references are to Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, edited by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press. 2006). This volume is made up of the stories first published in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: William Heinemann, 1890) and a selection of stories from her later books.

up with his suppressed nationality and the extent that this identity draws sustaining energy from a romantic view of history. It is also true, as Kristin Mahoney suggests, that the manner in which Lee presents her protagonist demonstrates towards historical documents and objects a 'method of appreciation that acknowledges the historical otherness of the cultural relic and grants the object a separate and distinct identity, allowing it to exceed its utility as an indicator of taste.'[195] This reinforces a sense of the past as something inherently other, as having its own separate identity which is removed from contemporary values. This establishes a link between the narrator and the objects of the past which exist in his perception, manifesting a means of identifying with the item that is other. To this conception we can add the notion that the identity of the narrator bears importance in a way not highlighted openly in the text – his status as a male presence created by the female author. From this perspective it is possible to read Spiridion Trepka as a surrogate presence, representing the female writer in the appearance of a male persona – Lee makes much of the fact that the narrator refers to himself ironically as 'the semblance of a German pedant' (p. 42), and it should be seen that this irony is doubled by the fact that he is also a 'semblance' of a male writer who is attracted to the otherness of the past.

The discussion in this opening paragraph alerts us to one of the key arguments that Lee was engaged in at the time concerning her relationship with the past and present, which is further developed as the story of Trepka's visit to Urbania is described. We are told that the names of the villages evoke 'some battle or some great act of treachery of

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[195] Kristin Mahoney, 'Haunted Collections: Vernon Lee and Ethical Consumption', *Criticism*, Winter 2006, Vol. 48, No. 1, 39-67 (39).

former days' (p. 42), and that as the 'huge mountains shut out the setting sun' an atmosphere is created in which:

> I almost expected, at every turning of the road, that a troop of horsemen, with beaked helmets and clawed shoes, would emerge, with armour glittering and pennons waving in the sunset. And then, not two hours ago, entering the town at dusk, passing along the deserted streets, with only a smoky light here and there under a shrine or in front of a fruit-stall, or a fire reddening the blackness of a smithy; passing beneath the battlements and turrets of the palace …. Ah, that was Italy, it was the Past! (p. 42).

This passage re-imagines the past through the glow of sunset and twilight, and yet it is clearly situated in the context of the traveller in August 1885. The past is the past in that the narrator brings it with him in his set of assumptions, in his imagination; he is not concerned with what he can actually see. This vision with which he surveys his surroundings has been diluted and altered by a romantic perception of the past, revivifying his everyday reality. The consciousness has transformed, even transfigured, the experience, at least as it has been recorded in the diary, and, therefore, through the process of writing is turned into a process by which control is exerted over actual life. This takes the experience of the past beyond what is learned from books or through historical analysis to a point whereby it takes on an almost mythical, quasi-religious or occult sense of mystical revelation. This is partly made possible by the process of going on a journey that takes Trepka away from familiar places and allows him to form a new set of relationships away from the usual centres of culture and learning, like Rome, Berlin, and Munich, allowing an opportunity for personal romance to develop. He is still engaged in his research and searching the Archives, but Trepka is too sufficiently isolated to make the conversation with the reader (through the medium of the diary) take on the role of a subjective account of an experience for which no external evidence exists – we are later made aware that the

narrator has been told 'it was bad for me to live all alone in a strange country, that it would make me morbid' (p. 61). This indicates that Trepka's narrative may not be reliable because it is the account of an interior journey where the mind of the narrator is able to blur the past and with the present. Lee makes this possible by casually embedding the fantastic into the text and granting it as much authority as objective reality, contributing to and altering the way we read the story. In fact, as he uncovers the history of Medea de Carpi, it quickly becomes apparent that Trepka's story is one of personal obsession: 'Even before coming here I felt attracted by the strange figure of a woman, which appeared from out of the dry pages of Gualterio's and Padre de Sanctis' histories of this place' (p. 45). These historians are invented by Lee, but they represent the kind of material that she had explored in her own research for her early books on history and aesthetics, such as *Studies in the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), *Belcaro* (1881), and *Euphorion* (1884). It becomes a feature of her supernatural fiction to make the differences between 'the real and the fantastic' problematic and tenuous as regards the faculty of sight as inextricably linked with an inner eye that sees by the light of the mind and its capacity to feel into a subject, as Catherine Maxwell has demonstrated.[196]

Medea is clearly represented as a *femme fatale* in the summary of her life provided by Trepka's discovered historical sources, having, we are told, in the course of her life (1556-1582) 'brought to a violent end five of her lovers' (p. 50). This interest in history is matched by the narrator's desire to track down portraits of her, again indicating the extent to which he has become obsessed with his pursuit, which is nonetheless presented as a

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[196] Maxwell, 1997, p. 268.

search for facts. From the few pictures that he discovers he is able to 'reconstruct the beauty of this terrible being' (p. 51), and we are told that:

> I often examine these tragic portraits, wondering what this face, which led so many men to their death, may have been like when it spoke or smiled, what at the moment when Medea da Carpi fascinated her victims into love unto death – "Amour Dure – Dure Amour," as runs her device – love that lasts, cruel love – yes indeed, when one thinks of the fidelity and fate of her lovers. (p. 52)

The gender of the 'I' in this extract is male in the context of the narrative; but we can also read it as Lee's own fascination with a certain kind of sexual attraction, which is seen as potentially dangerous in that it is suggested that the energies contained in this historical context have the power to break out of their historical moment and enter the present with disruptive force. It might seem that the idea of a *femme fatale* belongs to a misogynistic interpretation of female empowerment as we find in the examples of the biblical Eve, Helen of Troy and Cleopatra, but in this story Lee suggests something more ambiguous and potentially liberating. Maxwell notes, Lee's depiction of Medea 'rewrites the *femme fatale* with a feminist purpose [whilst it] also testifies to a rage about the limitations of women's lives.'[197] This is achieved through the figure of Medea emerging from the account that portrays her as a woman who uses what advantages life has given her to make the best of the considerable gifts she has in a world where there is little scope other than through her capacity to excite sexual desire. Lee had been drawn to 'stories of filthy intrigue and lewd jest', as she made clear in the opening chapter to *Euphorion,* and, as Peter Gunn has suggested, this was in a way 'far different from that of a detached observer'.[198] As he points

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[197] Maxwell, 1997, p. 267.
[198] Gunn, 1964, p. 92.

out, Lee focuses on adultery in a chapter on ‘Medieval Love’ as being the ‘explanation’ of the courtly poetry and troubadour songs that came from Provence and Languedoc:

> The young man in the service of the great feudal lady, while feeling that he is being trained to knightly service and honour, is gradually taught dissimilation, lying, intrigue; is initiated by the woman who looms above him like a saint into all the foulness of adultery. Adultery; a very ugly word, which must strike almost like a handful of mud in the face of whosoever has approached the subject of medieval love in admiration of its strange delicacy and enthusiasm. Yet it is a word which must be spoken, for in it is the explanation of the whole origin and character of this passion which burst into song in the early Middle Ages.’[199]

Vineta Colby has written that the essays to be found in *Euphorion* demonstrate a ‘drift toward polemics, with sweeping judgments on the morality – personal or social – of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.’ In particular she notes that for Lee, ‘the love poetry of the Middle Ages [is] a beautiful cloak concealing a reality of oppression and brutality, of forbidden love and adultery.’[200] There is a categorical criticism in Lee’s essays at this time that reflects her upbringing in the middle Victorian age, as well as the possible influence of the writings of John Ruskin, constraining her thought and expression within the confines of a socially imparted notion of morality. However, whilst she feels the social and cultural restraint to censure, this is balanced against a radical desire to explore the darker areas of sexual attraction and to break free from the restrictions of the time. Stefano Evangelista points out that in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Æsthetical Questions* (1881), Lee ‘dismisses the search for the good in the beautiful – what she calls ‘Ruskinism’ – as a thing of the past, and defends instead a theory of art for art’s sake, clearly influenced by

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[199] Vernon Lee, *Euphorian: Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884), pp. 138-139.
[200] Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 68.

Swinburne and Pater, in which beauty and moral corruption can coexist and in which physical sensation is the only mean for the obtainment of an 'abstract instinct of beauty'.[201]

If contemporary conventions sometimes hampered her in the writing of essays, Lee's fiction allowed for a greater freedom because the capacity of the fictional bestowed ambiguity and impression on self-expression, without the need to overtly judge. Kathy Psomiades writes, in regard to Lee's early satirical novel *Miss Brown* (1884), that the typical *femme fatale* of the aesthetic movement, most associated with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, is portrayed in such a way as to appear as seemingly intended for critical presentation, but often produced the opposite effect: 'sex […] can only be brought forth on the condition that it is loudly condemned', and yet the effect of the book on contemporary readers was that 'it seemed to reveal its author's obsession with the sexual matters she claimed to deplore.'[202] Sex is expressed in *Miss Brown* in the description of relations between the female characters through what is implied, but not overtly stated, about their intimacy. This is not exactly the case in 'Amour Dure', where the story is of a male character who allows himself to be seduced by a woman who was 'put to death just two hundred and ninety-seven years ago' (p. 50). It is only the time gap and the difference between death and life that can be said to cool the passion, and if that is removed then the text becomes one which liberates the sexual relationship and gives way to female sexual power. However, if we read the narrative in the light of what Martha Vicinus has referred to as Lee's 'tales of frustrated desire, impossible love', then we can read the text as an

[201] Evangelista, 2009, pp. 55-56.
[202] Psomiades, 1999, pp. 22-27.

exploration of an erotic fascination which cannot be consummated.[203] In her essay, Vicinus develops the idea of the 'adolescent boy' as a surrogate for lesbian desire, finding in Lee's work a Puritanical element that sees all same-sex relationships as being ultimately tragic, reflecting the contemporary dominant cultural perspective which sought to deny any public expression of lesbian or homosexual love. In 'Amour Dure' the protagonist is a little older than an adolescent and the text doesn't depict him as the object of desire, but he is nonetheless presented as a youthful, ambitious, headstrong, and impressionable man.

It is in this guise that Trepka describes his 'state of excitement' (p. 61) at discovering a picture of Medea di Carpi. The 'excitement' might be read as the excitement that a researcher finds in discovering something hitherto unknown in their field, but here it is presented as something more erotically charged, a longing for a historically impossible union. This owes something to Pater's subjective readings of the past, such as his well-known description of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* in *The Renaissance* – which is, as Maxwell remarks, described in language which uses 'the vocabulary of ritualism, of death, reanimation and reincarnation'. [204]Lee responds to this impressionism in her supernatural fiction in such a way as to reveal how readings of the past can become problematic in the present if they rely on too close a personal interest in the subject, denigrating the inanimate as the other. Significantly, the location for this encounter is ambiguously revealed as either one of two mysteriously twinned rooms, or where a change has occurred such as a 'shutter had been opened or curtain withdrawn' (p. 61). It is a space which is

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[203] Martha Vicinus, 'The Adolescent Boy: Fin-de-Siècle Femme Fatale?', Richard Dellamora, editor, *Victorian Sexual Dissidence* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 83-106 (p. 100).
[204] Maxwell, 1997, p. 257.

doubled or seen as being open, creating the sense of it being, as Lee writes, ‘uncanny’ (p. 61). The text of this story was written more than thirty years before Freud’s essay ‘The Uncanny’, but in this respect Lee’s use of the word in English anticipates his assertion that ‘an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced’.[205] It is often in this territory, where the objective reality and the individual’s imaginative response are blurred, that Lee creates the tensions in her narratives. By 1923, May Sinclair is using the word ‘uncanny’ as the distinguishing and unifying term in her collection of supernatural tales, *Uncanny Stories* (see chapter 2). In Lee’s ‘Amour Dure’ the narrator approaches an old mirror, at first only concentrating on the frame, but then glancing at the glass of the mirror, producing a shock:

> I gave a great start, and almost shrieked, I do believe – […]. Behind my own image stood another, a figure close to my shoulder, a face close to mine; and that figure, that face, hers! Medea da Carpi’s! I turned sharp round, as white, I think, as the ghost I expected to see. (p. 61)

It is not a ghost that he sees, but a portrait on the wall behind, which reproduces the image of ‘Medea, the real Medea, a thousand times more real, individual, and powerful than in the other portraits’ (pp. 61-62). The effect of this incident is to remove the boundaries between the work of art observed dispassionately and the presence of a real person. The imagination has apparently intervened, causing the narrator to lose all sense of the normal, or the habitual, relation of things, demonstrating a psychological phenomenon wherein the narrator’s fantasies about Medea have caused him to lose his reference points to reality, making it as if what he sees in the mirror is what he wants to see but has suppressed. It also suggests the possibility of a haunting, foreshadowing the element that Freud specified was

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[205] Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ [1919], *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 17, translated by Alix and James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 217-256 (p. 243).

'to many people the acme of the uncanny', namely 'anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts.'[206] The survival of presences from the past which are known to be dead, yet are allowed to exist in the present moment, often with a force which goes beyond the impact of the material circumstances, is experienced as the manifestation of the uncanny. As Freud acknowledges in his essay, the doubling of a likeness was, in early societies, a means of defeating death.

It is just for a moment that this uncanny appearance of the dead occurs in the narrative, and then Trepka goes on to record in his diary in precise detail the portrait as a work of art. This is an attempt to take back control, categorising the object of desire as part of a more reasonable discussion, and yet even here he cannot quite avoid expressions which go beyond any attempt to contain his desire - the eyebrows are 'beautifully curved' and there is a 'dazzling splendour of skin' (p. 62). This is more than a descriptive flourish, again making it clear that the relationship between the viewer and the object is subjective feeling, or an empathetic reaction. As a result, Trepka's research becomes infused with new vigour as he envisions Medea as someone who the official accounts of history have wronged, his own desire for her disguised as historical reassessment, but also as insight led by close identification:

> *Dec.* 14*th*. – I don't think I have ever felt so happy about my work. I see it all so well – that crafty, cowardly Duke Robert; that melancholy Duchess Maddalena; that weak, showy, would-be chivalrous Duke Guidalfonso; and above all, the splendid figure of Medea. I feel as if I were the greatest historian of the age; and, at the same time, as if I were a boy of twelve. (p. 63)

[206] Freud, 2003, p. 148.

The last sentence is telling, revealing the extent of Trepka's self-delusion as he conflates the enthusiasm of an adolescent with that of a distinguished historian. In the remaining portion of the story the neurosis, revealed when glimpsing the image of Medea in the mirror, is given another twist as the narrator receives what appears to be a letter from Medea asking for a meeting in the Church of San Giovanni Decollato (St. John the Beheaded) – a detail that suggests the price of devotion will be death, echoing Salome's request for the head of St. John the Baptist. The narrative is punctuated with many instances of the rhetorical question: 'Am I mad?' (pp. 65, 68). This madness is linked to Trepka's youth and his supposed stereotypical characteristics as a Pole: 'I confess I was excited; one is not twenty-four and a Pole for nothing' (p. 66). This operates as a way of trying to rationalise his experience, but does not hide from the reader the extent to which the individual has become obsessed with Medea. Lee stresses national identity as part of her character building, indicating her sense of the absurdity of behind Trepka's emotional response to aesthetic beauty. Whenever Lee has recourse to make assumptions about national identity she is inclined to stress an awareness of the absurdity of such forms of identity, as she was to do in her radical *Ballet of the Nations* (1915), a play on the insanities of war. This is exaggerated in Trepka's case, as he occupies the complicated position of someone whose national identity has been marginalized in the contemporary world and only allowed expression through reference to a past when Poland was an independent country. As Kandola says, 'Lee indicates that Trepka's uncanny experience is born from his sense of himself as a disenfranchised colonial (Polish) subject of the German empire.'[207]

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[207] Kanola, 2010, p. 43.

Trepka is drawn to reject the research that is being funded by the German government and increasingly pursue his own studies, hoping to find a subject more closely connected with his individual needs as a Pole seeking independence from German control, which is felt at both a cultural and personal level. As Kandola states, 'Trepka's impressionist method is intimately connected to his desire for Medea.' The nature of Trepka's excitement in his discoveries is described in terms which suggest erotic excitement, and the narrator becomes agitated as he seeks to obtain entry to the locked church – 'Half-maddened, I rushed up the two or three steps, and prepared to wrench the door open with tremendous effort' (p. 67). The drama is focused on the desire to seek access to the church, and it provides a commentary on his lust to break in to a building associated with the sacred, as well as the past. Trepka observes Medea near the altar displaying a red rose, and his desire seems to be answered by her encouragement, but whilst consummation seems within his grasp, he is left frustrated:

> I followed close upon her, but somehow I could not get up with her. Once, at the curtain, she turned round again. She was within a few paces of me. Yes, it was Medea. Medea herself, no mistake, no delusion, no sham; the oval face, the lips tightened over the mouth, the eyelids tight over the corner of the eyes, the exquisite alabaster complexion! She raised the curtain and glided out. I followed; the curtain alone separated me from her. I saw the wooden door swing to behind her. One step ahead of me! I tore open the door; she must be on the steps, within reach of my arm! (p. 68).

Beyond the door and out in the open nothing is revealed but a cold and wet evening, and nobody is there. Desire is thwarted; but the idea of fulfilment still haunts the Trepka, driving him on further. When he is later told that the church has been shut up for a long time, he is confronted with a problem that he cannot easily resolve. On the one hand, there is the evidence of what he believes he has witnessed, and on the other there is the objective

evidence of the church which has not been opened for many years. Significantly, Trepka claims 'I have so clear a remembrance, so distinct a consciousness of it all' (p. 69). If the only reference point by which an experience can be judged to be authentic is located in consciousness then the experience must be true, he seems to say. This is of course problematic because it places all justification of the self on the evidence of the subjective mind – the narrator has already stated that he is distrustful of his mind by repeatably suggesting that he might be mad. The desire to understand and explain an experience is here thwarted, and the narration can only offer a conventional plea of insanity. As Kandola states, 'for Lee, it seems that the end-product of the impressionist historical mode and its attempt to enter into a communion with Renaissance personalities can only bring hysteria and insanity in its wake.'[208] However, at the same time the text itself is an attempt to account for an extreme emotional and physical experience; an enactment of the experience, as the only testimony we have, is what is recounted in the document left by Trepka. It is also a literary construction which serves, by the use of narrative, to convey a sense of the resurrection in the present of the past as a fulfilment of intellectual engagement based on empathy.

This attempt to record accurately an experience, in this case an extreme experience, not to mention a distinctly uncanny one, can be related to the theory of aesthetics that Lee was developing together with Anstruther-Thompson. The story might seem to begin as an exercise in Paterian Impressionism, but as the narration progresses the reader is made to witness the description of the physical consequences of Trepka's experience, taking them

[208] Kandola, 2010, pp. 42-43.

beyond the contemplation of the beautiful into a state of mind where the individual is in danger of self-destruction. Kandola suggests that in this story 'Lee shows that she remained entirely pessimistic about the dangers posed to the modern mind by scholarly celebrations of Renaissance immorality.'[209] Benjamin Morgan has noted that Lee and Anstruther-Thompson in their studies began to 'transform empathy from an abstract theory into a critical practice that involves writing about what one feels'[210] which, as he points out, was developed in relation to the records they kept of their physical experience of art in London, France, and Italy. Morgan suggests that Lee regarded these records as collections of 'introspective data' and objective evidence, but also as a means to 'simultaneously, if perhaps unintentionally, [transform] motional empathy into a linguistic phenomenon'.[211] I would argue that this is what Lee dramatises in 'Amour Dure', which prefigures the method of her more self-conscious critical writing. The story serves to illustrate the attempt made by the fictional scholar to account for his reactions to the evidences of his senses on his mind, yet the encounter is given an extra twist in that our historian-cum-narrator has become prey to his own emotional needs, rendering the narration entirely limited by unreliable subjectivity. This is problematic because it could be interpreted as a criticism of the use of empathy as a basis for analysis, as it is an ironic comment on the cult of subjectivity associated with Walter Pater.

In regards to 'Amour Dure', the empathetic approach is ultimately the cause of Trepka's death. We are told that he questions whether 'the present be right and the past

[209] Kandola, 2010, p. 46.
[210] Morgan, 2017, p. 227.
[211] Morgan, 2017, p. 228.

wrong?' (p. 71), his sympathy with the achievements of the past is such that he can get outside of his own time, dismissing the advances of science and technology in the nineteenth century as 'another superstition to the men of the future' (p. 71). But these attempts at disinterested assessment are based not on the power of the intellect, instead the narrator suggests that, 'all is explained by the fact that the first time I read of this woman's career [Medea], the first time I saw her portrait, I loved her, though I hid my love to myself in the garb of historical interest' (p. 72). The passivity of his research has hidden from his consciousness the motives of his heart, but his empathetic response requires active engagement. Now he sees that his mission is to do what he believes Medea demands of him, and he declares his intention to 'obey Her' by taking revenge on Duke Robert's soul (p. 72). Significantly, Trepka states that his wish is to follow those who have met their death in the hopeless service of this woman: 'The love of such a woman is enough, and is fatal – "Amour Dure," as her device says' (p. 73). Belief in Medea as a wronged figure from history has been replaced by a blind devotion to what Trepka believes is her will, whether it might be considered right or wrong. His Polish heritage is also again foregrounded as a justification for his passionate nature, suggesting that, if it were not for the fate that now awaits him, it might have been Trepka would have died in a duel with a fellow student. This is a limiting outlook, and it appears Lee is implying that being prey to perceived national characteristics can only bring with it one form of extinction or another. Yet the important point in Trepka's perverse demonstration of love is that it represents the extreme token of passion; a passion that has no hope of consummation. This could be read as a comment on Lee's own frustrated sexual passion, her same-sex desire clashing with a streak of Puritanism, as well as the wider cultural prejudices of the Victorian age, creating an

understanding of erotic desire that is both taboo yet furtive, existing beneath the surface of the story. Although clothed conventionally as a man, Trepka's account of the development of his intense attraction to an unobtainable woman – one who, after all, has been dead for hundreds of years – is perhaps an expression of Lee's own sublimation of her erotic interest in her own sex by escaping into the study of the past and its potential consequences in the context of conventional Victorian society.

It is not just in her sense of history that Lee provides alternative points of reference, but the way in which the present is haunted by that which was not possible in the past; that which might be in the future. Even Medea's female energy is resurrected in the text, her fight with the restrictions of her own time vivid through Trepka's testimony. Lee's interest in the contemplation of beauty is something with which leaves her feeling uncomfortable unless it is viewed through the lens of the historical and concerned with aesthetics. It is significant that much of Trepka's narrative is constructed from the image he has of Medea in the tangible object of a painting, demonstrating Lee's focus is with the past as a manifestation of aesthetics, for which she wanted to find an adequate account in the present moment. At another level still it is a permitted, in the context of a fantastic story, to give expression to the body's responses to works of art that have taken on the presence of the real. Lee's protagonist in 'Amore Dure' is equally thwarted by his infatuation with the long dead Medea, a love interest that avoids the possibility of an actual physical encounter with a human object of desire. Her text here bears witness to what Kirsty Martin describes as Lee's attempts at 'calming and subduing […] emotion through distance and time', whilst observing Trepka's descent into madness when too much 'aesthetic ecstasy' causes the self

to no longer distance the individual's consciousness from 'what lies beyond the self', and is self-consumed in emotion.[212] Whilst it is true that 'the conclusion of the tale undermines the reader's assumption that the historian's contact with Medea has been no more than elaborate fantasy' by providing evidence in the form of a newspaper report that he has been stabbed to death, this remains an open-ended resolution to the narrative as the violent death may be explained in terms of a modern crime rather than as proof of a supernatural occurrence.[213] Lee maintains the ambiguity of the text in the borderland between the real and the supernatural, but also suggests that the present is haunted by the past and that the unappeased presences of thwarted female opportunity continue to haunt the modern world.

**Feeling for Others: *Dionea* and Aesthetic Understanding**

As has already been stated the women of the ghostly sisterhood were interested in the way the past haunts the present. This was linked to their shared sense of uncanny states of consciousness. Lee was in many respects the most analytical of the three writers and her concern with aesthetics was a product of her tendency of mind to want to understand the way the mind deals with perceptions of beauty. Often these considerations were enacted in her fiction. With the second story in *Hauntings* (1890), 'Dionea', Stefano Evangelista suggests that Lee demonstrates her tendency to be 'simultaneously inside and outside aestheticism, using its genres and language but exposing its restrictions and bias', describing it as a 'hybrid of fiction and criticism [with] a psychological narrative in which elements of cultural history are blended with, and examined in the light of, imaginary

[212] Martin, 2013, p. 78.
[213] Kandola, 2010, p. 43.

historical reconstructions.'[214] The story takes shape around the correspondence between Doctor Alessandro De Rosis, a supporter of a republican united Italy, and Lady Evelyn Savelli, an Englishwoman married to an Italian prince and living in Rome. (Although we are only afforded the letters written by Dr. De Rosis, so are only privy to one half of the conversation.) This means we don't have the same level of involvement with the characters that Lee developed with Trepka, who was not just a reporter of the action, but also its leading participant. As such, 'Dionea' enacts Lee's concern with the destructive nature of passion, and the perspective is presented from a position whereby feeling is distanced and controlled by the narrative process. This method of storytelling reveals Lee's anxiety about perspective and objectivity, concerns which relate to her interest in how to account for aesthetic experience. Evangelista draws attention to the way in which the text 'effectively uses [Lee's] idea of the supernatural to portray the indeterminacy and impression of the moderns' knowledge of antiquity'.[215] This perception relates back to Lee's ability to draw a distinctions between the past and present, coupled with her radical awareness that any reconstruction of the past is, to some extent, bound to produce an inconsistencies as it tries to interpret information belonging to a previous culture. Evangelista coins the term 'spectral classicism' to convey this kind of interaction with the remote Greek or Roman past, highlighting that:

> As the individual mind recedes into the past, objective vision becomes blurred and subjective perception and subjective perception and the eye of the imagination become keener. This model bears an obvious affinity to what Pater, in the 'Preface' to *The Renaissance*, had called the 'aesthetic' mode of understanding, in which the closed reality of 'the object as in itself it really is' is discarded in favour of an open-ended approach that relies on subjectivity and sensation.[216]

[214] Evangelista, 2009, p. 82.
[215] Evangelista, 2009, p. 81.
[216] Evangelista, 2009, p. 81.

But if Pater allowed his subjectivity to dominate his interpretations, Lee's writing seeks to frame such subjectivity so that her fiction might be read as a critique of this form of aestheticism. Catherine Maxwell states that Pater was influenced by Heinrich Heine's essay 'The Gods in Exile' (1853-1854), with its suggestion that, since the rise of Christianity, the gods of the Greeks have had to adopt a disguise, and explored this concept in his fiction.[217] As Evangelista observes:

> The genre of the return of the pagan gods is a fertile terrain for psychological study. In one of his most influential essays, Freud refers to Heine in order to illustrate the aesthetics of the 'uncanny', in which the double becomes a thing of terror 'just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons. (Heine, 'Die Götter im Exil' [1853-54])'. The Freudian 'uncanny' is created through the trope of repetition. The reappearance of the pagan god in the form of demon is an uncanny doubling of an original, benevolent, form. In Pater's and Lee's stories, the reception of ancient religion and ritual bears precisely this uncanny quality. It could be said that the continuous process of re-enactment and transformation that is for Pater (after Hegel) the main characteristic of ancient Greek culture makes it inherently 'haunting' in Lee's sense, or 'uncanny' in Freud's. In the 1880s and 1890s Lee became increasingly interested in the relationship between art and psychology and, like Freud, she took the passage from god to ghost as a powerful means to create an evocative intersection of aesthetics and psychology.[218]

This is an important linking of the thought of Lee with that of Freud, stressing that there is a way of understanding that includes both aesthetics and psychology. Lee's use of the concept of being haunted is close to Freud's of the uncanny. When the homely gods return, they do so in such a manner that their presence is transformed into something more troubling; troubling because cultural paradigms have shifted with time and modern society has no way to assimilate what is barely acknowledged as existing in a period dominated by progressive rationalist thought. Freud was fascinated by psychological models founded in

[217] Maxwell, 1997, p. 258.
[218] Evangelista, 2009, pp. 82-83.

myth, with the infamous Oedipus Complex outlined in *The Interpretation of Dreams* becoming so familiar that it has long since entered into common language. Freud's methods used science to expand the Hellenic myths into the world of psychological analysis, and the idea of the double became central to Freud's idea of primal myths, with 'The Uncanny' he articulating a view that it would be key to, as Hugh Haughton suggests, the 'whole experience of modern selfhood'.[219] This is experienced repetitiously, whereby even the self may become 'duplicated, divided and interchanged'[220]; the self becomes a problematic area where opposing forces may struggle for control. In 'Dionea' these conflicts are felt in relation to the sense of ease and freedom which Dionea exhibits in relation to living in a natural environment, expressed in the way her frank sensuality is a challenge that disrupts conventional life.

Whilst, as the title suggests, Dionea is the focus of the narrative, the method by which the story is told remains external to her experiences, leaving the reader no sure way of knowing what Dionea may truly think or what determines her actions. Everything that occurs to her is reported in correspondence from the perspective of those not directly involved in the action, but are nonetheless able to report on it with apparent objectivity, although this might be mitigated by the narrator's research into the 'Exiled Gods'. The narration begins when De Rosis reports that a baby has been saved from a wrecked ship that has foundered in the sea, a sea he describes as:

[219] Haughton, 2003, p. ii.
[220] Freud, 2003, p. 142.

> [A] wicked sea, wicked in its loveliness, wickeder than your grey northern ones, and from which must have arisen in times gone by (when Phoenicians or Greeks built the temples at Lerici and Porto Venere) a baleful goddess of beauty, Venus Verticordia, but in the bad sense of the word, overwhelming men's lives in sudden darkness like that squall of last week (pp. 77-78).

This sets out the theme of the story, the child growing up to be a manifestation of the goddess Venus and bringing trouble to the community that has nurtured her:

> Dionea is [a] figure of the 'sexlessness' of Greek paganism: she appears innocent and she herself shuns sexual contact, but simultaneously embodies the possibility of a freer sexuality, retrospectively located in Greek antiquity, in which sexual desire finds its gratification in harmony with social norms. If Dionea becomes a deadly *femme fatale*, it is almost despite herself: this role is forced on her by the narrative of anachronism or time travel, which brings about the clash between ancient and modern codes of sexual behaviour and is, at the same time, the source of the 'uncanny' quality of Dionea's eroticism.[221]

Lady Evelyn has previously indicated that she would like to provide financial assistance in the area where De Rosis lives, with him to act as the agent in distributing her philanthropy. De Rosis suggests Lady Evelyn give him finance to fund 'the complete bringing-up, until years of discretion, of [this] young stranger whom the sea has laid upon our shore (p. 78). The narrative then develops by means of the letters sent to Lady Evelyn charting the progress of her '*protégée*' (pp. 79, 80, 82, and 83). He reports that, after some debate as to whether the child has already been baptized, a decision has been made to call her Dionea, named after 'Saint Dionea, Virgin and Martyr, a lady of Antioch, put to death by the Emperor Decius' (p. 80). It soon becomes clear that, although her physical beauty is acknowledged and praised by De Rosis, there are certain character-traits emerging that are 'not so satisfactory' (p. 81), with particular importance placed on the realisation that 'she shows no natural piety' (p. 81), suggesting an uncontrolled paganism. Dionea is invested

[221] Evangelista, 2009, p. 84.

with a female energy and individuality, making no compromises with her adopted environment, and those she encounters seem to take a dislike to her, leading Dionea to suggest to De Rosis her desire 'to get to the sea - to *get back to the sea*' (p. 81). It is observed that she likes to lie under myrtle and rose bushes, and attracts pigeons to her presence, an association that alerts the reader to an intangible something that makes her presence feel uncanny in the realistic account of a shipwrecked orphan:

> [The pigeons] flutter down like snowflakes, and strut and swell themselves out, and furl and unfurl their tails, and peck with little sharp movements of their silly, sensual heads and a little throb and gurgle in their throats, while Dionea lies stretched out full length in the sun, putting out her lips, which they come to kiss, and uttering strange, cooing sounds; or hoping about, flapping her arms slowly like wings, and raising her little head with much the same odd gesture as they [...]. (pp.81-82)

By de Rosi's perspective, this is an image that he believes would be a suitable subject for a painting by artists such as Sir Edward Burne-Jones or Sir Laurence Alma-Tadema; Burne-Jones perhaps bearing significance for the famous remark made to Oscar Wilde, 'the more materialistic science becomes, the more angels shall I paint: their wings are my protest in favour of the immortality of the soul.'[222] We can see that Lee is seeding within her fiction some of the tensions between materialism and the survival of religious belief. Lee's descriptive imagery, imitating an imaginary painting, is alive with the suggestion of movement and sound, but the 'wings' in the narrative are not angel wings, but those of a girl imitating the pigeons who gather about her person, suggesting that perhaps something other than the soul is what is alluded to. The mention of Alma Tadema, who Lee knew, was

[222] Oscar Wilde, *Miscellanies*, edited by Robert Baldwin Ross (London: Methuen, 1908), p. 259.

an artist who made the depiction of Greek maenads one of his chief subjects.[223] This association links the narrative's direction toward what Yopie Prins has identified as the discovery of 'in ancient Greek a new language of desire' among women at the end of the nineteenth century.[224] In particular she points out that:

> Greek maenads seemed the very embodiment of feminine rebellion and unruly female sexuality, denounced by some and celebrated by others. The figure of the maenad appeared with increasing frequency in literature and the visual arts, variously represented as seductive wanton, murderous femme fatale, or raging madwoman [...].[225]

Prins states that the paintings of Alma Tadema 'represented maenads in a wide range of movements and poses: sprawled on the floor, dancing madly, or playing musical instruments [...].'[226] It is not difficult to see why Lee should have wanted to draw the reader's attention to the scene described by De Rosis and the work of Alma Tadema, as in both cases there is a picture created of a female subject that challenges Victorian ideas of decorum in matters relating to female sexuality. However, this is only possible in the mode of fictional fantasy, which provides liberation to Lee's thoughts and feelings - even here it is only by allusion to works of art that Lee can articulate sensuality, indicating the way in which aesthetic consciousness or psychology is closely linked to her understanding of the presentation of sexuality.

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[223] Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema (1836-1912) was a Dutch-born painter who settled in London in 1870, specialising in historical genre pictures which established the glamour and sensuousness of the ancient world of Greece and Rome in the popular imagination. He was known for the 'emphasis he placed on his personal relationships' and knew nearly every significant artist of the period, including John Singer Sargent. 'The Alma-Tadema Banquet – Potrait', National Portrait Gallery, London, http://www.npg.org.uk [accessed: 20.12.23].

[224] Yopie Prins, 'Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters', in Richard Dellamora, ed., *Victorian Sexual Dissidence* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 43-81 (p. 43).

[225] Prins, 1999, p. 49.

[226] Prins, 1999, pp. 49-50.

Dionea's powerful pagan sensuality is seen as problematic and exerts a disruptive influence on the community in which she has been brought up, as a number of previously pious people come under her influence and are led to the discovery of carnal love, including nuns and monks. Dionea is described as having lips 'like a Cupid's bow or a tiny snake's curves' (p. 87), emphasizing her status as a manifestation of Venus, and the mention of the snake evoking the serpent in Genesis. This causes De Rosis to speculate that 'the Pagan divinities lasted much longer than we suspect, sometimes in their own nakedness, sometimes in the stolen garb of the Madonna or of the saints. Who knows whether they do not exist to this day?' (p. 91). This gives emphasis to Lee's attempts to imagine the past existing in the present, with the particular sense here of the way in which ancient beliefs are seen to have taken on an aspect of the conventions of later beliefs whilst never losing their essential power. Freud was also interested in this survival of what he calls the 'old *animistic* view of the universe'.[227] Freud claims, based on a suggestion from one of his patients, that this continuing influence of the 'omnipotence of thoughts' is an example of the uncanny. He describes the animistic nature of primitive societies as

> a view characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with human spirits, by the narcissistic overrating of one's own mental processes, by the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic that relied on it, by the attribution of carefully graded magical powers (*mana*) to alien persons and things, and by all the inventions with which the unbounded narcissism of that period of development sought to defend itself against the unmistakable sanctions of reality.[228]

Freud explains this phenomenon in relation to the continuing presence of primitive magic in the individual unconscious, which he states is a part of each person's development:

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[227] Freud, 2003, p. 147.
[228] Freud, 2003, p. 147.

> It appears that we have all, in the course of our individual development, been through a phase corresponding to the animistic phase in the development of primitive peoples, that this phase did not pass without leaving behind in us residual traces that can still make themselves felt, and that everything we now find 'uncanny' meets the criterion that it is linked with these remnants of animistic mental activity and prompts them to express themselves.[229]

In Lee's imaginative world the peoples of the Mediterranean still possess this kind of animistic approach to interpreting the environment, and what she dramatizes is the extent to which later developments have merely closed over these darker and more primal intuitions that can break through the veneer of the contemporary society of nineteenth-century Italy.

It is worth observing that, in this context, De Rosis makes a joke against Lady Evelyn with her interest in the fashionable forms of late nineteenth-century occultism: 'You think our peasants are skeptical? Perhaps they do not believe in thought-reading, mesmerism, and ghosts, like you, dear Lady Evelyn' (p. 93). However, they do believe in the power of superstition, and it is in this context Dionea has established herself as 'village sorceress' (p. 93). This story challenges the assumption that the late nineteenth century was simply a period in which materialism and science were dominant, to reveal that, at different levels of society, there still existed forms of belief in hidden forces controlling human existence, and yet, in contrast, its narrative voice is provided by De Rosis, who is presented as member of the 'Republican *bourgeois*' (p. 92) and, therefore, presents a rational and modern perspective. By taking this perspective as the one which guides Lady Evelyn and the reader,

[229] Freud, 2003, p. 147.

Lee constructs the kind of sympathy which Martin suggests 'might involve a type of feeling for others, in which feeling was less immediate.'[230]

The story's conclusion is brought about by the arrival of Lady Evelyn's friends, a couple called Waldemar and Gertrude. Their names emphasise their northern European background, which Lee wants to contrast with the southern mentality of Dionea, adding another layer of distance, but this time contained within the narrative. As we saw in 'Amour Dure', Lee exploits notions of national identity to provide the text with a dimension that goes beyond the individual identity to embrace stereotypes of different cultural backgrounds. This is related to her own experience as someone who, from an early age, was used to travelling in different regions of Europe, developing an interest in cultural differences, but it must also be symptomatic of her way of wanting to shift perspective between different cultural backgrounds. Lee lived in a period when nationalism was one of the dominant political ideas, with the unification of Italy being perhaps the most obvious instance. Nationalism led to the formation of powerful new states such as Germany, but at the same time fed a growing desire among minority ethnic groups for recognition, which was to be one of the factors behind the outbreak of World War One in 1914. Lee, as a leading cosmopolitan intellectual, was an outspoken proponent of pacifist views, both before, during, and after the war. In this context her fiction anticipates the results of

[230] Martin, 2013, p. 78. Martin quotes from Lee's 'Introduction' to Richard Semon's *Mnemic Psychology* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1923), where she suggests that sympathy has a relationship with the distanced experience of emotion when contemplated in memory: 'the intensity and insistence of our own immediate emotions, is precisely paralleled by the faintness and fluctuation of visual and auditory memory-images […] when compared with their correlated sensations'.

nationalism, demonstrating the problems of the survival of more primitive norms of identity.

In a crucial exchange that is reported back to Lady Evelyn, De Rosis recounts a conversation that he has had with Waldemar about art. Waldemar argues that he cannot sculpt women because for him their essence is to be found in the soul rather than the body, and he can best capture the expression of the soul in painting. De Rosis replies by suggesting that 'the ancients' – the Greeks and Romans - were successful in creating such sculptures (p. 96). Waldemar's response is to say that they had goddesses for subjects to inspire them – he says: '"but those were not women"' (p. 96). This conversation is followed in the next letter by the moment when the artist meets Dionea:

> Waldemar stood silent; his eyes were fixed on her, where she stood under the olives, her white shift loose about her splendid throat, her shining feet bare in the grass. Vaguely, as if not knowing what he said, he asked her name. (p. 98).

Lee imagines the effect of a woman as a manifestation of a goddess on the male gaze, yet it is also the lesbian gaze that is really being articulated in this scene, even though that is something that Lee will not allow herself to admit. It is significant that the words that she gives to Dionea to speak include a song that is in a form with which her former love, Mary Robinson, had experimented with.[231] In this narrative, Lee suppresses desire by developing the idea of the dedicated artist's contemplation of beauty of form; an attitude that De Rosis sees as being 'curious ' to observe (p. 98). He then, by way of explanation, states:

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[231] See note on the use of the *stornello* in Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, edited by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Broadview, 2006), p. 98.

> I could never have believed that an artist could regard a woman so utterly as a mere inanimate thing, a form to copy, like a tree or flower. Truly he carries out his theory that sculpture knows only the body, and the body scarcely considered as human. The way in which he speaks to Dionea after hours of the most rapt contemplation of her is almost brutal in its coldness. And yet to hear him exclaim, "How beautiful she is! Good God, how beautiful!" No love of mere woman was ever so violent as this love of woman's mere shape. (p. 98).

What is expressed here is Lee's interpretation of aesthetic idealism – related to her tendency to want to balance emotion and 'intellectualized knowledge', whereby the interest in the individual is of minor importance compared with the attempt to give representation to the abstract concept of beauty.[232] In her essay 'Psychology of an Art Writer', Lee discusses the notion that what was behind her interest in aesthetics was a belief that, while fashions and tastes in art might change from generation to generation, there might be some legitimate feeling relating to the experience of art that could be regarded as the appreciation of the purity of form. She suggests that her motivation was

> to get to the bottom of the origins of art, of its influence, the vicissitudes of various schools, the evolution of form. And, in doing so, I approached the work of art with an absolutely objective spirit. In other words: I *looked* at it with every last scrap of my attention.[233]

This would seem to be the perspective that the artist Waldemar possesses during the creation of his statue of Dionea. Significantly, she goes on to record in this essay what she describes as 'the full blossoming of what I'll call my aesthetic life.'[234] Lee believes this is something that she was not able to fully achieve in her conscious thought until she was 46, in around 1902-03 (this essay was first published in 1903). It is therefore not until after the

[232] Martha Vicinus, ' "A Legion of Ghosts": Vernon Lee (1856-1935) and the Art of Nostalgia', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10:4 (2004), 599-616 (604).
[233] Lee, *The Psychology of an Art Writer* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018), p. 42.
[234] Lee, 2018, p. 43.

end of the Victorian age that she attributes her moment of enlightenment or epiphany. Although she is expressing a moment in her personal journey as an art writer, it cannot be without some relationship to the changes that were occurring in wider society and intellectual thought at this time; a period when the Wright brothers make the first flight and the campaign for women's suffrage becomes more organized. However, as with these other pioneering achievements that seem to define the direction of the twentieth century, the origins can be dated to developments that actually occurred in the late nineteenth century. This is also true in the developing mind of Vernon Lee. The arrival of the twentieth century may have given her a greater sense of personal freedom, but it was a direction that she had already been travelling, even if she was conditioned by her upbringing to find it difficult to be completely liberated. By the time she was composing the stories that comprise the *Hauntings* volume, I argue Lee was already covertly exploring this newly-found relationship with art objects, and as she admitted, her basic 'aesthetic character' had remained unchanged since her earliest memories of her engagement with art aged 'fourteen or fifteen years old' (in around 1870).[235]

She describes this relationship in the following terms in her essay on 'The Psychology of an Art Writer':

> The drive to understand works of art, and the need to examine them and compare between them, led me to put myself into constant and direct contact with them. When I was obliged to experience their reality in the same way that we experience the cities we live in, the individuals that surround us, and the furniture and instruments we make use of constantly, I began to feel for canvasses and statues the same spontaneous and organic attraction – or boredom, malaise, and repulsion –

[235] Lee, 2018, p. 44.

> that came naturally to me in my immanent and unconscious relationships with the visible things in my environment.[236]

This is a crucial statement of her approach, with its emphasis on feeling and relationship with creative art forms, as what Lee describes in this passage is a connection between the viewer and the object that is based on the physical and material world. Extraneous considerations derived second hand, such as some appeal to literary considerations, are thereby distrusted and excluded. She claims that:

> Visual beauty and ugliness were now real for me, because my attention had to latch onto the form of which they are qualities. I lived intimately with art. Is it surprising, then, that this intimacy should have taught me a real affection, on the one hand, and a real irritation on the other, the kind of disgust that all forced contact causes the mind subjected to it?[237]

Lee's emphasis throughout is on what she terms 'contact'. She discusses this approach as scientific, and yet the language with which she presents her ideas are suggestive of human relationships. She uses words such as 'attraction', 'intimacy', and 'affection' to articulate her notion of the 'relationship' between the self and the artwork, suggesting that the manner in which she perceives art is as a sublimated form of erotic, or at least emotional, attachment. In her Gallery Diaries, dated 1901-1904, she makes clear that her method of engagement with individual works of art is to ask a number of questions. These are:

> "How do I behave in the presence of a given work of art?" "How do I become acquainted with it?"; and that this led, insensibly and at first unconsciously, to a series of other questions: "How have I perceived and felt today in my relations with given works of art?" until little by little I have found myself with so many introspective data to verify and compare that there has ensued a deliberate system of noting down all the factors and concomitants of my aesthetic processes which cause them to *vary from day to day*.[238]

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[236] Lee, 2018, p. 43.
[237] Lee. 2018, p. 44.
[238] Lee, 2018, p. 48.

Once again, the use of terms such as 'behave', 'acquainted', and 'felt' establish a set of points of reference which would be typical of self-analysis by someone who is trying to understand their emotional responses to other humans, but are here related to art objects.

The ending that Lee gives to 'Dionea' is related to her thinking about the art writer's engagement with the work of art. Lee had wanted to get away from the poetic allusion when she contemplated art, instead concentrating on the form presented in physical reality of the work in front of her, but this is itself a means of substituting 'artistic' experience for human contact. In the story, Lee expresses this aspect through one of De Rosis's final letters to Lady Evelyn, in which he declares that his research on the 'Exiled Gods' has turned out to be a 'prosaic' dead end (p. 102). There follows a passage in which he seems to contradict this statement, admitting that the 'world, at times, seems to be playing at being poetic, mysterious, full of wonder and romance' (p. 102), another attempt to experience the world through aesthetic feelings. Here the writing resembles that which was characteristic of Lee in her travel writings, complete with a sensuous recreation of the natural world.

This vision is shattered in the penultimate letter, which is written after a catastrophic event has taken place, which is revealed slowly, piece-by-piece – the straightforward account of what has happened appears to have been contained in a telegram not included in the narrative, but as a document referred to as a source. A fire has occurred and Waldemar has died, his body discovered at the base of a cliff, Dionea has disappeared, and, most shockingly, Gertrude, Waldemar's wife, has died as a sacrifice at the

altar that Waldemar has made to Venus: 'We found her lying across the altar, her pale hair among the ashes of the incense, her blood […] trickling among the carved garlands and rams' heads, blackening the heaped-up roses' (p. 104). The precise sequence of events which have led to this situation are left unknown, but the destructive influence of Dionea seems to be offered as a partial explanation – further hinting that pagan forces still operate in the Mediterranean world that Christianity has never managed to entirely subdue. We are back here in the realm of the animistic, where rational, 'modern' individuals have become prey to superstitions. The story also dramatizes how a feeling for something can be the source of obsession and that the extent that an individual can get caught up in an aesthetic emotion can lead to a loss of perspective.

That the artist should die in his pursuit of the ideal, and that family relationships should be destroyed by such devotion to beauty of form, is one way of interpreting the narrative. But it is also a story that reflects the destructive presence of a female character, another Lee's *femme fatales*. There is little that is resolved in its conclusion, and the effect is the unleashing of forces that cannot be contained within the acceptable social structures of the time. What is curiously missing from the conclusion of De Rosis's account is any mention of the work of art itself that became the material justification for the obsession. Instead, all the reader has is the sense of the tragic aftermath and a retrospective account of explosive energy having been released. The text has taken the place of what Waldemar may have hoped to achieve, and can be seen as a substitute for his 'lost' statue by providing a record of what is left beyond the self as a moral comment about the consequences of devotion to a muse. The sense of failure that he felt when confronted by the beauty of

Dionea is enacted in the narrative's failure to achieve a satisfactory resolution, linking to Lee's interest in the nature of erotic desire that can find itself manifested in relation to works of art. It can also be argued that because the supernatural is, by definition, that which is outside material life, the reason for the failure of Waldemar to achieve his project of capturing Dionea's elusive beauty is related to Lee's frustration to fully realise her own same sex desires, the impossibility of establishing long-lasting same-sex relationships in the age in which she lived. This eroticism exists in the context of the contemporary modern world which didn't know how to come to terms with pagan sensuality, forcing it into the domain of unrestricted sexual expression. Dionea is portrayed as being unrepentantly triumphant as she returns to the sea, as Evangelista states:

> The ghostly reappearance of Venus has kept alive the memory of the Greek past as a terrible power of renewal. The last sighting of the exiled goddess is of her sailing on a Greek boat back into the sea, lavishly robed and singing triumphantly, victoriously disappearing again into the past and into the realm of the unconscious, uncontained and uncensored by the double plot to frame her and explain her by the hand of the sculptor Waldmar and of the doctor and mythographer De Rosis.[239]

The perspective of the story is built around the method of reading a collection of letters written by someone – De Rosis - who is a marginal participant in the drama. Whilst this lends the narrative the appearance of objectivity, De Rosis remains a participant himself, rendering his account strictly subjective. The extent to which the characters are allowed to develop is limited, the only exceptions being De Rosis's abandonment of his study of mythology and Waldemar's growing fascination with Dionea. It is De Rosis who most resembles Lee in that he is on a pathway which is leading towards the her own insistence on observing the object as free from 'poetic' additions, whereas Waldemar pursues an

[239] Evangelista, 2009, pp. 87-88.

ultimately self-destructive route that attempts to affix, in the concrete terms of a statue – an aesthetic object - the extraneous notions of the ideal as represented by a goddess. The result, therefore, is uncanny in the Freudian sense, becoming the type of uncanny experience that results from 'superannuated modes of thought' relating to goddesses and the reverence for their spiritual powers.[240] In trying to achieve the sculpture of the immortal Venus, Waldemar has lost his senses and become a victim; he has forgotten that Venus represents a double identity, that she, as Maxwell notes, 'has both benign and malign aspects, winning for herself another title: that of the Goddess of Death-in-Life – a goddess who demands ritual sacrifices.'[241] Presenting De Rosis's observations in the form of letters act to record the encounter over time much like entries in a diary, which we can further attribute to Lee's intention to observe her own reactions to works of art on a day-to-day basis in her gallery diaries. This works as a method of narration in 'Dionea' to provide a viewpoint on the case history provided by the main protagonist, Dionea, and how the community react to her. Crucially, De Rosis and Lady Evelyn are not wholly passive, ultimately culpable in bringing Waldemar and his wife to their fatal meeting with Dionea. This means that the story serves as a criticism not just of Waldemar's obsession, but also the way in which the intellectually progressive – and Lee may have had in mind Walter Pater - can be accessories in allowing their impressions to obscure the boundaries between art and life. As is the case in all the stories in the *Hauntings* volume, there is a high price to pay for too close an identification with that which is aesthetically attractive, especially when that object is seen in a modern context. Maxwell claims that 'the strange, beautiful and demanding women who figure in these stories insist on crossing the boundaries of

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[240] Freud, 2003, p. 157.
[241] Maxwell, 1997, p. 264.

historical time; they require the performance of ritual and the sacrifice, most importantly, of male devotees.'[242] This means that figures such as Dionea are seen as particular manifestations of female power, and as such evade easy classification in the world of the late nineteenth century which is dominated by male perspectives.

**Impressions, the Uncanny and the Aesthetic Double in 'Oke of Okehurst'**

The same concern with recording day to day experience as Lee used in 'Dionea' is again present in the story 'Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover', the first of the stories in the *Hauntings* volume to be published, first appearing as a separate novella in 1886 as more simply, *A Phantom Lover*.[243] It is one of Lee's few stories to be set in the English countryside, contrasting with her usual cosmopolitan settings. It is a first-person narrative, told three years later, by a successful portrait painter, who at the time of the action is at a point of crisis in his career following a negative reaction to one of his paintings from an influential sitter, and is invited to take a commission to paint a Kentish squire and his wife that he might have otherwise rejected. The painter struggles to complete the picture of the wife, and in fact never finishes it, stating that her head had 'something exquisite and uncanny about it.'[244] The artist recognises that there is some aspect about her head that evades his analytical powers and produces a sense of anxiety, implying that the visual aspect of her head creates a feeling of something that cannot be defined; something that belongs elsewhere in some hitherto unknown context. Lee's use here of the term 'uncanny' contrasts with Freud's general definition of the 'uncanny': 'this belongs to the realm of the

[242] Maxwell, 1997, p. 265.
[243] Vernon Lee, *A Phantom Lover: A Fantastic Story* (London: William Blackwood, 1886).
[244] Vernon Lee, 'Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover', *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2006), pp. 105-153 (p. 106).

frightening, of what evokes fear and dread'. But it should be remembered that the narrative is written from the perspective of events which have already taken place, and whilst an exact description of the unfolding of story is attempted, it is inevitably coloured by retrospective knowledge - it can be claimed that the artist refers to the head with the irony that he is fully aware that it is associated with an almost inexplicable tragedy. In the sense that the uncanny element also suggests something that is difficult to define precisely, the narrator's word choice conveys a meaning that is similar to Freud's assertion 'the essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny is intellectual uncertainty'.[245] Uncertainty is an important element in Lee's supernatural stories as it is in the borderlands between the objective and the subjective that they explore the haunting of the present by the past, the haunting of male by the female. As Kandola makes clear, 'Oke of Okehurst' is concerned with 'the failure of a ''radical'' masculine impressionism to incarcerate conclusively the female subject degenerates into anti-feminist diatribes.'[246] The story critiques, as do the other stories in the volume, elements of the Aesthetic Movement based on Pater's impressionism in *The Renaissance*, particularly the unacknowledged male bias that is associated with it, a bias that becomes obscured under the superficial modern outlook of many of the movement's artists.

To carry out the portrait commission, the painter has to travel by train, a manifestation of modernity and a clear indication by Lee that she wants the reader to be fully aware of the time period in which it takes place. He then stays at the remote manor house of Okehurst, where he finds that the squire's wife has found poems by a seventeenth-

[245] Freud, 2003, pp. 123-125.
[246] Kandola, 2010, p. 26.

century poet called Christopher Lovelock and begins imagining herself to be an earlier Alice Oke, who had been involved in a tragedy concerning the murder of Lovelock in 1626. She teases her husband, and the outcome is a tragedy in 1880 where the husband shoots his wife and soon afterwards kills himself. This outcome exists in the objective world, but the narrator's reliability is in question when it comes to the circumstances that lead up to the tragedy as the narrative resembles a monologue for which little objective evidence is offered, apart from the grim and sensational outcome.

In a letter dated June 16th 1886, Lee referred to this story as a 'shilling dreadful': openly comparing the story to the 'Penny' or 'Shilling Dreadful', one of the popular forms of narrative entertainment of the late Victorian period which was often melodramatic and sensational in composition. By making this statement, Lee seems to have wanted to distance herself from any suggestion that much seriousness had been invested in the fiction, apparently regarding it as a pot-boiler. [247] This volume was dedicated to Peter Bontourline, however, a Russian writer and friend of Lee's who helped with her research for *The Countess of Albany* (1884), a critical study of Princess Louise of Stolberg-Gedern, the wife of Charles Edward Stuart, better known as 'The Young Pretender'. Bontourline had spent time in Florence and shared Lee's aesthetic interests.[248] This suggests the dedication indicates that, although Lee might have been dismissive of the 'Oke of Okehurst'as a piece of empty, sensational entertainment, she was perhaps ambitious for its success, and quite

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[247] Vernon Lee, *Vernon Lee's Letters*, ed. by I. Cooper Willis (Privately Printed, 1937), p. 223.
[248] Vernon Lee, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee. 1865-1935: Volume I, 1865-1884*, edited by Amanda Gagel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 408-09, note 12. It is likely that he knew Mark André Raffalovich (1866-1934), a noted writer on homosexuality and companion of the poet and Catholic priest John Gray, and who held influential literary parties in London with guests such as Henry James and Oscar Wilde.

prepared to use it as a means of publicly acknowledging friends who had helped her in the past, and whose opinions she valued. Lee also wanted to remind Bontourline of what she had said to him about the elusive nature of such a tale when she had previously told him the outline of the story, which reveals that she had thought quite deeply about her attitude to the writing of such stories:

> You thought it a fantastic tale, you lover of fantastic things, and urged me to write it out at once, although I protested that, in such matters, to write is to exorcise, to dispel the charm; and that printers' ink chases away the ghosts that may pleasantly haunt us, as efficaciously as gallons of holy water.[249]

It might appear that Lee had been reluctant to commit herself to the writing of the story and its future publication, which today is perhaps ironic given that it has been her supernatural fiction which has proved to be the best-known of her literary output. That she did decide to commit herself to printers' ink would indicate that the idea of the supernatural tale must have been of more interest to her than it had at first appeared. We have already seen that Lee developed an interest in the supernatural or magical in her non-fictional travel writings, and this was an important part of her conception of human experience. Vernon Lee noted in a letter on 20 July 1886 that she had read the story to Walter Pater and his family: 'Yesterday evening I read the proofs of *Oke* (it is called *A Phantom Lover*) to the Paters, & they like it or pretended to do so.'[250] This is another indication that the story was something that she had taken care to write.[251] However, the response from the Pater family is difficult to evaluate in her account of the matter in this

[249] Quoted in Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, eds., 'Introduction', *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2006), p. 13.
[250] Lee (1937), p. 223.
[251] It is also worth noting, in relation to the original title of this story, 'The Phantom Lover', that when I. A. Richards came to investigate the limitations, as he saw it, of the use of aesthetics to determine the merits of literary value in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), he entitled his chapter 'The Phantom Aesthetic State', a chapter in which he references Lee's work, especially *The Beautiful* (1913).

letter, where the emphasis is placed on the doubt as to whether they are being politely encouraging of their friend or whether they were expressing genuine satisfaction in her ability as an artist. It has been claimed that Lee was 'Pater's most original disciple and commentator', but at this point in her career – Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* had been published the previous year – it would not have been clear how original the disciple would become.[252] Indeed, as has already been suggested, the stories in the *Hauntings* volume have been read as a critique of Pater's impressionism – particularly his earlier *The Renaissance* (1873) - and his influence on the younger generation of writers such as Oscar Wilde.[253] Against this must be stressed that Lee's reaction to both Pater and Wilde was ambivalent, and she came to regard Pater's later career as indicative that he had learned some lessons from earlier mistakes.[254] However, the Pater influence does suggest one way in which Lee can be understood in relation to modernist structures of engagement with the contemporary world. Although Pater was dismissed by T. S. Eliot in 1930 for having, among other things, 'a hodge-podge of the learning of the classical don', he was a critic who anticipated the attempt to reveal the world as fragmented, impressionistic, and to interpret experience in terms of the subconscious and the individual's psychological responses, which are also gendered.[255] It was in this sense that Lee was influenced by Pater and developed a similar approach in the essays collected in *Euphorion* (1884), but in the same collection she noted the problematic consequences of the 'half-artistic pleasure' which such

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[252] Angela Leighton, 'Ghosts, Aestheticism, and "Vernon Lee"', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 1-14 (2000), 2.
[253] See Vineta Colby, 2003, pp. 56-68, and Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), pp. 54-59.
[254] Kandola, 2010, p. 24.
[255] T. S. Eliot, 'Arnold and Pater', in Walter de la Mare, ed., *The Eighteen-eighties* (London: C.U.P., 1930), quoted in Derek Stanford, ed., *Critics of the 'Nineties* (London: John Baker, 1970), p. 69.

a subjective method could lead to without a sense of moral responsibility.[256] This indicates the duality of Lee's understanding of Pater's method, which both participates in and holds back from so as to make a critical judgment. Lee's approach operates on the borders between the modern and the traditional, and she is close to finding agreement with Eliot in his reservations about the value of Pater's learning when it is based upon impressionism.

Kandola suggests that 'Oke of Okehurst' is a story responding to this duality by creating an atmosphere of ambiguity that leaves the reader unsure whether everything is quite what it appears to be.[257] The uncanny element relates closely to this ambiguity, reminding us that perspective is something that is gendered and variable, hovering between the object and the subjective perception. John Clute has suggested we might also consider Henry James's explorations of the unreliable narrator to be traced back to a link between the supernatural writing fiction of Henry James and Vernon Lee:

> Perhaps somewhat undervalued because of its drenched, tepid English setting, and because its protagonists are at least superficially routine creations, 'Oke of Okehurst' nevertheless demonstrates that its author, in 1886, breathed the same literary atmosphere as Henry James and was capable of anticipating some of his explorations into the relationship between the narrator and what he narrates. [...] If the contemporary reader detects an adumbration here of Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw' (1898), he is unlikely to be misguided. 'Oke of Okehurst' depicts a folie à trois, and the reader is left as ambivalent about what truly happened as he is clearly meant to be in the later tale. Lee's novella can only gain by being read as an early tour de force in the presentation of an unreliable narrator. In this light, a quiet, overextended anecdote can be seen as a tale of genuine horror.[258]

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[256] Lee, *Euphorion*, (London: Fisher Unwin, 1884), Vol. I, pp. 12-13.
[257] Kandola, 2010, p. 24.
[258] John Clute, 'Vernon Lee', in E. F. Bleiler, ed., *Supernatural Fiction Writers: Fantasy and Horror* (New York: Scribner's, 1985), pp. 329-335 (pp. 331-32).

Henry James, a friend of Edith Wharton, offered Lee encouragement, although he was highly critical of her style. Amanda Gagel claims that Lee regarded James as 'a friend and mentor'; but she also quotes a letter to his brother, William James (20th January 1893), in which James states he finds Lee's style 'insupportable' and remarks: 'There is a great second-rate element in her first-rateness.'[259] Nonetheless, James's comments do demonstrate a grudging admiration for Lee's intellect, even if this appreciation was tempered by considerable distrust: 'she is as dangerous and uncanny as she is intelligent – which saying a great deal.'[260] That James should have thought that there was an element in Lee's personality that he felt was particularly 'uncanny' must not be overlooked, although what precise meaning may have been intended is not entirely clear. But, once again, the use of this term which fascinated Freud, and is later adopted by May Sinclair for her own supernatural tales, *Uncanny Stories* (1923), needs to be stressed.

As has already been pointed out, Lee's 'Oke of Okehurst' (1886) predates James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), and her supernatural fiction acting as an influence on him rather than the other way round is important. It may be said James was haunted by Lee's conception of the individual human consciousness and how it can dictate the terms of reference with which situations are interpreted.[261] Catherine Maxwell notes that the 'Lee-James relationship is an extremely complicated affair of mutual acknowledgment, mutual

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[259] Henry James to William James, 20 January 1893, quoted in Amanda Gagel, Introduction, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935, Volume I, 1865-1884* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. xiv.
[260] Ibid, p. xiv.
[261] James wrote a number of other fictions that exploit the conventions of the Victorian supernatural tale. *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is the most noted of these, but others include: 'Owen Wingrave' (1892), 'The Private Life' (1892), 'The Way It Came' (1896) – revised as 'The Friend of the Friends' (1909) - and 'The Jolly Corner' (1908). See Henry James, *Ghost Stories of Henry James*, edited by Martin Scofield (Ware: Wordsworth, 2008) and Anna Despotopoulou, *Henry James and the Supernatural* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

influence and mutual grievance.'[262] In both narratives, as we have already discussed, the supernatural tale was already an established genre in nineteenth-century fiction, but what both James and Lee shared, and were able to utilize, was an interest in the precise understanding of the importance perspective played in the construction of art. The narrative method adopted by James in *The Turn of the Screw* is one that invites the reader to speculate about the reliability of the witness to the supernatural, the governess,. So, whilst the story is presented as being a traditional fireside Christmas ghost story, it can also be read as a sophisticated modern story which troubles the reader's mind with the ambiguity of the events described and without the traditional reassurance of an omniscient narrator as guide. Lee's fiction can also be read in relation to the mechanics of a narrative constructed to challenge the reader's trust in a first-person narration. However the best way to understand her method of narration is to relate it to the development of her interests in, and developing theories on, aesthetics. The formulations of Lee's aestheticism can be best viewed through the relationship crafted between the narrator (who is subjective) and what that narrator perceives (that which is objective), which can be read as a distilled instance of how the perceiving mind and/or body responds to different kinds of experience. The crafting of these responses can be convoluted and problematic because the experienced quickly becomes part of what is interpreted by the mind, making the reliability of the text an exploration of the limits of perception. Stories of the supernatural are characterized by the way in which they engage the emotions of the reader, and the resulting tension is often enhanced by the circumstances that attend what Clute refers to as 'genuine horror'. The suspense that such tales evoke in an audience is far removed from

[262] Maxwell, 1997, p. 268.

ordinary experience by design, stimulating the senses beyond what would be normally expected in real life. This means that the recording or interpreting mind is unlikely to be able to be truly objective, as the usual points of reference are unreliable and the resultant mind is forced to construct meanings from instinct and experience to construct a new, altered reality.

'Oke of Okehurst' is written from the perspective of someone who is a successful artist (such as Lee's friend, John Singer Sargent), and so it is through the gaze of a male artist that the story unfolds, allowing Lee to further explore the consciousness of the masculine artist as they contemplate the elusive quality of a female subject. The painter-narrator suggests that the preparatory sketches for a portrait he made whilst staying at a house in Kent of Alice Oke, the wife of the owner of the property, possess a special significance. These are now stored at his London home, and described by the painter as 'mere scratches' which 'may give some idea of her marvellous, fantastic kind of grace' (p. 106). The projected painting has never been completed, and the text provides an account of why the artist has not been able to complete it, as he searches to capture some elusive quality. The use of 'fantastic' here to describe Alice Oke's particular charm is significant in a story in a collection which is subtitled 'Fantastic Tales'. A clue as to what the narrator meant by 'fantastic' is related to the assertion that he found 'something […] uncanny about' Alice Oke's head (p. 106), linking together both the idea of the 'fantastic' with the 'uncanny' - a point amplified soon after by Alice's husband declaring that '"she's awfully strange"' (p. 108). Part of this strangeness is owing to the location of the remote country, with its nostalgia for 'forgotten days' (p. 112), and the narrative continually draws a connection

between past and present, consciously distinguishing between the present in which the narrative takes place and the events of the recent past which are its subject. This is presented as another difficulty in the artist's attempt to construct Alice's image:

> I feel that I cannot possibly reconstruct my earliest impressions of Mrs Oke. My recollection of them would be entirely coloured by my subsequent knowledge of her; whence I conclude that I could not at first have experienced the strange interest and admiration which that extraordinary woman very soon excited in me. Interest and admiration, be it well understood, of a very unusual kind, as she was herself a very unusual kind of woman; and I, if you choose, am a rather unusual kind of man. (p. 113)

It is tempting to read the last phrase of this passage as a joke made by the author, Lee perhaps acknowledging to those readers familiar with her writing that she is engaged in a kind of 'cross-dressing' process with this narrative. It is my belief, rather, that Lee is once again expressing the need to identify something 'uncanny' in the personality of Alice Oke; that 'she seemed always to have been present in one's consciousness, although present, perhaps, as an enigma' (p. 113). This suggests that regardless of what might be identified in the personage of this lady, there is also something present which has a quality representative of what cannot be wholly quantified; something that the artist feels the need to capture, suggesting a cultural, as well as personal, need to pin down and label this elusive quality. There is a tendency by the narrator to view Alice Oke as the embodiment of certain values and beliefs, values and beliefs he wants to impose on his subject. As Kandola claims writes,

> Lee suggests that however radical high art circles perceive themselves to be in the dangerous and provocative images of women that they produce and promote, that essentially their gender politics are just as intractable and insensitive to women's needs as the values of the wider society which they seek to challenge.[263]

[263] Kandola, 2010, pp. 26-27.

Kandola highlights the extent to which Lee develops her arguments in relation to a criticism not just of conventional society, but of those who regard themselves as enlightened, showing how limited such assumptions are when challenged by female energies which do not fit with approved narratives. It through the adoption of fantastic elements or of the supernatural that women can articulate their sense of difference, rather than in the varied forms of progressive art which remained staunchly within the domain of male structures of expression.

It is particularly of note that the artist-narrator says he 'never thought about her as a body [...] but merely as a wonderful series of lines' (p. 114), suggesting a fundamental insensitivity to Alice's autonomy as a woman. Her personality, then, eludes the artist's attempts to root her in material circumstances, causing him to become obsessed: 'I pursued her, her physical image, her psychological explanation' (p. 117). His search for a meaning in Alice's strange appearance and behaviour settles around her self-identification with an ancestor from 1626, leading the narrator to observe that 'she [had] no interest in the present, but only an eccentric passion in the past' (p. 122). This suggests that the artist regards Alice as being the victim of medical imbalance, the only means of rationalising what he cannot understand, either in her material reality or her aesthetic potential. A footnote in the Broadview edition of the stories from the *Hauntings* volume posits that the character of Alice Oke was based on Janey Sevilla, Lady Archibald Campbell (c. 1846-1923), who had a reputation for acting and managing amateur drama. Sevilla had been the subject of three paintings by James McNeill Whistler, including one in which she was depicted as

Orlando in *As You Like It*.[264] Lee once described Sevilla as a 'very clever, delightful, fantastic, wayward creature' who she was 'dying to know'.[265] Illustrations from the time (see figure 1) show her dressing in masculine clothing similar to her appearance in Whistler's 'Orlando', and it is likely that this cross-dressing personality was particularly alluring to Vernon Lee, as it later would be to Virginia Woolf.[266]

Figure 1 Lady Archibald Campbell as Orlando, 1884.[267]

[264] Maxwell and Pulham, eds., Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (Broadview, 2006), p. 106. Peter Gunn states, 'It is probable that Vernon Lee had Lady Archie in mind for the character of Mrs. Alice Oke in 'The Phantom Lover […]', Gunn, 1964, p. 129.
[265] Gunn, 1964, p. 127.
[266] Woolf mentions Lee as being 'a dashing authoress' in a letter in 1922, suggesting that she may have responded to Lee in a similar fashion. Quoted in Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of the Word* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2007), p. 132.
[267] Lady Archibald Campbell as Orlando, 1884. Photograph; Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.; https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/shakespeare-outdoor-pioneers-summer-tradition/lady-archibald-campell-as-orlando/ [accessed: 7.9.20].

It might be suggested that Lee's failure to truly get to know Janey Sevilla might have been the inspiration of the artist-narrator's constant and frustrating attempts to get to know Alice Oke. The influence of Lady Archibald Campbell is particularly evident during Section VII when Alice appears in the following manner, during the preparation for an entertainment at the house:

> […] the door opened and a strange figure entered, stranger than any of these others who were profaning the clothes of the dead: a boy, slight and tall, in a brown riding-coat, leathern belt, and big buff boots, a little grey cloak over one shoulder, a large grey hat slouched over the eyes, a dagger and pistol at the waist. It was Mrs. Oke, her eyes preternaturally bright, and her whole face lit up with a bold, perverse smile. (p. 138)

Lee gives emphasis the impact of this appearance:

> Even to a crew of noisy boys and girls playing the fool in the garments of men and women long dead and buried, there is something questionable in the sudden appearance of a young married woman, the mistress of the house, in a riding-coat and jack-boots; and Mrs. Oke's expression did not make the jest seem any less questionable. (p. 138)

In this passage there is an association between queerness – cross-dressing, 'perverse', and 'questionable' - and the license given by evoking the past in the present, as if the desire to live outside one's own time is to challenge contemporary ideas of morality and enact the values of a different period of history, with historical otherness a means of challenging contemporary manners and conventions. From this perspective, the seventeenth century provides a greater degree of romance and an escape from the present, a sense of freedom to realise identity through imagination. This echoes Alice's assertion that she knows the story of her ancestors and the poet Lovelock are true 'because one does, because one feels it to be true' (p. 124). Lee's understanding of empathy is also about finding 'truth' through a

means of following exactly the ‘delicate processes of feeling and imagination’.[268] However, Lee was perfectly aware of the dangers that such an approach might pose, and stated that it was important to remain

> as free as possible both from self-suggestion and from that artificial isolation of separate factors which is bound to falsify our knowledge of phenomena whose very nature is to be complex and unstable and as dependent upon inhibitions, abbreviations, substitutions and summations as upon any more elementary psychological factors.[269]

I would argue that the case of Alice Oke is a study of what might happen if a strict ‘scientific’ control is not maintained and the process of empathetic judgement is led astray by personal emotional and psychological need. It is ironic that it is not Alice, described as ‘intangible, not of this earth’ (p. 150), who succumbs to supernatural paranoia, but the materialistic nineteenth-century husband. To achieve this, of course, Lee relies upon expressions of the supernatural, allowing her to bring the past to bear on not just the present, but also to shape the future. One of the strongest features of the ‘Oke to Okehurst’ is the way in which a sense of time and place is constructed, and how it is utilised in establishing the drama’s conclusion. The narrator is told that the yellow drawing room is believed to have ‘an evil reputation’ in such a manner that he concludes it must have been the scene of some great event. Mr. Oke assures him that nothing has happened there, prompting the narrator to ask: “‘How do you explain this uncanny reputation, since nothing ever happened there?’”, to which Mrs Oke asserts: “‘Perhaps something is destined to happen there in the future’” (p. 125). This statement is important because it draws attention to the fact it is not only in the present, but also in the future that a haunting may

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[268] Lee, ‘Aesthetic Responsiveness: Its Variations and Accompaniments – Extracts from Vernon Lee’s Gallery Diaries, 1901-4’, *The Psychology of an Art Writer*, 2018, p. 47.
[269] Lee, 2018, pp. 47-48.

be felt; that the present moment is pregnant with waiting for a future realisation. Much is made of Alice Oke's alleged 'perversity' (p. 141), and Lee goes so far as to introduce her lack of interest in having children as part of the artist-narrator's character assessment (p. 134), reiterating a conventional attitude to the role of women in Victorian England whilst simultaneously subverting it in terms of Alice's female power to resist simple categorisations.

Before the swift and violent conclusion of the story, Lee provides Alice Oke with a reasoning behind her beliefs regarding the nature of love and time. We are told that Alice has been reading Dante's *Vita Nuova* given to her by the artist-narrator, and this seems to help her articulate her philosophy of love and declare that there are cases of love which can survive death:

> It is unextinguishable, and goes on in the spiritual world until it meet a reincarnation of the beloved; and when this happens, it jets out and draws to it all that may remain of that lover's soul, and takes shape and surrounds the beloved one once more. (p. 150)

Lee emphasises Alice 'incorporealness' (p. 151), both foreshadowing her death and suggesting that, for some women, there may be no material satisfaction of material desire because their lesbian love is of a nature that is not acknowledged in contemporary society. Completeness and truth in terms of sexuality are impossible, but may yet come in the future. In much of her work, Lee continually searches for what Martin identifies as 'questions of how we feel for each other and questions of how we feel for art'.[270] In 'Oke of Oakhurst', Lee has created a story that, as Peter Gunn has suggested, has 'uncanny

[270] Martin, 2013, p. 30.

power'.[271] This uncanny feeling is related to the way in which Alice Oke has constructed a passion for somebody long dead, metaphorically reviving a corpse; a passion that proves so powerful, in fact, that she is able to provoke her husband to murder. The poetry of Christopher Lovelock read by Alice has allowed her to enter into the past and bring it back with her into the present, blurring the boundaries of time and disrupting conventional reality where the past is kept separate from the present. The feelings aroused by human beings are confused with the feelings aroused by art, and in Alice's case it seems that she prefers the romance of the past to the unfulfilling reality of the present, which is subtly presented in the narrative by the impressions of atmosphere in relation to the time of year and weather.

Freud's interest in the works of E. T. A. Hoffman in his essay *The Uncanny* is particularly concerned with bringing the inanimate to life. The case of Alice Oke can be interpreted as similar to the instance where Freud recounts how 'a woman patient tell[s] how, at the age of eight, she was still convinced that her dolls were bound to come to life if she looked at them in a certain way, as intently as possible.'[272] Freud relates such notions to infantile wishes or beliefs that have strayed into adulthood. In regards to psychoanalysis, Alice has repressed her living self to the extent she has identified herself more with the historical Alice, blurring the boundaries to such an extent that she no longer knows her actual self, becoming a person 'duplicated, divided and interchanged'. As in E.T.A. Hoffmann's novel *The Devil's Elixirs* (1815), this involves, as Freud suggests, 'the idea of the 'double' (the *Doppelgänger*), in all its nuances and manifestations – that is to say, the

[271] Gunn, 1964, p. 130.
[272] Freud, 2003, p. 141.

appearance of persons who have to be regarded as identical because they look alike'.[273] This summarises well Alice Oke's obsession, which furthermore meets the set of circumstances listed by Freud: 'the constant recurrence of the same thing, the repetition of the same facial features, the same characters, the same destinies, the same misdeeds, even the same names, through successive generations'.[274] The idea of the double was embedded in the aesthetic movement as an expression of the ambiguity art faces when imitating life, as life so often seems to imitate art. (Perhaps the most obvious case being Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1890-91, wherein the Dorian Gray likeness captured in the portrait ages, but the human manifestation, like a work of art, remains unaltered by time passing). In 'Oke of Okehurst', the relationship between art and life is also seen to be unstable. Freud identifies the double with attempts of primitive peoples to overcome death, and at a psychological level it was, according to the reductive ideas of the time, possible to interpret Alice Oke's identification with her ancestor as a manifestation of a frustrated instinct to bear children. Unable or unwilling to immortalise oneself through familiar lineage, Alice instead gestures towards a form of immortality through her identification with the past and a pattern of repetition. But Lee's interests were more firmly in regards to the aesthetic focus on the effect art has on life, and a desire to answer, impressionistically, the questions posed by Walter Pater in the Preface to *The Renaissance* (1893 edition): 'What is this song or picture … to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? … How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?'[275] The artist-narrator faces a similar dilemma when confronting Alice Oke – whose very name invokes the oak tree,

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[273] Freud, 2003, p. 142.
[274] Freud, 2003, p. 142.
[275] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. xix-xx.

something that is strong and lasting, symbolic of a traditional England; a seafaring nation whose empire was based on the oaks which were used in ship building. Alice has married into the name as she has married into a conventional family, but she remains outside its associations as somebody who cannot be wholly contained within its simple, conventional formulas. In seeking a greater explanation for her existence than offered by contemporary society causes Alice to transgress normalcy, cross historical boundaries, and express her feminine power. As Maxwell states, 'the society portrait painter who tries to paint her is unable to convey her peculiar and elusive charm'[276], and when all his attempts to capture this charm fail he resorts to conventional Victorian social standards, suggesting that Alice suffers from 'mania and hysteria' and, as Kandola points out, 'it is ironic that when he cannot keep Alice Oke fixed in his reading of her not only does the painter judge her to be clinically insane but, like the contemporary medical profession, he reduces this woman to her reproductive function.'[277] The artist-narrator is haunted by his failure to come to terms with Alice's otherness, much like the society which patronises his artistic talents cannot come to terms with the expression of female desires. As Anne DeLong states, 'the narrator as frustrated artist cannot contain the emergent New Woman, whose dangerous sexual and gendered transgressions undercut and destabilize traditional marital dynamics.'[278]

[276] Maxwell, 1997, p. 265.
[277] Kandola, 2010, p. 27.
[278] Anne DeLong, 'Framing the Fin-de-Siècle Female Narrative', in McCormick, Mitchell, Soares, eds., 2020, p. 20.

**'A Wicked Voice' and 'Qualities of Feeling': Aesthetics, the Uncanny and the Limits of Empathy.[279]**

Lee was the most self-consciously theoretical of the members of the ghostly sisterhood, combining her erudition about the art of the past with an analytical approach to aesthetical matters. Although Wharton was fascinated by the formal aspects of the construction of fictional narrative, her interest was concerned with what she regarded as craftsmanship. It would be wrong to suggest that Sinclair was not interested in these different approaches, but her primary focus was on the nature of the uncanny as an extension of psychological analysis. What makes Lee's supernatural fiction of importance is that it provided her with the opportunity to explore her ideas in such a way as to reveal the interaction between the subjective human consciousness and the products of artistic creation. Underpinning her thought is the understanding that external matter stimulates the imaginative faculties that all people possess. Kandola notes that in her early supernatural fiction, Lee takes a different stance from that adopted in her essays and permits the element of fantasy to free her imagination to explore the interplay between past and present: 'Lee uses her apparent possession by her psychological ghosts to license visceral and feverish critiques of prevalent trends in contemporary 'high' culture that are of quite a different order to those found in her numerous essays on cultural history.'[280] The final story in the *Hauntings* volume, 'A Wicked Voice', again explores the theme of aesthetic experience with a narrative combining a perspective rooted in the contemporary world with events which blur with the past. As Peter Gunn records, this tale began as a fascination

[279] Freud, 2003, p. 123.
[280] Kandola, 2010, p. 41.

with wanting to hear the voice of one of the renowned eighteenth-century singers Lee had read about in her studies.[281] This particular interest gives the story an added focus on what may be described as the physiological aspects of hearing musical sound articulated by a human voice. It was at the centre of Lee's thinking to account for sensory experience, not just in a general manifestation, but in the details of physical response. We are used to such discussions being concerned with the visual arts, but here Lee demonstrates that she is equally interested in the experience of sound. As Patricia Pulham has claimed, 'it is music that first "speaks" to her and that empowers her aesthetic appreciation and her subsequent literary production', as it was listening to her mother's singing of eighteenth-century songs that stimulated Lee's "fancies and longings"'.[282]

The narrative of 'A Wicked Voice' is concerned with a Norwegian composer called Magnus who is working on a Wagnerian opera *Ogier the Dane*, and who despises the music of Handel (1685-1759), Gluck (1714-1787), and Mozart (1756-1791). However, he has ironically become haunted by the voice of a castrato of the eighteenth century (Zaffirinio). This means that, rather than being known as 'a follower of the great master of the Future', he is instead seen as someone who has returned to the traditions, as he expresses in the text, of 'the miserable singing-masters of the Past' (p. 155). As Lee was a devotee of eighteenth-century music and disliked Wagner, she must have relished the awkward situation that she placed her narrator in, being celebrated for what he cannot respect. In an essay on 'The Art of Singing, Past and Present', Lee makes the claim the art of singing

[281] Gunn, 1964, p. 226.
[282] Patricia Pulham, 'The Castrato and the Cry in Vernon Lee's Wicked Voices', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2002), 421-437 (p. 422).

reached perfection in the eighteenth century and contemporary composers such as Wagner were in the process of moving away from such perfection to introduce what she termed "emotional declamation".[283] In 'A Wicked Voice', the narrator is convinced that he is the victim of 'mysterious, incredible, vengeance' (p. 156) for the care and attention he has taken in investigating the music of the past which he dislikes, a process initially undertaken expressly to prove its inferiority. His particular hatred is of the human voice, which he sees as the instrument of the Devil, and his justification soon takes on a puritanical tone:

> Singer, thing of evil, stupid and wicked slave of the voice, of that instrument which was not invented by the human intellect, but begotten of the body, and which, instead of moving the soul, merely stirs up the dregs of our nature! For what is the voice but the Beast calling, awakening that other Beast sleeping in the depths of mankind, the Beast which all great art has ever sought to chain up [...]. (p. 156)

As with 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea', Lee exploits the nationalism of the period to contrast northern and southern European approaches to art. Lee presents southern European culture as potentially dangerous and seductive, embracing a fusion between the body and the products of artistic creation, while northern Europeans are presented as likely to be undone in similar circumstances, losing their bearings. It is a feature of the story's construction that Lee 'links the purported supernatural encounter to the protagonist's disturbed sense of his own national and cultural dislocation.'[284] Magnus may appeal to some imagined ideal of the absolute based on the idea of the soul, as a means to keep balance and control, ultimately it is the body that triumphs. Lee articulates her understanding about the experience of aesthetics, located in a bodily response, further articulating the relationship between the objective material art, the subjective self, and the

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[283] Pulham, 2002, p. 427.
[284] Kandola, 2010, p. 43.

nature of beauty. It should also be noted that Zaffirino assumes the part of the *femme fatale* as found in the other tales in *Hauntings*, and Lee gives emphasis to the sexual ambiguity of the castrato:

> That effeminate, fat face of his is almost beautiful, with an odd smile, brazen and cruel. I have seen faces like this, if not in real life, at least in my boyish romantic dreams, when I read Swinburne and Baudelaire, the faces of wicked, vindictive women. Oh yes! he is decidedly a beautiful creature, this Zaffirino, and his voice must have had the same sort of beauty and the same expression of wickedness …. (p. 162).

Lee herself was interested in the Italian castrato Carlo Broschi, known as 'Farinelli' (1705-1782), who she referred to as one of 'the greatest artists of all times, the like of whom had never been seen before and will never be seen again.'[285] According to Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham, 'Lee was fascinated by a portrait of Farinelli by the Italian artist, Corrado Giaquinto (1703-66)' that she had seen in Bologna (see Figure 2)[286], which Peter Gunn records Lee first seeing when spending ten days with the family of John Singer Sargent during 1872, where Gunn suggests she commented on the 'beauty of this picture [which] fascinated, haunted them, and [stimulated] the desire to hear again one of these eighteenth-century voices (a Farinelli or a Pacchierioti) [thus] became something of an obsession with Violet', leading to her interest in music.[287] From this we might postulate Lee's fascination with Farinelli leading to a dramatised homage in the form of 'A Wicked Voice', particularly the focus on the sensory experience of sound and how it can influence the mind, expressing from Lee a desire to experience the sounds of the past and understand how they must have affected their audiences. In the Preface to the 1907 reprint

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[285] Vernon Lee, letter to Eugene Lee-Hamilton, April 20-21, 1873. Lee, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935: Volume I, 1865-1884*, edited by Amanda Gagel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 123.
[286] Maxwell and Pulham, 2006, p, 157.
[287] Gunn, 1964, p. 61.

of *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), she described how the chance discovery of 'the Italy of the 18th century' became 'the remote lumber room of discarded mysteries and of lurking ghosts' with which she could extract 'romance'.[288] She goes on to explain that this is what Lee saw as a raw material, the items with their suggestions of past times, that she might re-shape and 'transfigure in her, a process Irene Willis Cooper links to Lee's understanding of empathy. In this interpretation, 'feeling into' becomes a form of 'aesthetic responsiveness' which, as Lee would later state in March 1911, 'is an essentially active phenomenon'.[289] When she first encountered the story of Farinelli and saw his painting in the historic music school in Bologna, Lee tried to imagine the voice of a singer whose talents were said to have cured the madness of two kings of Spain, Philip V and Ferdinand VI. In the introduction to the later collection of stories *For Maurice* (1927), Lee identifies what she calls her leitmotiv in 'A Wicked Voice' as '"a silly, secret longing to hear a great singer of the past" which, in the absence of gramophones, was a longing for the unattainable'.[290] An earlier version of this narrative was 'Winthrop's Adventure', later collected in *For Maurice*, which Lee described as 'my only […] ghostly experience, complete with cold hands, dank hair, a thumping heart and eyes one didn't dare raise from the writing table for fear of dark corners'[291] - a distinctly 'uncanny' experience as it relates to what Freud defined as 'what evokes fear and dread.'[292]

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[288] Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1907), quoted in Irene Cooper Willis, 'Introduction', Vernon Lee, *Supernatural Tales* (London: Peter Owen, 2004), pp. 8-9.
[289] Lee, 2018, p. 129.
[290] Lee, *For Maurice* (London: John Lane, 1927), quoted in Irene Cooper Willis, introduction, Lee, 2004, p. 14.
[291] Lee, 2004, p. 15.
[292] Freud, 2003, p. 123.

By the time she came to rewrite 'Winthrop's Adventure' into the form of 'A Wicked Voice', Lee had transformed the singer from the historical Farinelli to fictional proxy that shared in her search for a 'reality of feeling'[293] – a term which echoes the discussions regarding the 'stream of consciousness' articulated by May Sinclair (see Chapter Three), where the nature of the written word attempts to render the lived 'reality' of the individual as seen through their particular consciousness. This 'reality of feeling' enacted in 'A Wicked Voice' is like a dream, but also 'as vivid as my waking thoughts had been vague' (p. 164), and is almost made to sound proto-surrealist, presenting dreams as having a greater sense of reality than everyday living. In this part of the narrative, the present time is transcended and a new reality replaces it - a new reality that is a vision of the past seen in minute detail, not only seen, but heard:

> Little by little I began to perceive sounds; little, sharp, metallic, detached notes, like those of a mandoline; and there was united to them a voice, very low and sweet, almost a whisper, which grew and grew and grew, until the whole place was filled with that exquisite vibrating note, of a strange, exotic, unique quality. (pp. 164-65)

This sound haunts the composer to such an extent that progress on his own composition becomes impossible:

> [...] I continued to be haunted by that voice. My work was interrupted ever and anon by the attempt to catch its imaginary echo; and the heroic harmonies of my Scandinavian legend were strangely interwoven with voluptuous phrases and florid cadences in which I seemed to hear again that same accursed voice. (p. 168)

[293] Lee, 2004, p. 17.

Figure 2. Corrado Giaquinto, Carlo Broschi (Accademia Filarmonica, Bologna).[294]

During a restless night after Magnus has escaped from Venice to the country around the Villa of Mistrà, with the 'blue cones of the Euganean hills closing in the green shimmer of plain outside the window' (p. 175), he comes face-to-face with a scenario in which the singer is about to commit a murder with the sound of his voice:

> During a long phrase on the harpsichord, sharp and tinkling, the singer turned his head towards the dais, and there came a plaintive little sob. But he, instead of stopping, struck a sharp chord; and with a thread of voice so hushed as to be scarcely audible, slid softly into a long *cadenza*. At the same moment he threw his head backwards, and the light fell full upon the handsome, effeminate face, with its ashy pallor and big, black brows, of the singer Zaffirino. At the sight of that face, sensual and sullen, of that smile which was cruel and mocking like a bad woman's, I understood [...]. I understood that I was before an assassin, that he was killing this woman, and killing me also, with his wicked voice. (p. 180)

Whether this scene is real or whether it is a hallucination is left unresolved, as when he regains consciousness the following morning all that Magnus is able to recall is the sense of

[294] Figure 2. Corrado Giaquinto, Carlo Broschi (Accademia Filarmonica, Bologna). Portrait of Farinelli; c. 1755; Painting; Oil on Canvas; International Museum and Library of Music, Bologna; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Carlo_Broschi.jpg; Photograph. [accessed: 5.12.20].

something 'supernatural' (p. 180). The legacy is that now the composer can 'never lay hold of my own inspiration' (p. 181) and is condemned to have his head full of music which he loathes. This is a strange and disconcerting manifestation of the double, where even the sense of self has been usurped. Magnus' earlier dynamic sense of purpose thus becomes undermined, leaving him, in a sense in keeping with the supernatural explorations of 'A Wicked Voice', as a lost soul. In this way we might interpret the story as following the gradual disassociation between the public and private presentations of Magnus's sense of self within his mind, causing an existential crises that can only be given expression through the appearance of a supernatural experience, or what Freud might interpret as the intervention of the conscience:

> By slow degrees a special authority takes shape within the ego; this authority, which is able to confront the rest of the ego, performs the function of self-observation and self-criticism, exercises a kind of psychical censorship, and so becomes what we know as the 'conscience'.[295]

This is similar to Freud's reading of the writings of Hoffmann, where the 'evolution of the sense of self' is dramatised in relation to a confrontation between the self and 'the world outside'.[296] Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson were aware of the hidden areas of the mind in *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (1912), likening the process of investigating the human mind to archaeology:

> Well! Let the excavating engineers come, those who methodically shovel up each clod, and examine and classify every prehistoric kitchen midden of the human mind, and let them dig up that mental region in every direction. If there is anything where we suppose, why, they will, even without our notes and sketches and maps, be found to find it.[297]

[295] Freud, 2003, p. 142.
[296] Freud, 2003, p. 143.
[297] Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, 1912, p. viii-ix.

It is significant that Lee and Anstruther-Thomson consider the 'mental region' an area of the mind capable of being explored in regards to the past as Freud also suggested that the mind can be understood in relation to the past, and notes that the double 'is a creation that belongs to a primitive phase in our mental development'.[298] 'A Wicked Voice' can be read as an archaeological dig into the personal history of Lee's own aesthetic development and an abiding interest in eighteenth-century Italy. *Beauty and Ugliness* also contains, in an admittedly embryonic form, a fictionalised analysis of Lee's need to understand art and aesthetic experience in an intellectual fashion. She does not just want to write about the subject of the singers of the past, but desires to know what they *actually* sounded like and what impact they might have on the ear of the listener.

The stories contained in the *Hauntings* volume represent some of Lee's most discussed fiction, and while each is an independent narrative they share a unity of themes, exploring areas where the interplay between sexuality and the body is linked to an aesthetic awareness. This awareness is usually located not in the past as experienced in history, but in a sense of the past being current in the present moment, and it is through an introduction of the supernatural that this is achieved. As Lee stated in 1911, the experience of art is in fact variable and conditioned by bodily responses which themselves are connected to psychological ones, writing that 'the bodily and mental condition in which I happened to come into the presence of [a] work of art' played a crucial role on her responses to said object. She suggests that this explains 'why certain categories of art and certain artistic personalities may be more or less suited to individual beholders as well as

[298] Freud, 2003, p. 143.

to the same beholder in different moods […].'[299] These fantastic and supernatural narratives offer the reader a means by which a response to past works of art from can fluctuate from moment to moment as different personalities experience them in the context of their own times. These responses are also conditioned by sexuality and national identity, but reveal the kinds of individual material and bodily reactions that Lee believed were key to understanding aesthetic experience. They also indicate the potential for reading female or feminised experience as a constant haunting of the present and the future until such time as changes in society would bring about adequate resolutions regarding the marginalised forces of female identity. These explicitly feminist issues can be seen more completely in the supernatural stories written by Edith Wharton, who was able to give insight into situations where the states of consciousness of individual's who find themselves on the margins is explored – whether they are lowly servants, wives who are kept in a state of ignorance about their husband's business affairs, or the ambiguities of minds cut off from conventional notions of social life. Wharton was a student of Lee, claiming to have carried copies of *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, *Belcaro* and *Euphorion* with her wherever she travelled. Perhaps more significantly their bond as ghostly sisters was linked to Lee's half-brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, who Lee nursed through his illness until he could make an unexpected transformation from bedridden invalid to bicycling poet known for his high spirits. Wharton acknowledged that it was due to his influence that allowed her friendship with Lee to develop and observed , 'I have often wished that the after-death resurrection, if it comes to us, might resemble the recovery of

[299] Lee, 2018, p. 130.

lost youth which made Lee-Hamilton's return to life so exhilarating to all about him'.[300] Such an example could not fail to have a profound effect on Wharton's own view of life, and it is telling that she highlights the return of something lost (in this instance it is youth) with a form of resurrection. As we shall see in the following chapter, although Wharton accepted Lee's intellectual superiority, they were ghostly sisters in that they sought by means of the supernatural to invest their fiction with the capacity to see beyond material circumstances to investigate uncanny states of consciousness which reversed the patriarchal order and opened the imagination to the recovery of that which has been lost.

[300] Wharton, 1934, pp. 130-132

# Chapter Two

# Edith Wharton, Feeling, and the Supernatural

## Background: The Psychology of a writer of Ghost Stories

Edith Wharton was haunted by memories of the ghost stories she read as a child. In the 1870s she was given a book of ghost stories to help her while away from home recovering from typhoid fever, and her reaction was intense. The anecdote has been repeated in numerous places, but it is worth reading the account from her autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934) again:

> During my convalescence, my one prayer was to be allowed to read, and amongst the books given me was one of the detestable 'children's books' which poison the youthful mind when they do not hopelessly weaken it … the volume in question was lent by two playmates, a brother and a sister, who were very 'nicely' brought up, and of whom it was assumed that they would have only 'nice' stories in their possession. To an unimaginative child the tale would have been harmless; but it was a 'robber-story' and with my intense Celtic sense of the supernatural, tales of robbers and ghosts were perilous reading.[301]

That she should choose to equate a 'robber-story' with the supernatural is striking, for it implies that for the young Edith Newbold Jones thought of the supernatural tale as a kind of genre shares commonality with stories about people on the margins of society – such as in the 'Newgate' novel, or even the sensation novels of the 1860s. This juxtaposition between 'robber-stories' and the supernatural tales establishes a connection between two popular genres that both served as literary expressions of escape. They represent not only extreme experiences, but also dramatise issues of dissidence and transgression, both of which were

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[301] Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*; quoted in David Stuart Davies, introduction, Edith Wharton, *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2009), pp. vii-viii.

important qualities of the supernatural that attracted Lee and Sinclair to write of the fantastic and horrifying - the kinds of fiction described by Karl Miller as the important terror fictions written by the ghostly sisterhood. Wharton was at an impressionable age and recovering from a serious illness when she first experienced the illicit thrill of the ghost story, so it is significant that she should mention it in her autobiography, implying the incident bears importance in the development of her character and identity. This became particularly important as Wharton's condition worsened significantly and the possibility of death loomed, circumstances which were linked in her mind to an understanding of supernatural experience:

> […] when I came to myself, it was to enter a world haunted by formless horrors. I had been a naturally fearless child; now I lived in a state of chronic [spelling] fear. Fear of *what*? [italics in the original] I cannot say – and even at the time, I was never able to formulate this terror. It was like some dark, indefinable menace, forever dogging my steps, lurking, and threatening; I was conscious of it wherever I went by day, and at night it made sleep impossible, unless a light and a nurse-maid were in the room.[302]

It is perhaps not uncommon for children to experience such an ambiguous change, the trusting nature of the very young child tempered suddenly by an awareness of their own mortality. In his essay on *The Uncanny* (1919), Sigmund Freud stated that 'in hardly any other sphere has our thinking and feeling changed so little since primitive times or the old been so well preserved, under a thin veneer, as in our relation to death'.[303] Wharton records that the experience became part of her conscious life for a number of years, and stated that right up to the age of twenty-seven or twenty-eight she 'could not sleep in a room with a book containing ghost stories and that I have frequently had to burn books of

[302] Wharton quoted in Davies, introduction,, 2009, p. viii.
[303] Freud, 2003, p. 148.

this kind because it frightened me to know they were downstairs in the library'.[304] This extreme reaction was formative in establishing a link between the physical object of the book and the content of the supernatural. It is the argument of this thesis that by placing the emphasis on the actual printed word bound within the covers of a physical book, Wharton had learnt to externalise her inner feelings of acute anxiety about death, rendering the books themselves as symbols. For example, a story such as 'The Lady's Maid's Bell', which I will go onto to discuss in detail, uses the bell to give a tangible focus to the fear the maid feels about the presence of her ghostly predecessor.

It is surprising that Wharton, whose novels such as *The Age of Innocence* (1920) are widely considered to be about dealing with men and women in social contexts, should have at first had such a shocking formative experience as, on the face of it, her fiction deals with manners and morals and the kinds of experiences that are conditioned by social structures that control conduct within boundaries in certain situations in public life and are accepted to be part of conventional civilised life. It is also important to highlight that Wharton describes her feeling for the supernatural as being 'Celtic'[305], which suggests a perspective different to that which she is most often associated and placing her as an American author writing on European subject, as had been developed by Henry James. The transatlantic experience was certainly something that was part of her background, and furnished an important aspect in her work, such as Malcolm Bradbury writes on Wharton, suggesting

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[304] Wharton, 2009, p. viii.
[305] Wharton quoted in Davies, introduction,, 2009, p. viii.

she 'showed the Jamesian influence by writing "international fiction".[306] Such configurations have obscured the extent to which she acknowledged her 'Celtic' roots, and what she implies about that inheritance as being related to her experience of the ghostly and associated with primitive, or animistic (to borrow Freudian terminology), notions of experience.

Wharton's 'Celtic' heritage can be traced to Major Thomas Jones (c. 1665-1713), who had fought at the Battle of the Boyne, saw military action under the command of the English King William III at the surrender of Limerick, and, through marriage, had inherited land on Long Island, which now makes up part of Jones Beach State Park.[307] One of Wharton's early poems, 'The Constellation's Last Victory', draws upon her empathetic response to the victims of the Irish famine of 1879 (not to be confused with the Great Famines of 1740 and 1845), by imagining the *U.S.S Constellation*, which had left America for Ireland with aid in March 1880, as a 'strong-winged Angel of the Lord'.[308] This poem reveals the extent of her identification with her Celtic roots, and that this was something of importance to her.

Wharton owed her interest in the supernatural to her Irish ancestry, and developed a sense that it had been come to her through her genetic background. In the preface to the collected edition of her supernatural fiction, *Collected Ghost Stories* [first published in

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[306] Malcolm Bradbury, *Dangerous Pilgrimages: Trans-Atlantic Mythologies and The Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 271.
[307] Albert Walker, 'Keeping Up With the Jonses', http://www.jonesnyhistory.com [viewed on 5th June 2020].
[308] Laura Rattray, 'Edith Wharton's Unprivileged Lives', in Jennifer Haytock and Laura Rattray, eds., *The New Edith Wharton Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 116.

1937], she wrote: 'it is in the warm darkness of the prenatal fluid that the faculty dwells with which we apprehend the ghosts we may not be endowed with the gift of seeing.'[309] Through her interests in the supernatural we can see that Wharton felt the need to identify the origins of her anxiety, only willing to suggest that her understanding of the ghostly is connected to a part of the mind which exists before the conscious mind is developed. Wharton thus places an emphasis on what is objectively unknowable; on what can be felt to exist but which cannot be seen, and in doing so explicitly prioritises the 'feeling' of the supernatural. Her choice of words, 'the gift of seeing', hints at a visionary capacity that exists in another dimension, that which might only be accessible should one be 'endowed' with such a 'gift'. These perspectives suggest that Wharton thought of her supernatural fiction as a means of giving expression to what might not otherwise be possible to manifest in other forms, giving a particular focus to branches of literature which allow for the inclusion of the fantastic. As Irene Goldman-Price has stated, Wharton shared an interest in ghost stories with her governess, Anna Catherine Bahlmann (1849-1916), who later became her secretary and female companion[310], again situating her interest in supernatural fiction in childhood and another instance in which the supernatural is related to very early life experiences - in this instance, to a shared sisterly enthusiasm with the mystery of a child's developing awareness of the world, and one which Wharton was reluctant to lose when entering adult life.

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[309] Wharton, *Ghosts* (New York: D. Appleton-Company, 1937), . Her contemporary M. R. James, whom Wharton admired, had published *The Collected Ghost Stories of M. R. James* in 1931, which included a preface. James wrote: 'In accordance with a fashion which has recently become common, I am issuing my four volumes of ghost stories under one cover', M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2013), p. 418. The publication of Wharton's ghost stories in one volume in 1937 was probably a response to the same fashion.

[310] Irene Goldman-Price, ed., *Dear Governess: The Letters of Edith Wharton to Anna Bahlmann* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 141.

Wharton was born in 1862 only six years after Sigmund Freud (1856), and they can both be viewed as belonging to the same highly-cultured world of the *belle epoque* which existed in Western countries before the First World War, yet in each there is an acute sense of hidden tensions bubbling under an urbane surface. Darryl Jones points out that, 'Freudianism, lest we forget, was itself the product of (and interpretation of, and response to) the same Victorian world that produced M. R. James'.[311] This was equally true of Wharton, who admired the ghost stories of M. R. James (also born in 1862). As we have seen, Wharton tries to identify these tensions when she wants to discuss what she understands as the supernatural as existing from the womb, or from her Celtic ancestry. Her traumatic childhood illness is the moment when these anxieties seem to take shape in her conscious mind; the moment that can be clearly identified when her personal experience and her imaginative development consolidated into a consciousness of something that cannot easily be categorised. Nicholas Royle has suggested that 'a feeling of helplessness' can be related to 'the feeling of uncanniness': 'Literature can be dangerous, destablilizing, engulfing. It can disturb our sense of who we are, of what "life" is, of what words are.'[312] These observations relate to the experiences that Wharton identified in *A Backward Glance* where a sense of helplessness felt when facing a serious illness might well have given her a feeling for what we might understand as the uncanny. Furthermore, Wharton's subsequent experience of an extreme reaction to the physical existence of books of ghost stories might well be considered a manifestation of her unconscious awareness that literature itself can have a disturbing effect. This sense of the ability of literature to

[311] Darryl Jones, introduction, M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2013), p. xxi.
[312] Nicholas Royle, 'The Uncanny in Literature', in Ivan Ward, ed., *The Uncanny: A Century* (London: Freud Museum, 2019), p. 18.

evoke, in Royle's words, 'what is deeply troubling and unexpected, strangely uncomfortable, weirdly powerful and haunting' is what she felt about her own experience.[313] This makes the case that seeing Wharton's 'fear' of ghost stories might well be the equivalent of Freud's reading of the works of E. T. A. Hoffman, which he noted had a 'peculiar emotional effect'.[314] This effect is something that Royle suggests is to be found in literature, but which includes what is uncanny in life as well:

> The sense of a literary uncanny or uncanny literarity that is *already* strangely within, yet uncontainable, is intimated in his [Freud's] description of 'the uncanny in literature' as something *different* from 'the uncanny in real life' that nonetheless *contains* all of 'the uncanny in real life' and 'something more besides.'[315]

This is an intriguing concept as it gives special status to the conscious product of the human mind – literature. It is as if, Freud suggests, the process of bringing a dramatisation of the uncanny into being in a literary text also creates a new level of the uncanny that adds to what is experienced in life. Similarly, Sinclair's fiction also expresses this notion of heightened experience through the uncanny, although the process becomes self-conscious and perhaps limits the effectiveness that Freud identifies in the works of E. T. A. Hoffman, which did not aim to be uncanny. Wharton discusses her notion of the supernatural in a very similar way to which Freud discusses the uncanny, considering it an attempt to escape from a conventional contextualisation of her awareness of the supernatural and place her emphasis on what is '*already* strangely within'. As Royle suggests, Freud seems to be at pains to stress how there is a relationship between this something that is 'within' and the need to 'contain' it. Wharton claimed in her preface to her volume *Ghosts* that, whilst she

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[313] Royle, 2019, p. 18.
[314] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 217-256 (p. 227).
[315] Royle, 2019, p. 18. [Italics in the original].

admitted to being 'afraid' of ghosts, she did not actually believe that they existed.[316] In the light of Freud's discussion of the uncanny, it can be interpreted that Wharton's assertion that she was 'afraid' of ghosts is also an attempt to express her need to contain what she claims she does not believe in, carried out through the burning of books, which can be said to be an extreme example of this form of containment - as if she is haunted by the supernatural because she lacks an adequate means of suppressing it. This poses the question what it is exactly that Wharton might be suppressing. To accept her own description, it is not something that is conscious, but that which is embedded deeply in the individual, and perhaps in the culture. Darryl Jones has suggested that Sigmund Freud was 'the last, and the greatest, of all writers of Victorian Gothic', and Wharton taps into the same legacy.[317] Wharton embraces the Gothic and supernatural to give voice to her own sense of suppressed horror at the way in which patriarchal society limits the lives of women, only giving them opportunities to act that conform to expectations. It was the fantastic elements of the ghost story provided her with a means to question and destabilise established order and to draw upon her awareness of the power of the uncanny.

[316] Wharton, 1937. See the New York Review of Books edition, Edith Wharton, *Ghosts* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2021). .
[317] Darryl Jones, 2013, p. xxi. See Carol Singeley's essay 'Gothic Borrowings and Innovations in Edith Wharton's "A Bottle of Perrier', in *New Critical Essays*, ed Bendixen.

**Wharton and Lee: Ghostly sisters**

Wharton's response to the supernatural is linked to her reading of ghost stories by other authors, and to the physical possession of books of ghost stories. The Victorian age was rich in the literature of the supernatural and included works by her predecessors in the nineteenth century, such as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Mrs. Oliphant, and of her contemporaries we know that she was impressed by the works of M. R. James and Walter de la Mare.[318] Her close association with Henry James is well-documented, and the influence of his *The Turn of the Screw*, which she referred to in a preface to her collected edition of ghost stories in 1937. Among her other personal contacts was her ghostly sister, Vernon Lee. R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis date Wharton and Lee's first meeting to the spring of 1894, and Peter Gunn states that sometime before 1896 Wharton had 'visited Vernon Lee with a letter of introduction from [the French writer] Paul Bourget'. [319] According to Lewis & Lewis, Wharton was at the time 'passing through what later parlance would call a severe crisis of identity.' This crisis was a result of the challenges she faced regarding the 'emotional and sexual inadequacy of her marriage' combined with meeting figures like Lee, who were already established authors in areas where she aspired to follow.[320] Percy Lubbock (1879-1965), the critic and biographer who edited *The Letters of Henry James* (1920), records a valuable account of one of their meetings:

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[318] David Stuart Davies, introduction, 2009, p. vii.

[319] R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, eds., *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1988), pp. 28, 35. Wharton, Edith, *My Dear Governess: The Letters of Edith Wharton to Anna Bahlmann*, edited by Irene Goldman-Price (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 123.
Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: O.U.P., 1964), p. 162.

[320] Lewis and Lewis, 1988, p. 28.

> There was no hurrying of Vernon Lee while her inexhaustible mind was at work, absorbing and straining and philosophizing an impression of beauty, were it the twentieth time she stood in that garden and searched its appeal; no experience, be it ever so familiar, was to be dismissed as finished and settled in the past, its history was always in the making. So there was Edith, bright and alert, brisk on her feet after a winged glance; and beside her Vernon Lee, tall and angular Vestal in her stiff collar and drab coat, fixed in rumination, absorbed and unheeding, her rugged face working in the toil and labour of her burrowing thought. She pondered, she reconnoitred as she talked; she wound her way through suggestions, sensation, speculation – she threaded a labyrinth, a branching forest of shadowy forms. […] It all took time, but it was worth while to wait for her. While she talked on, with her pungent and guttural deliberation, a scene unrolled, brilliantly peopled and displayed – a drama was evolved out of all the admonitions, curious and lovely, grand and grotesque, of the genius of this place and this hour. Who will say, listening to Vernon Lee, that a thing of beauty is ever finished, or an hour of time accomplished. She knew better[…]. Most surprising, most interesting, most exasperating of women, in her power and her humour, her tenacity and her perversity – Vernon Lee holds her ground, to the eyes of memory, in the twinkling ilex-shade of that old garden, as she held it in gnarled and seasoned determination to the end, when her hour was achieved at length. What a figure! Edith admired her, but scarce knew how to treat her. It was impossible to control or to civilize Vernon Lee.[321]

Lubbock paints a picture of a young Wharton in awe of Lee – whom he inaccurately describes as tall (she was in fact short of stature). Wharton was uncertain about how to respond to Lee; at this time in her life she didn't have the experience to be able to deal with someone who challenged the conventions of a world from which she had yet to escape. In fact, we should remember that Lee was only six years her senior, though she had already been a published author since 1880, producing more than ten books – and Wharton was an enthusiastic admirer of her work, claiming to have carried copies of her some of her books with her during her travels. Lubbock suggests that it was 'impossible to control or civilize Vernon Lee'[322], curious terms with which to describe someone, and we cannot know whether they correspond to Wharton's own thoughts, but it does give us a sense of the

[321] Percy Lubbock, *A Portrait of Edith Wharton* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948), pp. 112-113.
[322] Lubbock, 1948, p. 113.

intimidation Lubbock implies that male contemporaries felt in their dealings with her, or it may be that he is merely amplifying Henry James's own assessment that she was dangerous.[323] Nonetheless, it is significant that those among Wharton's circle thought that Lee was someone who did not fit in with their idea of civilized behaviour. Whatever the precise meaning of Lubbock's 'civilize' in this statement, it is a strange term to use in regard to someone who was very highly cultured by the standards of her day, so the suspicion remains that this was a negative reference to Lee's sexuality and to the extent of her learning. Lee's knowledge of Italian culture of the eighteenth century, for example, would imply a highly civilised kind of mind, and Wharton respected her learning. It does seem that what is being expressed here is the kind of disparaging comment used against women intellectuals by men who regards themselves as highly cultured, a topic that Lee had developed in her fantastic stories, such as 'Oke of Okehurst'. The fact that Lubbock shows recourse to the idea of controlling such women reflects a cultural anxiety within the patriarchy, although this call that Lee be 'controlled' does echo Wharton's own responses to ghost tales and her need to 'contain' them. This suggests that any form of narrative that allows the imaginative world to transcend expected social norms has the potential to be radical by implication, unleashing forces that challenge conventional society. Wharton was the product of this kind of society, but had learnt from experience that it was very difficult for women to find happiness if they simply followed the rules. Of course, in a way, she was conflicted, as she had been brought up to fit into such an order.

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[323] Henry James had written, as previously stated, that Lee was 'as dangerous and uncanny as she is intelligent' in a letter to his brother William James on 20th January 1893, as quoted in Amanda Gagel, introduction, *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935, Volume I, 1865-1884* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. xiv. See Maxwell, 1997, p. 268.

As has been suggested, these formulations about Lee having some element in her that inspired distrust from men could be located in their prejudice against her lesbian identity. If so, how do we account for Wharton's response? In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton writes that Lee is 'the friend whose kindness made [the writing of *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*] possible' and 'the first highly-cultivated and brilliant woman I had ever known.'[324] Lee had arranged for Wharton to visit many private villas and gardens in researching the book in 1903, and she also critiqued most of Wharton's writing about Italy. However, it is the insistence that Lee was both 'highly-cultivated' and 'brilliant' that marks out Wharton's admiration as something personal to her. As we have seen, Lubbock was at pains to question Lee's cultured reputation and implied that she lacked some sense of behaving according to social conventions.[325] In contrast, Wharton praised her with Lee talk as having 'had the opalescent play of a northerly sky'.[326] At the time of their first meeting, Wharton wrote (April 8th [1894]) from Florence to Anna Bahlmann: 'I have made the acquaintance of "Vernon Lee," & shall have many interesting things to tell you about her when we meet'.[327] What these interesting things may have been we do not know, but it is testimony to the impact that Lee had made on her that Wharton should express herself with such apparent enthusiasm. Whether Wharton's observation of Lee included the fact that, as Shari Benstock has noted, she 'projected a male persona' is open to conjecture, as is what, if anything, that might have meant to her sexually.[328] Benstock asserts 'in her adult life, Edith had only one lesbian friend, Vernon Lee, and she either did not recognise Lee's sexuality or

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[324] Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), p.129-132 .
[325] Peter Gunn notes that Lee was given to 'expressing her views with great force and volubility on any occasion that arose, however inopportune'. Gunn, 1964, p. 134.
[326] Wharton, 1993, p. 133.
[327] Wharton, Edith, *My Dear Governess: The Letters of Edith Wharton to Anna Bahlmann*, edited by Irene Goldman-Price (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 124.
[328] Shari Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* (New York: Scribner's, 1994), p. 99.

turned a blind eye to it.'[329] In a gloss on this comment, Jenni Dyman suggests that Wharton was 'a still sexually naïve thirty-two years old'.[330] These formulations rightly avoid simplistic assessments where there is very little evidence, but there is nonetheless a sense in which the discussion of Wharton's sexuality may be evasive. Whilst Wharton may have had a sheltered upbringing in matters relating to sex, it is hard to imagine that she could be entirely ignorant regarding Lee's sexuality, and was perhaps curious to know more about what she was challenged by. Publicly, Wharton is known in later life to have exhibited a wariness, if not a horror, of lesbianism – and she was notably reticent about the subject. Most of this evidence, as presented by Benstock in *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, relates to Natalie Clifford Barney's circle in Paris. Barney (1876-1972) was an American writer[331] and Benstock refers to Barney's open lesbianism as 'too pubic for Edith Wharton'. R. W. B. Lewis goes further stating that 'Edith looked upon … Barney as 'something – appalling'.[332] It is clear that Wharton did not, by this later stage, feel much tolerance for open expressions of lesbianism, but perhaps her hostility betrayed some personal doubt and a rejection of what made her feel awkward. There is a similarity with her reaction to ghost stories when a child, the desire to destroy that which she could not control. Beyond the subject of sexual orientation is the importance that Lee was an established female writer, and it was of great significance to Wharton to receive personal encouragement from her. In relation to the formation of the ghostly sisterhood, their friendship was extremely potent. Lee's leading example as a writer of supernatural fiction

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[329] Benstock, 1994, p. 101.

[330] Jenni Dyman, *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 63.

[331] See Diana Souhami, *Wild Girls: Paris, Sappho, and Art: The Lives and Loves of Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

[332] Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 87. R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 433-434.

with a critical edge must have impressed the young Wharton at a time when she was struggling to have confidence she could establish a literary career.

Henry James's reference to Lee as 'a tiger-cat' previously mentioned was in response to an unfavourable description she had made of him in a story called 'Lady Tal', published in *Vanitas* (1892).[333] Recent research suggests that Lee may have been enacting revenge for the inclusion of a portrait of her and her family in James's 1886 novel *The Princess Casamassima*,[334] but whether this episode had much or any influence on Wharton or not is difficult to assess. It is, nonetheless, worth stressing that Henry James was quite clear when warning his brother William about Lee, advising him that he should not 'throw yourself into her arms' for reasons that he suggests go beyond her caricature of him in 'Lady Tal'. These unspecified reasons include the observation that she is 'uncanny', and yet at the same time he notes that her conversation is 'superior altogether'.[335] Wharton was also impressed by her conversation with Lee, but without the critical attitude adopted by James. It can be questioned what it was that led James to use the word 'uncanny' in this context, and it is quite possible that it may have been something that Wharton also observed, even if she did not express this herself in public. In fact, William James responded to his brother's remark about Lee by complaining that she had 'a strangely *objective* way of taking human beings.'[336] These testimonies suggest something that the American brothers found to be 'problematic'' about Lee, but they don't make it clear what they find so troubling. What they do accuse her of is a want of tact, a lack of sensitivity to an unspoken code of conduct in

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[333] Quoted in Gagel, 2017, p. xiv.
[334] See Maxwell, 1997, p. 268.
[335] Quoted in Gagel, 2017, p. xiv.
[336] Quoted in Gunn, 1964, p. 139. [Italics in the original]

their friendship. The use of the term 'uncanny' here is a reminder that Freud states that the uncanny 'is that species of the frightening which goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar'.[337] It is as if Henry James was unnerved by Lee's attempts to, as he saw it, exploit his friendship for the purposes of art – something that James was not above doing in his own fiction. As we have already noted, James's other concern with Lee was that he felt she had 'a great second-rate element in her first-rateness'.[338] It is difficult not to suspect that there is a degree of misogyny in comments of this kind with their implied sense of a hierarchy of relative values. Wharton also expressed reservations about Lee's style, and it is noticeable that her expression of this fact echoes the specific concern expressed by Henry James: 'I read Vernon Lee's article on Ravenna ['Ravenna and her Ghosts', first published in 1907] with great interest, but thought it rather a pot-boiler'.[339] It is difficult to assess how much she may have been influenced by the prejudice of James and members of his circle, and it is possible that she arrived at a similar assessment without being aware of this negative comment. Nonetheless, while it was the case that Lee represented a challenge to Wharton as she developed as a writer and a person, she was an important figure in the formation of her literary identity as the writer of supernatural fiction, and as someone interested in house and garden design[340]

Wharton's gender identity later in life seems to relate to the notion of herself as being different from other women of the time; of being both independent from and equal to men. Louis Auchincloss claims that it was said of Wharton that she and Theodore Roosevelt

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[337] Freud, 'The Uncanny', 2003, p. 124.
[338] Quoted in Gagel, 2017, p. xiv.
[339] Wharton, *My Dear Governess: The Letters of Edith Wharton to Anna Bahlmann*, 2012, p. 140.
[340] Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Pimlico, 2013), pp. 97-100.

'were both "self-made men", and that this pleased her.[341] I would argue that this demonstrates that Wharton saw herself as being someone who had succeeded in establishing an authorial identity enabling her to present herself to the world as a 'man of letters' to rival Henry James and other male authors. Shafquat Towheed writes that 'Edith Wharton craved visible success in everything she did; and much more often than not, she was spectacularly successful.'[342] This side of Wharton's personality reveals the materialism of her public face, which was demonstrated by a lifestyle that included, as Towheed has shown, 'maintaining two houses, both with substantial gardens, multiple cars, a plethora of servants (driver, secretary, gardener, maids), any number of guests, charitable causes, and for far too long, a mentally unstable, physically ill and estranged husband'.[343] This degree to which Wharton indulged in, what Thorstein Veblen termed, 'conspicuous consumption' suggests a reaction to the vulnerability that she had experienced as a child, the extent that she surrounded herself with material possessions acting as a defence against her anxiety about her own mortality and insecurity as a writer. It was also an expression of her need to break free from the conventional world that had sought to deny her existence as an individual by making her just an appendage of the successful men of her time, haunted by the life she might have led if she had not been fortunate to develop the successful career that she did.

[341] Louis Achincloss, *Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 9.
[342] Shafquat Towheed, ed., *The Correspondence of Edith Wharton and Macmillan, 1901-1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 2.
[343] Towheed, 2007, p. 2.

**Houses, Gardens and Impressions: Reality and Art**

Wharton was most obviously and directly influenced by Lee when she was writing about houses and gardens, establishing for herself a reputation as a fashionable designer. Her first published text, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), written in conjunction with an architect called Ogden Codman, Jr (1865-1951), was of such a kind, what Towheed describes as 'effectively a style guide for the more aesthetically and culturally insecure members of America's rapidly expanding *nouveau riche*'.[344] Wharton was appalled at the way the newly rich were demonstrating their wealth in Newport, Rhode Island, and in using the access that she had to European standards of architecture and interior design she determined to educate them in what she viewed as the superior culture of the old world. This echoes Lee's veneration of the songs of the eighteenth century and her rejection of what she felt were cruder substitutes of the late nineteenth century (see my discussion of 'A Wicked Voice' in the previous chapter). Wharton had a house called The Mount built in Lennox, Massachusetts, in 1901, which she used to showcase her ideas. The house was based on an English country estate, Belton House in Lincolnshire, which it was believed had been designed by Sir Christopher Wren.[345] Wharton later wrote in *A Backward Glance* that 'The Mount was my first real home, and although it is nearly 20 years since I last saw it (for I was too happy there ever to want to visit it as a stranger) its blessed influence still lives

[344] Towheed, 2007, p. 6.
[345] This view is now challenged. See Nigel Nicolson, *Great Houses of Britain* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), p. 147. Nigel Nicolson was the son of Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West, who had also combined literature with an interest in garden design at Sissinghurst Castle in Sussex.

with me.'[346] It is worth pointing out that she refers back to The Mount as a place that can be regarded as still haunting her, although in a positive way; Wharton maintained a habit of glancing backwards throughout her life, and these glances seem to have manifested themselves as self-hauntings not unlike those experienced by the protagonist of James's 'The Jolly Corner'. It is as if Wharton cultivated the feeling of particular past moments within her consciousness, often in relation to specific places with which she had been associated, as a source of positive female energy arising from a domestic space. It is also significant that she expresses the desire not to revisit the house after she had left it, perhaps indicating a fear of disrupting a sense of security that she associated with her happiness when living there, realising that the lost past cannot be made real again in revisiting. These are important considerations as they demonstrate a tendency in Wharton to invest places with a meaning that transcends the materiality of living in a certain place at a certain time. Instead, she invests her memories with a supernatural, or uncanny, feeling. The sense of being in one place but thinking of another one, especially of a place as it used to be, is not of course unique to Wharton. It is the common experience of many people, but whereas it is usually limited to the experience of nostalgia, in Wharton it feels as though she desires to suggest the living presence she harbours inside her is an influence at the present moment, haunting that moment as well as having the ability to haunt future time as well.

She followed up the construction of The Mount with a book which more clearly demonstrates her association with Vernon Lee, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* published in

[346] Wharton, 1934, p. 125

1905. Writing to Sara Norton in 1903, she noted, 'Miss Paget (Vernon Lee) has such a prodigious list of villas for me to see near here, & is taking so much trouble to arrange expeditions for us, that I think we shall have to stay here longer than I expected'.[347] *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* demonstrates both Wharton's interest in aesthetic issues through an interest in design and her understanding of psychology and perception in ways that link her with both Lee and Sinclair. Her most sophisticated responses to these issues of feeling find expression in her supernatural fiction, and, while these early texts are concerned with aesthetic tastes, there is a relationship between consciousness of design and material construction which has implications for the way in which she configured her relationship with the experience of the world as embodied through objects. Benjamin Morgan points out that 'within late nineteenth-century portrayals of intense aesthetic experience, it is not uncommon to encounter [...] transformed affective relationships to a world of things.'[348] It is important in this respect that such an influential writer as Walter Pater, as Morgan states, 'locates thinking itself in the world of "touch and sight".'[349] Lee also refers to this sense by which the aesthetic experience is linked to states of consciousness, but she maintains that such experience is one of observation as much as participation, noting that extreme emotion can temporarily come between the observer and the appreciation of the object, but the key is that consciousness of the self is fundamental to aesthetic understanding and appreciation:

> For years all my psychic life has been [...] accompanied by consciousness of itself: only logical thought, work, interested conversation and states of extreme emotion

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[347] Lewis and Lewis, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, 1988, p. 80.
[348] Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 134.
[349] Morgan, 2017, p. 153. The reference here is to the apparently autobiographical 'The Child in the House' in Walter Pater, *Miscellaneous Studies: A Series of Essays*, ed. Charles Lancelot Shadwell (London: Macmillan, 1895).

> suppress the spectator, whom I carry within myself. The greatest aesthetic enjoyment, always very calm in my case, is accompanied, […], by a constant consciousness of my condition.[350]

Wharton's appreciation of domestic space is related to these ideas of consciousness, and it is significant that she described 'a woman's nature' as 'a great house full of rooms'.[351] Wharton had an acute sense of the way in which interior spaces could reflect and influence people, making such an observation in one of her ghost stories and indicating how important they are in relation to the evolution of her ideas. There is, in fact, less of a difference between her supernatural fiction and her major novels than one might expect. In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), she expressed the relationship between the materiality of the domestic environment with the state of mind of the individual:

> There was something about the luxury of the Welland house and the density of the Welland atmosphere, so charged with minute observances and exactions, that always stole into his system like a narcotic. The heavy carpets, the watchful servants, the perpetually reminding tick of disciplined clocks, the perpetually renewed stack of cards and invitations on the hall table, the whole chain of tyrannical trifles binding one hour to the next, and each member of the household to all the others, made any less systematized and affluent existence seem unreal and precarious.[352]

Her description of the Welland house is of an atmosphere that controls individual consciousness with a blanket of small details that serve to assure that person that the maintenance of the prevailing system is reassuring and protective, and yet the maintenance of such a regime is 'tyrannical' and asserts power through inducing a drug-like effect. There

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[350] Vernon Lee, 'Aesthetic Responsiveness: Its Variations and Accompaniments – Extracts from Vernon Lee's Gallery Diaries, 1901-4', *The Psychology of an Art Writer* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018), pp. 46-131 (p. 115).

[351] Wharton, 'The Fullness of Life', in *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2009), p. 162. It is significant that this observation comes from early in her career – in fact, it is from her second published short story, *Scribner's Magazine*, December 1893.

[352] Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (London: Constable, 1960), p. 190.

is something decidedly uncanny in such a description. In this case, Wharton is stressing the repressive atmosphere of an affluent New York home of the 1870s where the ticking clock exerts a regimented sense of order based on maintaining a measured memory of the past. This atmosphere can be said to be haunted not by a ghost or ghosts as manifestations of deceased individuals, but by an abstract, non-personal presence. Time is presented as moving forward in the present moment only in a manner that immediately recalls a continuity with a repeated cycle of actions, signified by the accumulation of visiting cards and invitations described as being 'perpetually renewed'. The repetition is symptomatic of a society that has reached a point of inertia, where conventions have become more important than the life of individuals. This ambiguous atmosphere, where it appears that impersonal forces impose on the living, creates the feeling of the supernatural. As this occurs within a novel concerned with the workings of society, it demonstrates how closely related Wharton's social novels are to her supernatural stories. This indicates the kind of nuanced uncanniness that Jack Sullivan suggested is present in her ghost fiction - a 'sharply felt sensation of supernatural dread' - might also be found all her fiction.[353] However, as she stated in *A Backward Glance*, in response to the idea that American magazines had one eye on the imagined control of morality governed by conservatively-minded representatives of the Bible belt of the U.S.A., Wharton saw her role as an author to be one who would 'never sacrifice my literary conscience to [the] ghostly censor'.[354] This is another instance where she seems to feel haunted or has recourse to the imagery of the haunting, here referring to a harmful influence that she sees as being best expressed as a

[353] Jack Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978), p. 199.
[354] Wharton, 1934, p. 139.

disembodied presence; a force that exerts influence, but which is absent as a direct material participation in the conduct of her life. Wharton's defiance of this ghostly presence is an acknowledgment of her awareness of the impact of forces outside the self to construct, or to thwart, the fulfilment of identity. The strength of her supernatural fiction is that it provides an examination of these forces, focusing on her experiences as a woman and giving her supernatural fiction an edge, a basis from which the fantastic can be a method with which to examine and challenge conventional representations of women's lives.

In the discussion that follows I have selected three stories that highlight the tensions between feeling and material space, best exemplifying the ways in which Wharton explores female consciousness in her supernatural fiction and suggests that the ghostly is a means by which to engage with lives that are restricted. By constructing her narratives through uncanny situations, Wharton is capable of breaking through the oppressive reality of convention that are no more real than the chains which society has built into the minds of individuals to keep repeating the forms of the past. Each of these stories exemplifies the ways the writers of the ghostly sisterhood challenged readers to re-think female experiences. Lee had established a precedent by showing how the supernatural tale could be the means of applying intellectual concerns about identity and states of consciousness to the lives of women in society in her *Fantastic Tales*. Sinclair would arguably take this method on another stage by using her sense of the uncanny to unlock the human mind to explore areas of consciousness that were beyond the limits of conventional experience. The three stories which I investigate were among the 11 selected by Wharton for inclusion in *Ghosts* (1937).

**'The Lady's Maid's Bell': Limited Perspectives and the Disruptive Uncanny**

'The Lady's Maid's Bell', first published in *Scribner's Magazine* in November 1902, is immediately remarkable for its depiction of a kind of life that contrasts with the view of Wharton as a writer from a privileged class of New York society, written from the point of view of a female servant.[355] The opening paragraph displays Wharton's understanding of those whose lives are less fortunate than her own, and it might be claimed that her insight also reveals empathy for the condition of women in general, as people controlled by patriarchal conventions. The story's title places the action in the world of domestic service, one of the main forms of employment open to young women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first-person narrator has been ill and is increasingly desperate because without employment 'most of my money was gone' (p. 3).[356] She is also compelled to 'hanging about the employment agencies, and answering any advertisement that looked any way respectable' (p. 3). This gives emphasis to the precariousness of such a life in the period before state support was available. It is made clear that Alice Hartley, the narrator, is from England and has been brought out to the United States for the opportunity of work, another symptom of the insecurity women faced. The upper and upper-middle classes of this time required servants in order to maintain their leisurely lifestyles of relative leisure, but the status of the working classes they employed was often that of drudgery, carrying out their duties in the background of the homes to which they were employed –living in attic rooms, eating in the kitchen below the stairs, and ascending and

[355] 'The Lady's Maid's Bell', in Edith Wharton, *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2009), pp. 3-21.
[356] All page numbers refer to *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2009).

descending separate, hidden corridors to answer calls from the family they served. The fact that they were employed not to be seen except when needed means that they were often little more than ghosts who haunted the remote areas of the property. Women have often been regarded as having their existence denied to them in patriarchal society, and in the function of domestic service this meant that they were largely.

Significantly, the illness that Hartley has suffered from is typhoid, the same disease that Wharton had experienced in her youth – and which coincided with her anxiety about ghost stories. Illness or infirmity is presented in the story as one of its themes, and it is suggested by an old contact of Hartley's that she should take up the post of lady's maid to 'a Mrs Brympton, a youngish lady, but something of an invalid' who spends her entire time away from the town 'at her country-place on the Hudson' (p. 3). This means that Hartley's illness is doubled by her employer, Mrs. Brympton, whose illness does not cause the same level of potential distress as Hartley's, who needs to appear healthy in order to hold down a employment. Wharton emphasises in the words of Mrs. Railton, Mrs Brympton's aunt, who knows something of the narrator's background, that: 'the house is big and gloomy; my niece is nervous, vapourish' (p. 3). This juxtaposition of the house with the emotional state of the principal inhabitant is characteristic of Wharton's understanding of the interactions between a place and the individual that inhabits it, stressing the typical 'haunted house' motif in a tale of terror presented as being physically isolated from the world. Added to this is the suggestion of the instability of the house's mistress, seemingly confirming the stereotype of the woman who is unable to perform her role as mother that was perpetuated by the medical profession. Jane Wood writes that women in late Victorian

society were 'regularly warned by socio-medical commentators in journals and periodicals that they were doubly disadvantaged since they courted nervous illness if they resisted their biological destiny of marriage and motherhood'.[357] The decidedly off-hand manner in which Mrs Railton suggests that not all is well in the domestic circumstances – 'her husband – well, he's generally away; and the two children are dead' (p. 3) - is telling, subtly hinting that the marriage is not successful and the death of the children fulfils the circumstances conventionally expected for the nervous wife, further hinting that Mrs. Brympton's delicate health will rule out the possibility of having further children. Hartley feels that there is more to this Mrs. Brympton's circumstances than has been related to her, but is not in a position to interpret the situation – getting the distinct impression she should avoid the husband if he should appear – and as a maid who has been ill and is in desperate need of money, she is in no position to ask further questions and soon departs to take up the post. Indeed Hartley's isolation is enhanced by an innate desire not to ask the other servants about her master and mistress - an attitude stressed with the assertion that Hartley is 'not being one to ask questions' (p. 5), and later declaring 'At any rate, I made up my mind to ask no more questions' (p.6). This suggests that she has decided to be discreet in her interactions with the staff and her superiors, perhaps as a symptom of a her job insecurity and a desire not to appear as one who gossips for fear that she will not be trusted and could be put in difficult circumstances that may lead to the loss of employment.

However, this reluctance to ask questions is soon challenged when she starts to observe a number of 'queer' (p. 6) circumstances about the house. The housemaid who

[357] Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2001), p. 163.

shows her to her room apologises about not bringing any light, resulting in making the corridor in the accommodation part of the servant's wing especially dark and obscure. Then the figure of 'a thin woman with a white face, and a darkish stuff gown and apron' is noticed in a doorway by the narrator, but not, it seems, by the housemaid (p. 5). When the housemaid complains that the door opposite to the room that is to be Hartley's has been left open, the narrator is unable to avoid asking questions about who occupies the rooms - questions which are promptly evaded: '"That's nobody's room. It's empty, I mean, and the door hadn't ought to be open"' (p. 5). There is an atmosphere that Wharton creates which resembles the familiar ghost story, with a sense of mystery and a location that is isolated. The opening and closing of doors and the symbolic implication of shut spaces as being restricting and places of hidden truth are handled with sophistication by the Wharton, allowing the tale to convey something that is beyond its realism, leaving the unexpressed deeply implied. If Hartley's perspectives are limited, then so is her social position as a domestic servant.

Hartley's limitations as a narrator are also revealed through the presentation of her conscious thoughts. On speculating that the person seen in the corridor is a nurse, she impetuously responds to this notion in a way that implies a mind inclination to rationalise situations which are found outside her knowledge, based on supposed probability:

> If Mrs Brympton was an invalid it was likely enough she had a nurse. The idea annoyed me, I own, for they're not always the easiest to get on with, and if I'd known, I shouldn't have taken the place. (p. 5)

In this respect the narrative recalls Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, the reader of 'The Lady's Maid's Bell' being placed in a similar position in having to read the text outside the

narrow view offered by the apparently artless first person presentation and speculating on whether the tale is reliable. This stresses the limitation of the Hartley's point of view and the reliance the reader has in the soundness of the narrator's perspective in order to interpret the true nature of the situation. Another instance of this is provided by the way in which Hartley assumes that her mistress intends to commit suicide by an overdose of drugs, only to find that the prescription is for lime-water (p. 13). The psychological state of mind of the lady's maid is shown to be as susceptible to impressions which appear to be romantic in origin, similar to the governess in James's *The Turn of the Screw*, recalling the critique of impressionistic interpretations that Lee makes in the stories in *Hauntings*.

Hartley, we are told, begins working as a lady's maid for Mrs. Brympton, who has previously employed Emma Saxon in the same capacity. The cook, Mrs. Blinder, comments that Mrs, Brymton was especially fond of Emma, She is also told that 'My mistress loved [her] like a sister' (p. 7). Hartley finds herself responding sympathetically to her mistress, declaring that 'when she smiled I felt there was nothing I wouldn't do for her' (p. 5). These feelings of sympathy and devotion are constructed almost instantaneously in her mind, and are not the product of long association and knowledge producing affection and respect, once again leaving us with the sense Hartley is very impressionable and inclined to accept people at face value. There is also the possibility that her desire to please and to make herself a valued employee condition her attitudes, adding a further class dynamic to Wharton's narrative. In light of the revelation that Mrs. Brympton had formed a close relationship with her most predecessor, Hartley sees that she has an opportunity to install herself in a similar high regard, but is also haunted by the fear that she shall be found less

suitable. The post of lady's maid had been occupied by a number of others prior to Emma Saxton, all of whom had left in mysterious circumstances, making it likely that she would feel some insecurity in the role, and be on the lookout for explanations for why this should have happened.

Hartley's response to the master of the house is conditioned by what she observes among the other servants: 'a change passed over the whole household. It was plain that nobody loved him below stairs' (p. 7). When Hartley is first introduced to her new master, she describes him in unflattering terms and condemns him with an already established mistrust towards men in power: 'the kind of man a young simpleton might have thought handsome, and would have been like to pay dear for thinking it' (p. 8). Her mental preoccupation is with his masculinity, and she appears to pass moral judgment based on, as she claims, previous experiences of masters in other households. There is doubt whether she is disappointed or relieved when he carries on a conversation with his wife and fully ignores her presence, either blaming or taking comfort from the idea she is perhaps not as attractive to men due to her illness with typhoid. This ambiguity is repeated in the narrative, as the reader is left to wonder how much of the story presented can be trusted, as Hartley displays a want to turn to moral judgments as a cover for her own feelings of inadequacy. Her favourable feelings towards Mr Ranford, the neighbour who shares books with Mrs. Brympton during the winter months, is loaded with her own preconceptions, describing him as 'melancholy-looking' and, more revealingly, that his smile is 'like the first warm day of spring' (p. 8). This is an expression that betrays her own feelings, rather than an objective assessment of his personality, and for all of Hartley's reluctance to question

the other servants, her only authority for this attitude is that 'the servants all liked him' (p. 8). In contrast she says of Mr Brympton:

> The servants said very little about their master; but from what they let drop I could see it had been an unhappy match from the beginning. Mr Brympton was coarse, loud and pleasure-loving; my mistress quiet, retiring, and perhaps a trifle cold. (p. 9).

By this early stage of Hartley's employment she has taken sides in what she perceives as a marital struggle between two different temperaments.

The notion that Hartley is very impressionable and romantic in temperament is made on numerous occasions, adding to a sense of irony regarding her reluctance to listen to others. When a chance encounter with a former acquaintance leads her to believe that there '*was* something about the house', she states that: 'though I knew the woman was an idle gossip, the words stuck in my head, and my heart sank lower than ever' (p. 10). The dramatic denouement is effectively set up and, as the title 'The Lady's Maid's Bell' indicates, the key to this story lies with the bell that Mrs. Brympton avoids using, instead only trusting in one of the servants to summon her maid. She admits that 'I grew so nervous that the least sound made me jump' (p. 10), so that when she is awoken by the bell it has the effect of being 'queer', as Wharton uses the term, or uncanny. The bell rings on two occasions in the story: On the first occasion, Hartley is convinced that someone has preceded her in rushing to her mistress's aid, but the sound is very faint and, as she has been anxiously pondering in regards to the master and mistress's relationship, also brings to mind what she was told about the succession of maids that left Mrs. Brympton's employment before her arrival. The truth behind the first ominous ringing of the bell is, apparently, nothing more sinister than Mrs. Brympton requiring some medicine drops -

that she begins by calling Hartley 'Emma', the name of the maid who has died, can be explained away by Lady Brympton's delirium. The encounter with Mr. Brympton, who opens the door, is more problematic: "'*You*!' he said, in a queer voice. '*How many of you are there, in God's name*?'" (p. 12) [Italics as included in the original text]. The situation is presented as if Mr. Brympton had already seen another maid, presumably Emma, and the assumption Hartley makes in turn is that he has been drinking, but she soon observes by his movement that 'to my surprise I saw that he walked as straight as a sober man' (p. 12). No explanation is offered by Mr. Brympton, leaving it up to the reader to consider. Jenni Dyman suggests that this lack of explanation 'may [...] indicate [Mr. Brympton's] sensitivity to denial and repression which are stunting his growth as well as his wife's.'[358] In this reading, the ghost would represent a female consciousness seeking to disrupt patriarchal values, and when Mr. Brympton asks 'how many of you are there', he is identifying a sisterhood looking after his wife, although it remains sufficiently ambiguous that he might have simply been referring to the succession of lady's maids who have come and gone in a short space of time. This intervention by Hartley has the effect of forcing Mr. Brympton to reconsider his actions, implying that if he is sober then there must be some other reason that 'his face looked red and savage'(p. 12). There is a suggestion of sexual violence, though this may be a manifestation of Hartley's own set of assumptions about the marriage, and about the type of man she believes Mr. Brympton to be.

The following day we are told by Hartley that 'I would have staked my head on my mistress's goodness' after she has been sent on a secret errand to deliver a note to Mr

[358] Jenni Dyman, *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 24.

Ranford. In her sense of the developing melodrama, she concludes that there is a sexual attachment between Mrs Brympton and Mr Ranford, and yet at the same time she does not want to accept that such a thing can be the case. When she refers here to 'goodness' it is suggested that she means the sanctity of the institution of marriage, which may be interpreted as the expression of her own naivety or her need to imagine in the sexual purity of her mistress. Hartley would therefore need to establish Mrs. Brympton's goodness as an embodiment of her own conventionally limited set of values. Hartley therefore places great importance on any token that indicates her success in this regard:

> She had grown attached to me, and seemed to like to have me about; and Agnes told me one day that, since Emma Saxon's death, I was the only maid her mistress had taken to. This gave me a warm feeling for the poor lady, though after all there was little I could do to help her. (p. 16).

In the encounters between mistress and maid there is little to justify the idea that there is an attachment between Hartley and Mrs. Brympton, and the relationship only shows that which would be expected between their respective stations, so the reader has to take this assertion on Hartley's word, if at all. The feelings of understanding, of empathy, that exist seem to be entirely the product of Hartley's sense of the situation and her involvement within it, and not from the perspective of Mrs Brympton This is not immediately obvious, as we are only presented with the point of view of the servant.

It is the presence of the ghost, Emma Saxon, who operates as the link that awakens Hartley's consciousness. The title of the story draws attention to the mechanical device of the bell that would normally be a means of communication between the mistress and servant, but this is presented as if it were not functioning (although Hartley discovers that

this is not the case), relegating usual communication as being maintained by messages of summons conveyed by other servants. It is only in moments when a particularly private calling (in the late hours) is made that the ringing of the automated bell is used, suggesting a hidden meaning in its use. This is especially the case during the story's climax when the bell is associated with Emma Saxon as much as it is with Mrs. Brympton, almost suggesting that it is the dead lady's maid who is responsible for its operation:

> I jumped awake to the furious ringing of my bell. Before my head was clear I had sprung out of bed, and was dragging on my clothes. *It is going to happen now*, I heard myself saying; but what I meant I had no notion. My hands seemed to be covered with glue – I thought I should never get into my clothes. At last I opened my door and peered down the passage. As far as my candle-flame carried, I could see nothing unusual ahead of me. I hurried on, breathless; but as I pushed open the baize door leading to the main hall my heart stood still, for there at the head of the stairs was Emma Saxon, peering dreadfully down into the darkness. (p. 19)

These circumstances echo the events of earlier in the day when Hartley is led on a journey through the winter countryside by Emma Saxon's ghost, and she is sure – too sure – that she is being led on purpose. On that occasion, Hartley is brought into a situation that is beyond her comprehension, and in ironic contrast to her continually affirmed desire not to ask questions, she feels that she has no other choice but to think of asking Emma Saxon: '*She* knew what it was; she would tell me if she could; perhaps she would answer if I questioned her' (p. 18). However, Hartley is thwarted by the sudden appearance of Mr Ranford, and her question goes unasked as the ghost disappears, leaving her to make sense of the situation as best she can under the immediate interrogation of Mr Ranford, who disconcerts her by his good looks and cheerful demeanour. Previously she had felt that it was wrong to ask too many questions, now she finds that circumstances have moved too quickly, and by the time she formulates the decision to ask a question the moment has

passed. Later that evening, her senses heightened by a sense of drama, but equally with a self-confessed tiredness from her earlier adventures, she imagines the sources as she lies in bed of the different sounds she can hear, as if they can be understood by the opening and closing of particular doors. When she feels that Emma has had a hand in the frenzied ringing of her bell she has been dozing and her certainty that this is a sign repeats her earlier conviction that she is being summoned by the ghost as much as by her mistress. It fulfils the sense she has that Emma wants to show her something.

This expectation is made more complex by the sequence of events which then follow; with Mrs. Brmypton stating that she hasn't rung her bell, although she is fully dressed, and seems to be expecting a visitor. The mistress suggests that Hartley might be ill or that she has been dreaming of the bell, and from what the reader has been led to believe of Hartley's mental state this explanation is not implausible. Hartley's extreme desire to find a meaning which explains the events to which she is a witness but does not understand colours her view of the events. Her certainty that she has a pivotal role to play creates a doubt in the readers' mind that her own imagination has distorted her objective reasoning. However, it might be claimed that a kind of feminine alliance – if we link Hartley's intuition with the supernatural presence of Emma - are working to protect the mistress. Events then take a different turn when Hartley reveals that Mr. Brympton has returned unexpectedly to the house, distressing her mistress who apparently is overwhelmed and collapses. Mr. Brympton's arrival seems relatively unambiguous if we trust the narrator, coming across as intent on uncovering his wife's infidelity with his neighbour and friend, Mr Ranford. This conclusion has the elements of Victorian or Edwardian melodrama about it, bordering

upon farce. At the moment when the reader might well expect to find Mr. Ranford hiding behind the dressing-room door, confirming the supposed adultery, there he instead discovers Emma's ghost. The subsequent death of Mrs Brympton coming almost immediately afterwards is anti-climax, and the final few of paragraphs add little to the reader's understanding of what has occurred.

Wharton commented on the issue of what readers should consider when reading one of her ghost stories in the Preface to *Ghosts* (1937):

> [A] common medium between myself and my readers, of their meeting me halfway among the primeval shadows, and filling in the gaps in my narrative with sensations and divinations akin to my own.[359]

She uses the term 'medium' here as an expression of constructing a link with her readers, but it of course recalls the fashion in the late nineteenth century for spiritualists claiming to be vessels through which the dead could speak to the living. (An ironic choice of words when one considers that the collection was published posthumously). Wharton stresses the 'primeval' to denote a dark region of unconscious semi-awareness that recalls her association between the unknown and some primitive state of psychological understanding, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. In reference to what she terms 'a common medium between myself and my readers', and that there is a possibility of author and reader coming together in this unspecified in-between territory, Wharton echoes Vernon Lee's understanding of empathy, although she avoids considering it in terms of what Lee calls 'aesthetic receptivity'.[360] What Wharton attempts as a writer is to bring

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[359] Wharton, 1937, pp. 1-2.
[360] Lee, 'Aesthetic Responsiveness', *The Psychology of an Art Writer*, 2018, p. 47.

the reader to a position wherein they must interpret the story themselves. As with 'The Lady's Maid's Bell', it can be argued that the narrative is settled in a typically dramatic fashion, establishing a domestic story around the secret lives of the mistress and her lover, but Wharton maintains a sense of ghostly ambiguity throughout that goes beyond the realist narrative, haunting the reader with a sense of the unfulfilled – particularly in regards to the lives of women in a patriarchal society. The mystery that Hartley discovers for herself is merged with her own repressed desires and innocence, and her growing feelings of being a participant in the action is not sanctioned by the other characters, for whom she remains a mere servant. Equally, Brympton itself is a house where the truth of the relationship between master and mistress is suppressed. The ghost of Emma Saxon acts as the link between Hartley and the emotional entanglements that cast a shadow over the lives of the manor's inhabitants. As Jenni Dyman suggests, Saxon is both the solution to the puzzle that leads Hartley into a greater awareness of the situation, as well as an intrusive presence: '[She] has major symbolic significance, but she is evoked too often, becoming too substantial a presence to be terrifying.'[361] Wharton rarely intends her stories to be frightening in a conventional manner, but she does turn the reader's attention towards the dire situations that many women, with little to no means of expressing themselves, become trapped in. Although Mr. Brympton finds her terrifying enough that he shrinks back from her presence, here the horror being expressed is more symbolic of the dramatic and public realisation of his wife's adultery, his inner suspicions realised. His wife's death is a convenient conclusion, suggesting to the reader that her long-standing illness is symbolic of all that has become rotten and lifeless in her emotional world, reinforcing the patriarchal

[361] Dyman, 1996, p. 30.

nature of societal marriages whereby the scandal leads to the death of the woman and the man, now liberated, is free to pursue other opportunities. In this reading of the story illness is a metaphor for all that is wrong in the material lives of those who are trapped in the claustrophobic social conventions of late nineteenth century American society. Wharton's emphasis is on the truth of feeling, and when that 'truth' – seen as a morality based on sympathy between human beings - is suppressed and pushed under the surface, then it is only by articulating a supernatural vision of the world that a higher sense of reality can be achieved and the reader made aware of the complex interactions that exist between people. By utilizing the supernatural, Wharton transcends the limitations of a realist text to penetrate the nature of personal interactions, and in so doing gives expression to what was, Kirsty Martin claims, Vernon Lee's ambition to investigate 'the roots of our feelings for each other to the workings of our bodies, urging that sympathy is, intricately, a condition of our embodiment.'[362] In the narratives of the ghostly sisterhood there is a concern for the truth of feelings which cannot always be embodied, but can persist as hauntings.

[362] Martin, 2013, p. 31.

**‘Afterward’ and the Construction of Delayed Meaning**

One of the criticisms of ‘The Lady’s Maid’s Bell’ was that Wharton had made the ghost too literal of a presence in the narrative. Such a critique is partly justified, but fails to account for one of the story’s principal strengths: imparting to the reader a feeling of the implied multiplicity of experience. A history of ladies’ maids as having a similar experiences of being bodily present and yet unseen is part of the general experience of domestic servants, who predominately were female. The function of the servant was to be as invisible as possible leaving their employers the luxury of having their necessary chores done without having to spend any more time than giving an instruction either directly to the servant or to the senior members of the household staff. This complete disregard for their servants’ individuality, autonomy and identity is something that Mrs. Brympton subverts and complicates through her reliance on Emma. Fundamentaly the text suggests that the power base is located in the male members of the ruling class and that women have to find ways of getting around such structures.

In contrast, one of Wharton’s most celebrated stories, ‘Afterward’, earns its appeal by making the ghost itself much more mysterious. First published in *Century Magazine* in 1910, ‘Afterward’’s opening lines, which are repeated a little further on in the text to reinforce their significance, begin: ‘Oh, there *is* one, of course, but you’ll never know it’ (p. 40) [italics in original]. This story has moved from an Upstate New York property (albeit one modelled on European ideas of the country house) of ‘The Lady’s Maid’s Bell’ to a rural England. This shift is important as the couple at the centre of the narrative are expressly

seeking to leave behind modern American landscapes and immerse themselves in a British rural idyll, with its appeal in a sort of *Country Life* view of the past:

> It was to sit, in the thick December dusk, by just such a wide-hooded fireplace, under just such black oak rafters, with the sense that beyond the mullioned panes the downs were darkening to a deeper solitude: it was for the ultimate indulgence in such sensations that Mary Boyne had endured for nearly fourteen years the soul-deadening ugliness of the Middle West, and that Boyne had ground on doggedly at his engineering till, with a suddenness that still made her blink, the prodigious windfall of the Blue Star Mine had put them at a stroke in possession of life and the leisure to taste it. (p. 41-42)

Wharton constructs a series of contrasts: between the past and present; between modern America and old England; between old money and new money, and; between the harsh world of work and that of cultured leisure. On first reading this appears to be an attempt to exploit an opportunity to highlight cultural differences (which the story does also highlight), but this passage also gets to the heart of the story, juxtaposing wealth with the means by which money is made, but leaving a significant gap between a life of toil and one of luxury. As if to reinforce her point, Wharton informs the reader Edward Boyne is engaged in writing a book to be called the 'Economic Basis of Culture'. This has an ironic effect on a second reading of the story wherein the reader understands the means by which Boyne has been able to acquire enough money for the couple to live out a fantasy lifestyle in the English countryside. This dramatic irony is further foreshadowed by the casual assertion of the narrator presenting Mary's perspective: 'Certainly the book was not going as smoothly as she had imagined it would, and the lines of perplexity between his eyes had never been there in his engineering days' (p. 43).

Wharton subtlety presents some of the details about who Edward and Mary Boyne are, hints why everything may not be quite as it appears on the surface, and details how they came to live in a 'haunted' house far from their own country. The new home of the Boynes takes on a living presence throughout 'Afterward', gradually bringing together the lives of all who have lived in the building across time. Lyng, as a name, seems to have been deliberately chosen, perhaps echoing Bly Manor, the house from Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, as well as the aural suggestion of 'lying'. Wharton notes that the building has been 'for centuries a deep, dim reservoir of life'; that 'the life had probably not been of the most vivid order: for long periods, no doubt, it had fallen as noiselessly into the past as the quiet drizzle of autumn fell' (p. 42). It is important to note how differently Wharton approaches this subject. Vernon Lee, by comparison, would have been at pains to give a precise historical and material account of the house, as she does in 'Oke of Okehurst', using historical details to enrich the aesthetic qualities of the property's history. Wharton, in contrast, seeks to play down this aspect by making a lighter sense of documented history, whilst still suggesting the passage of time in picturesque terms, in a way that is psychologically true to the consciousness of Mary Boyne. More importantly, Wharton stresses that it is possible to respond to some uncanny feeling aroused by Lyng, the narrative voice observing: 'these backwaters of existence sometimes breed, in their sluggish depths, strange acuities of emotion, and Mary Boyne had felt from the first the occasional brush of an intenser memory' (p. 42). Whilst this is subtle enough as to almost evade categorisation, it is clearly signals Mary's growing sense of unease, her troubled anxieties not directly related to the building and its grounds as a source of haunting, but instead to focus on something uncanny entering into the personal relationship between

husband and wife. The context of the story is of an American couple actively seeking a haunted house and wilfully, though unconsciously, stirring up their own ghosts. Wharton suggests that there is some aspect to their lives that causes Mary to notice 'that she had felt in him the undefinable change that made her restless in his absence, and as tongue-tied in his presence as though it were *she* who had a secret to keep from him!' (p. 43). These are the sorts of closely observed nuances in human relations that become clearer when people are removed from the struggles of daily living, more distinctly available to those with the leisure to engage in reflections about their emotions and subject them to closer analysis. The Boynes also express a sense uncanny unease within the domestic environment, haunted by something that is not openly acknowledged, yet that is felt to be decidedly real. Instead of finding escape through relocation to a 'romantic' and remote setting –one of the conditions that the Boynes seek is to be cut off from the modernity of houses that possess the conveniences of a 'heating system' and a regular 'water-supply' (p. 40) – they find an unsettling suggestion of a mystery in their own personal existence is awakened, something that might disrupt the outward calm of their existence. The protective atmosphere of the past which they thought they would discover by occupying an old house is subverted by an equally old sense of human existence influenced by an undercurrent of the supernatural.

'Afterward' plays with the conventional notions of a place and its residents being haunted in a way that may be more morally or psychologically orientated. Mary Boyne cannot decide whether her husband is hiding something from her or whether it is merely that the house contains a ghostly presence - even though nobody knows the story of the supposed ghost attached to the property:

> The thought that there *was* a secret somewhere between them struck her with a sudden smart rap of wonder, and she looked about her down the dim, long room.
> 'Can it be the house?' she mused.
> The room itself might have been full of secrets. They seemed to be piling themselves up, as evening fell, like the layers and layers of velvet shadow dropping from the low ceiling, the dusky walls of books, the smoke-blurred sculpture of the hooded hearth. (p. 43).

Mary's understanding is uncanny, displaying an insight that goes beyond the conventional, natural appearance of things. The suggestion that there might be some secret between Mary and Edward brings the narrative closer to 'The Lady's Maid's Bell', where it is the wife who has a secret which she is keeping from her husband. In that story it is the ghost that is party to what has been going on and seems to be leading a naïve Alice Hartley into an epiphany, bringing to bear that which is greater than our social order, unearthing the deception that may lurk behind public personas and the private passions that lay half hidden beneath the social fabric. In 'Afterward', however, the presence of the supernatural is related to the feeling that not everything is as it appears, and once again there is an ambiguity about the actual nature of the secret. If the house has a role to play, what might that role be? Wharton gives some clue to this in the following passage:

> Now, as she [Mary] stood on the hearth, the subject of their earlier curiosity revived in her with a new sense of its meaning – a sense gradually acquired through close daily contact with the scene of the lurking mystery. It was the house itself, of course, that possessed the ghost-seeing faculty, that communed visually but secretly with its own past; and if one could only get into close enough communion with the house, one might surprise its secret, and acquire the ghost-sight on one's own account. Perhaps, in his long solitary hours in this very room, where she never trespassed till the afternoon, her husband *had* acquired it already, and was silently carrying the dead weight of whatever it had revealed to him. (p. 44).

What is suggested here is a sense that the house has an active role to play in bringing to the fore that which Mary, subconsciously, believes has been left unsaid between her and

Edward. The 'ghost-seeing faculty' speaks of the uncanny, and Mary speculates that Edward has discovered something from his 'communion' with the house, and that is the reason for her intuition that there is a secret between her husband and herself. She suggests that it is her husband's understanding of the etiquette of those exposed to ghosts that they should not discuss what they see, although admitting that this 'explanation that did not really satisfy her' (p. 44). The notion that it is the house itself that provides the conditions by which the ghost can be seen is presented as though it were the house's antiquity that gives it an ability to respond to the past. The assumption is that ghosts are of presences belonging to the past, and yet, through supernatural means, they exert an influence over the present. It is implied that, because the house has been in existence for much longer than any individual's lifetime, it contains a memory of all the lives that have lived there since it first came into being.

**Beyond Realism: Modernism, Aesthetic Consciousness and Fantasy**

The way in which Wharton presents the discovery of the house's secret knowledge that Mary speculates that her husband has mystically found out as a 'new sense of its meaning' (p. 44) links the story to the modernist concern of 'making it new' – the title of Ezra Pound's literary essays published at T. S. Eliot's insistence by Faber and Faber in 1932 – as a new approach which reveals meanings which are hidden deeper than material reality. However, Wharton's open reaction to modernism in literature was hostile as she was someone who continued to be haunted by the past throughout her life. She wrote to Bernard Berenson in 1923 regarding James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), stating that:

> - It's a turgid welter of pornography (the rudest schoolboy kind) & unformed & unimportant drivel; & until the raw ingredients of a pudding *make* a pudding, I shall

> never believe that the raw material of sensation & thought can make a work of art without the cook's intervening. The same applies to Eliot.
>
> I *know* it's not because I'm getting old that I'm unresponsive. The trouble with all this new stuff is that it's à thèse: the theory comes first, & dominates it. And it will go the way of "unanimisme" & all other isms.
> (6th January, 1923).[363]

Wharton's view is that she opposes what she interprets as self-conscious writing that follows a pattern determined by a theory. What results of this approach is, for Wharton. not art, but some raw and undigested material lacking the intervention of the artist to construct shape and meaning. Her rejection of modernism extended to rejecting those like May Sinclair, who was a friend and champion of Eliot's work, stating in 1925, in relation to Wharton's novel of that year, *The Mother's Recompense*, that 'I was not trying to follow the new methods, as May Sinclair so pantingly & anxiously does'.[364] From these comments it is possible to see that in the 1920s, Wharton was feeling the challenge of modernism and her reaction was one of defiance. She defended the writers of her own generation and tartly suggested 'my heroine belongs to the day when scruples existed'.[365] Meaning for Wharton represent a moral vision rather than an immersion in the sensations of the moment, ideas which Lee had also grappled with in her work. Wharton's consciousness as an author is that of wanting to see the whole of an experience, to give it shape and meaning, and only then engage with the reader in a manner that brings forward a moral sense of what has been described through precise presentation of the circumstances rather than through open commentary – which demonstrates a Modernist tendency to present the situation free from the open expression of the author's omniscient opinions.

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363 Lewis and Lewis, 1988, p. 461. [Italics from original source]
364 Letter to John Hugh Smith, May 25th, 1925; Lewis and Lewis, 1988, p. 480.
365 Lewis and Lewis, 1988, p. 480.

In spite of her negative strictures regarding modernism, T. S. Eliot's understanding of the concept of tradition, as expressed in his influential essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), is pertinent to what Wharton was writing in 'Afterward':

> [Tradition] involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.[366]

Although Eliot is primarily discussing the idea of tradition from the point of view of the male poet, I argue that what he writes concerning the historical can be applied to Wharton's understanding of the feeling for the past experienced by Mary Boyne. In this reading, Lyng, with its great age, can be seen to represent a tradition that has existed through many generations, bearing the marks of each successive generation and the changes of fashion and taste. The historical sense is the awareness that Mary Boyne is able to extract from her surroundings a feeling of the remoteness of the past, but also its presence. Eliot refers to the nature of this experience as being based on 'feeling' and the consciousness of a 'simultaneous order', and Wharton suggests the same order of knowledge can be gained by obtaining the 'ghost-seeing faculty', in that the state of being 'that communed visually but secretly with its own past' is also a means of seeing the past in the present (pp. 44). However, in 'Afterward', Mary's view is limited, and rather than seeing

[366] T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Prose*, edited by John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 23.

a totality she only sees according to her conventional notions of her role as what Jenni Dyman terms 'a representative American wife of the leisured class'.[367] The extent to which Mary can be viewed as belonging to the 'leisured class' is up for debate as it glosses over the years she has endured her life as a supportive wife of a mining engineer in the American Mid-West, but it is true to observe that the role she sees for herself is one of aspirational leisure. When her husband is able to provide the means to make that dream a reality, Mary asks remarkably few questions, content to be elevated to the leisured class. Dyman is right, however, to stress that Mary's condition is one dominated by absences rather than an awareness, similar to Eliot's concept of 'contemporaneity' – 'absence of information, communication, memory, clear thought, and independent judgment.'[368] Indeed, one of the ways in which Mary is limited is that she fails to establish a viable understanding of 'contemporaneity'. The couple's intentions had been to shut out the present as much as possible, and Mary's failure is that, in the midst of her lack of knowledge of present circumstances, she seeks to establish connections and interpretations are based on the romance of their locality in an alien landscape. This even goes as far as maintaining a sentimental attachment to the ever-present history of the Lyng as revealed in the property's fixtures and fittings, as demonstrated when Mary recalls that, upon arriving at Lyng, she flung herself into a 'first rapturous flurry of exploration' (p. 44), in the midst of which

> she had pressed (like a novel heroine) a panel that opened at her touch, on a narrow flight of stairs leading to an unsuspected flat ledge of the roof – the roof which, from below, seemed to slope away on all sides too abruptly for any but practised feet to scale. (pp. 44-45).

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[367] Dyman, 1996, p. 47.
[368] Dyman, 1996, p. 48.

This shows Mary finding the romance she had been hoping for, and it is significant that she makes the connection with a heroine in a novel. Wharton also uses her knowledge of the architecture of old houses to suggest that not everything is quite as simple as it first appears, creating a sense the sloping roof creates a feeling of vertigo in the reader and skilfully conveying the impression of a deceptiveness behind one's initial reaction, a subtle warning that the solidity of Mary's world is going to be challenged by new perspectives. Aesthetic appreciation is presented as problematic in this story because it is a theory of beauty that can blind individuals to the true relationship between things based on material reality.

This impression is immediately confirmed when her husband Edward, who Mary calls familiarity Ned, spots a figure approaching, and she follows his gaze, and sees a figure 'with something foreign, or at least unlocal, in the cut of the figure or its garb' (p. 45). Mary is challenged by 'her shortsighted eyes' (p. 45), another hint that she has a limited understanding of the situation. This narrative strategy allows the reader to see that there is more to at play than Mary's version of events makes us privy to, even though the story is told from her point of view. However, Wharton does not want to collude with the reader to the extent that Mary's perspective can be easily questioned conveying the limitations of her understanding, serving a dramatic purpose and convincingly adding a sense of mystery and, consequently, a desire to seek out a resolution by the reader. When Mary pauses on the stairs after the strange 'foreign' figure is first sighted, she leans 'over the oak banister to strain her eyes through the silence of the brown, sun-flecked depths below' (p. 45), it is as if

we are exposed to a profound realisation of the unstable basis on which her life is constructed and a prelude to a crack that begins to emerge in the relations between husband and wife, as Mary begins to become aware of a gap in her knowledge of her husband's affairs. The fact that this realisation is presented by the observation of 'sun-flecked depths' gives her meaning the same kind of introspection to be encountered in a modernist text, such as Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway (1925).

Wharton's use of the genre of the supernatural tale is primarily a means by which she can explore areas of life that were difficult for writers to articulate through conventional means - women writers especially - and explore, within the restrictions of the time, ideas surrounding sex and marriage. This is most clearly demonstrated in 'Afterward' by the development of Mary's consciousness, at first metaphorically blind to the supernatural action, but on reflection empowered to re-examine situations and read them with a newly acquired insight. There is something 'uncanny' about these experiences for Mary, dramatising situations which have long passed and constructing meanings out of their affects that challenge the assumptions of what had been presented as material fact. Although the genre of supernatural fiction is often seen to be commercial in intention due to its popularity, and despite what we have seen of her opposition to Modernism, Wharton has recourse to utilise techniques that had a lot in common with those developed by the international avant-garde. She presents human experience from different perspectives, often through the eyes of the one central character's consciousness, which is - with certain qualifications – reminiscent of the work of the cubist painters, and the role of memory is as important to Wharton as it is in Proust as a means of making sense of the world. Of course,

Wharton does not pretend to present simultaneous views of the same object as a cubist painting, but as we have seen in 'The Lady's Maid's Bell' and with more sophistication in 'Afterward', she does present different angles of vision in relation to what different characters can see, and this controls the narrative, and stresses the importance of sight in the interpretation of experience. It is as if Wharton were trying to find ways of presenting the totality of an experience, from its sources through its biases to its wants, whilst being aware that any viewer is limited to one perspective. This same problem was something would concern May Sinclair, who was more temperamentally open to the idea of Cubism. In this respect, regarding the individual's perspective, there is much which goes into making the form of Wharton's narrative structure that can be related to Vernon Lee's attempts to think about aesthetics in relation to the experience of art objects.

In *The Outward Mind* (2017), Benjamin Morgan explains the understanding of empathy that existed towards the end of the nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth by reference to Lee's descriptions of nature as it occurs between the body and an object in *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (1913).[369] In particular, Morgan wants to stress the impersonal character of this interpretation of empathy, distancing it from the later twentieth century more emotional use of 'sympathy'. In Lee's description she argues that the way a mountain is seen is conditioned by the viewer's process of observing the object's geometric shape - in this case the mountain is seen as a triangle - 'It *rises* …. It rises and keeps on rising, never stopping unless *we* stop looking at it', stressing the importance sight plays in assessing what an object does to the

[369] Morgan, 2017, p. 221.

mind.[370] In relation to this largely passive gaze, Lee suggests that the viewer engages with the object – in this case the mountain – relating, significantly, the importance of what she terms 'emphatic movement', which Morgan describes as 'a compound of actual upward eye movement and a bodily memory of past feelings of rising'.[371] Morgan wants to stress Lee's concept in terms of impersonality, but as he concedes, Lee 'did not deny that this type of response could have something to do with feeling for other persons, whom, like mountains, we encounter as materially substantial beings'.[372] This compound of eyesight and of feeling is crucial to the way in which Wharton develops Mary Boyne's perspective.

As the title indicates, 'Afterward' explores not just seeing and feeling as existing in the same period, but also incorporates the activity of the mind and its mental processes as it attempts to interpret this data:

> Yet now, as she reviewed the rapid scene, she felt her husband's explanation of it to have been invalidated by the look of anxiety on his face. Why had the familiar appearance of Peters made him anxious? Why, above all, if it was of such prime necessity to confer with that authority on the subject of the stable-drains, had the failure to find him produced such a look of relief? Mary could not say that any one of these considerations had occurred to her at the time, yet, from the promptness with which they now marshalled themselves at her summons, she had a sudden sense that they must all along have been there, waiting their hour. (p.46).

The language in which this retrospective understanding is communicated suggests that Wharton wants the reader to consider the experience much like a supernatural 'haunting'. The thoughts come together unexpectedly and suggest a sudden realisation of some hidden meaning; Alida Stair, who is mentioned at the beginning of the story as the woman who

[370] Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1913), p. 72.
[371] Morgan, 2017, p. 221.
[372] Morgan, 2017, p. 221.

first suggests the house in Dorset, has already warned that the ghost at Lyng is not known until 'afterward' (p. 41). It is also worth noting that Wharton's autobiography was entitled *A Backward Glance* (1934), which, whilst appropriate for a book in which the author reminiscences about their past life, is indicative of a way of seeing that is about the action of returning to previous experiences. I would argue that the implication Wharton conveys through use of the term 'glance' is that the person looking backwards in the *present* is a changed person from the one who is being observed in the past. This is what 'Afterward' is also trying to dramatise. Wharton would have been familiar with Edward Bellamy's utopian fantasy *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888), which Malcolm Bradbury describes as having been 'the stuff of the general imagination' which 'soon sold a million copies worldwide, to become America's second great international bestseller (the first was Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*)'.[373] Although Wharton is a very different kind of writer to Bellamy, she must have been interested in the concept of seeing from a perspective of a different period of time which would highlight its passage.

'Afterward' is focused more on a specific moment in time than Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, its narrative centred on the individual's experience rather than a collective social vision. The act of 'seeing' is a vital part of Wharton's method of understanding the world, and, as Lee had observed in relation to John Singer Sargent, the business of seeing is

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[373] Malcolm Bradbury, *Dangerous Pilgrimages: Trans-Atlantic Mythologies and the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 276.

not only about the sense of sight, but includes mind, memory, and heart.[374] This interior element is stressed in the opening of the second section:

> Weary with her thoughts, she moved toward the window. The library was now completely dark, and she was surprised to see how much faint light the outer world still held. (p. 47).

In the twilit world of her thoughts, Mary's vision is necessarily limited, her preoccupations dominating her consciousness so much so she cannot even see that the figure approaching the house is in fact her husband. This, of course, also works at a symbolic level, because Edward is the person who she is growing to distrust – and when he moves away from her he 'moved away into the shadow of the hearth' (p. 47). Much is made of the contrast between the light of the lamps provided by the maid and darker areas of the interior space of the room, which deliberately echo the ambiguities that have appeared in the relationship between husband and wife, the contrast between what has hitherto been regarded by Mary as a marriage conducted in the light of openness being challenged by the suggestion of things hidden by her husband and existing in the shadows. When the couple discuss the length of time it may take to realise retrospectively that the ghost has appeared, Edward Boyne appears to be seeking the reassurance of some absolute deadline or cut off point. Yet, after Mary's further probing, instead Edward asks, 'is there any legend, any tradition, as to that?' (p. 48). This has the effect of deflecting her line of inquiry, while also suggesting a mythic dimension of the influence enacted by the past on the present. The self-conscious sense of modernity in the early years of the twentieth century was similarly a period when people were seeking either to make a clean break with the past, as in the case of the Italian

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[374] Vernon Lee, 'J.S.S. in memoriam', in Evan Charteris, ed., *John Sargent* (London: William Heinemann, 1927), p. 251, as quoted in Maxwell, 1997, p. 268.

Futurists, or to find new ways of linking with remote periods of history. The association Wharton made between her Celtic ancestors and the supernatural in childhood may have positioned her to think in line with Sheridan Le Fanu, the Irish writer of Gothic mystery stories and with the writers of the 'Celtic Twilight', the renaissance of interest in specifically Irish mythology and history that appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century.[375] I will discuss the significance of the issue of Wharton's need for a mythologized past in the discussion of the story 'The Bottle of Perrier' in the last section of this chapter. Lee was also interested in the ways in which a text could provide the opportunity to re-investigate the foundations of myths, especially those associated with the art of Western culture. We saw in the story 'Dionea' how she presents a narrative which re-imagines the ancient cults of belief which can still be found in the Mediterranean world during the nineteenth century and gives them a feminist slant. As a scholar of the history and culture of Italy she was able to explore those areas of knowledge which were concerned with aesthetic experience. Wharton's narratives are concerned with the contemporary world but she still is able to reveal those elements in human experience which enter into the construction of modern myths where stories are told in order to establish knowledge between individuals in an isolated country house or in the remote desert. Sinclair also uses a mythological sense of perception in order transfigure the material reality of her fictional world in the *Uncanny Stories*.

[375] W. B. Yeats, one of the writers most clearly associated with the 'Celtic Twilight', was a contributor to Wharton's *The Book of the Homeless (Le Livre des sans foyer)* (London and New York: Macmillan and Scribner's, 1915), which raised money for Wharton's American Hostels and the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee.

T. S. Eliot would later suggest in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' that 'it is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting'.[376] Eliot is pointing out that the key experiences which lead to poetry are the concentration of 'a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all' – a turn of phrase that might evoke the nuances of consciousness to be found in the work of Henry James and. I might argue, Edith Wharton. In particular, Eliot stresses that 'these experiences are not "recollected", and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is "tranquil" only in that it is a passive attending upon the event'.[377] Eliot's target here is Wordsworth's romantic concept of the nature of poetic experience, which he finds too lacking in dynamic tension for his understanding of the nature of poetic creation in the modern world. Wharton is not a poet, and her intentions were certainly not those of a poet, but there remains the same concern with feeling or emotion and their after effect on the reader. In both Eliot and Wharton we find the process of recollection has an active element to it, as consciousness responds to its condition and tries to readjust to changed circumstances and discover a new sense of awareness. This is precisely what Vernon Lee saw as the basis of the role of empathy in aesthetic understanding. In the *Psychology of an Art Writer* she describes her process of 'self-examination' and suggests the following:

> The existence of an abstract affective memory, through which an aesthetic feeling can be transferred from one set of sensations to another, and thanks to which it can enter a standby state, ready to express itself in response to sensations that wouldn't have summoned it up spontaneously [...].[378]

[376] Eliot, 1953, p. 29.
[377] Eliot, 1953, p. 29-30.
[378] Lee, 2018, p. 23.

This process is analogous to Eliot's concept of the poet's active concentration of memory, and although Lee situates the idea of the experience in consciousness itself, she is aware that it is stored in the memory and awaiting a favourable moment when circumstances allow the feeling to find expression.

Wharton's central consciousness in 'Afterward' is Mary Boyne, who is presented as neither a poet nor a writer, but the aesthetic form is used to invest a heightened sense of the subtleties of human emotions and perspectives upon the narrative. As Talia Schaffer has argued, it is possible to regard aestheticism in different ways as it was a 'loose category' allowing for differing interpretations.[379] Schaffer goes on to suggest that the use of 'language experimentation may mean the employment of epigrams or archaisms for the purpose of displacing or camouflaging forbidden topics [and] some of the deliberately oblique styles [adopted by female aesthetes] were direct precursors of modernist innovations.'[380] Wharton shares many of the characteristics of the female aesthetes, as experience in her fiction is a crafted by the author to present the complexity of human relationships by the focus on what is in public view and what remains unexpressed but determines outcomes. Thus, Mary is, for all her limitations, able to be the means through which the narrative explores a complex and fragmentary mode of being:

> With the dispersal of shadows, and the repetition of the daily domestic office, Mary Boyne felt herself less oppressed by that sense of something mutely imminent which had darkened her solitary afternoon. For a few moments she gave herself silently to the details of her task, and when she looked up from it she was struck to the point of bewilderment by the change in her husband's face. He had seated himself near the farther lamp, and was absorbed in the perusal of his letters; but was it something he had found in them, or merely the shifting of her own point of view, that had restored

[379] Schaffer, 2000, p. 2.
[380] Schaffer, 2000, pp. 4-5.

> his features to their normal aspect? The longer she looked, the more definitely the change affirmed itself. (p. 48)

These minute observations of nuanced thought and feeling are again relating to the act of seeing and its effect on perspective, producing in the reader a sense of the limits of objectivity. Here the description creates a sense of Mary's reassurances as she relaxes, signifying that the relative positions of husband and wife are established, the lamp light granting the scene an aesthetic appeal that agrees with Mary's shifting thoughts. Wharton does not shy away from the more melodramatic elements implicit in the situation, however, and there is an undercurrent of unease which she soon exploits in the next moment, presenting Mary's shock at finding a newspaper clipping about a law suit against her husband. Her interrogative 'Ned! What's this? What does it mean?' (p. 49) reinforces the feeling that she is metaphorically in the dark, even if the cosiness of the lighting in the room had temporally lulled her into a state of trust. Interpretation is seen to be subject to both mental processes and the body's reaction to shifting experiences, as is emphasised in Edward Boyne's response:

> He had risen at the same instant, almost as if hearing her cry before she uttered it; and for a perceptible space of time he and she studied each other, like adversaries watching for an advantage, across the space between her chair and his desk. (p. 49)

This is a remarkable description as it places the husband and wife in a mental and physical confrontation, and the gendering of 'her chair' and 'his desk' brings the inanimate alive to the extent that it manifests a supernatural experience. In this brief confrontation the tension is diffused as the male character uses humour and logic (perhaps to an extent which is symptomatic of patriarchal views) to ease the tension, claiming prior knowledge of the contents of the newspaper which he dismisses as something he is quite familiar with

and claims that he had thought it was the kind of thing which she usually found to be a bore (p. 49). In spite of this, the sense of distrust has been firmly introduced into Mary's consciousness, leading her to question the reality of her situation and to what extent her whole outlook has been complacently constructed. Significantly, Wharton writes that: 'Now, for the first time, it startled her a little to find how little she knew of the material foundation on which her happiness was built' (p. 50). The implication of the metaphor of building again stresses the spatial construction of knowledge in consciousness.

In spite of the doubts that the story has raised about the extent one can rely on material appearances, the third section begins by depicting Mary's return to faith in her husband and the reestablishment of the comfort and trust in the world of physical objects. The reader, however, is put on guard by the opening sentence placing the 'recovery of her sense of security' in contrast with that being among the 'strangest things she was afterward to recall out of all the next day's strangeness' (p. 51). The mood evoked by the description of Mary's 'low-ceilinged, dusky' bedroom, 'the breakfast table', 'the fire', 'the sturdy flutings of the Georgian teapot' (p. 51), whilst reassuring, is nonetheless tinged by a hidden apprehension that makes the listing of these details feel like an escape from the fear of what is not known, although the uncanny feeling that lingers undermines the solidity of a conventional world:

> It was as if, in some roundabout way, all her diffused apprehensions of the previous day, with their moment of sharp concentration about the newspaper article – as if this dim questioning of the future, and startled return upon the past – had between them liquidated the arrears of some haunting moral obligation. (p. 51)

This passage situates a moment of time when the effects of past and future on consciousness have been neutralised and the immediate material experience of the world

is free from the shadow of an unknown fate. It is possible to suggest that Wharton's private life at this time, with the crisis in her marriage which resulted in divorce in 1913, contributed to a heightened awareness of the fluctuations in relations between the husband and wife in 'Afterward'. This is not the place to discuss these biographical ramifications, but it is significant to note that her narrative engages with marital trust. In the light of this knowledge, it is curious to consider the suggestion in the text that Mary's 'diffused apprehensions' had become concentrated leading to the wiping out of 'the arrears of some haunting moral obligation'. The text reveals that this is a premature assessment of the real situation, but it does raise the question about how the story deals with morality, which is here related to the sense of being haunted. The irony underpinning this is that Mary's escape from this uncomfortably vague nagging sensation, while immaterial, intrudes into the materiality of her circumstances, and is as a result made part of her failure to acknowledge the economic means by which her lifestyle is maintained. The world that Wharton presents is also one in which conventional forms of morality, based on religious traditions, have ceased to play an active part. By suggesting a moral authority that is supernatural, however vaguely interpreted, can be seen to be problematic to modern readers who may be more comfortable with rational causes and effects and less comfortable with the concept of a higher moral judgement. However, what Wharton suggests can be related to consciousness, as I will go on to demonstrate, and is about feeling more than it is about the supernatural doubling as a mode for finding an emotive female perspective rather than on a rational, realist male one.

In this third section of the story, Mary encounters a mysterious man who turns up at Lyng when she is outdoors and expecting to see a boiler engineer from Dorchester. This stranger is described as having 'the air of a gentleman – perhaps a traveller' (p. 52) and is plainly not the prosaic man she expected, and she notices that:

> His intonation, rather than his accent, was faintly American, and Mary, at the familiar note, looked at him more closely. The brim of his soft felt hat cast a shade on his face, which, thus obscured, wore to her shortsighted gaze a look of seriousness, as of a person arriving 'on business', and civilly but firmly aware of his rights. (p. 53)

Wharton once again reminds the reader of Mary's literal short sightedness, indicating the limits of her ability to see clearly, and what Mary 'sees' is in fact her impression of the man rather than his physical reality. Her impression that the stranger, the ghost, is a business-like gentleman who must have come to see her husband. She already knows that he is asking to see Edward Boyne, and is not someone who was expected. Her deduction then is based on her assumptions about his identity, and she does not anticipate any other explanation why the stranger should want to her husband. More significantly is Mary's feeling that the stranger has 'rights' which give him authority, however subtly expressed, yet when she decides to send him away because he has no official appointment, he departs without overtly claiming any such 'rights'. One detail that she does notice, in spite of her short sight, is that on departing he stops to look up at the house, filling Mary uncertainty that she has committed an error of manners, reviving a sense of 'moral obligation' that she had thought to have wiped out. In Mary's conception of morality there is the suggestion of a profit and loss account in which a balance can be extracted which may still fall on the side of being in credit, which echoes the narrative's concern with the ethics of American business – as underlined later when Mary avoids seeing her husband and instead 'lost

herself in renewed calculations of the outlay to which the morning's conference [with the boiler engineer] had committed her' (p. 53). Mary sense of personal 'recovered security' (p. 54) is equated with the economic security that her status as the wife of a successful American man of business affords her.

Mary Boyne indulges in fantasies about what she might be able to accomplish with the money that her husband has brought to the marriage, Wharton writing that Mary is 'luxuriating in a lavish play of figures' (p. 54) when it starts to become apparent that Edward has mysteriously disappeared. This bears out Wharton's later assertion that 'compared with the women of France the average American woman is still in the kindergarten'.[381] What she wants to communicate here is a cultural difference which stresses her dissatisfaction with the role of women in American society, where she feels that they are kept away from key parts of life and unable to develop as individuals. As Jenni Dyman suggests:

> Confined by a marriage of dependency and the conventions of the wife's role bequeathed to her by Old New York, Wharton tried escape through her romantic affair, finally faced her situation, and developed an independent life in France.[382]

Whether her view can be categorised as a strictly feminist one is open to debate, as Wharton was often conflicted when it came to radical feminist points of view of the time, more comfortable when implying the necessity of the individual's role in liberating themselves from their ignorance as much as openly criticising patriarchal American society. It should be remembered that, although she associated French society with a

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[381] Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning* (New York: Appleton, 1919), pp. 100-101.
[382] Dyman, 1996, p. 47.

degree of freedom and a model of a better arrangement for the health of male-female roles, this too was a patriarchal society. More importantly for Wharton, I would argue, was the depiction of the process of growing consciousness through the interplay between seeing and feeling. As Dyman states in relation to 'Afterward', 'Wharton's focus is on the "perceiving consciousness" [provided by] Mary Boyne, whose psychological and ethical blindness are subtly, but well developed through symbolism, imagery, and absences in the text.'[383]

As we have already seen, this 'blindness' in Mary is something that Wharton hints at throughout the first part of the story. When Mary is brought back from her dreams into the material world, this point is again reinforced: 'Mary was very hungry, and she wanted to consult her husband about the greenhouses' (p. 55). Her preoccupation with herself means that she cannot see beyond her own limited view, suggesting 'Boyne must have gone to the gardens to meet her' (p. 54). Mary's identity is bound up in her marriage and the security that her husband provides, and therefore on the values of the patriarchy. The extent of this as a problem to her is demonstrated by the fact that she is thrown into confusion when the servants baffle her understanding by challenging attempts to find some rational explanation for his disappearance. She wants to impose her world view on those she regards as social inferiors, but is still left with a puzzle that she cannot solve. This is further compounded by the mention of a mysterious 'gentleman', and whilst Mary again attempts to take back control of the situation by interviewing the kitchen-maid who had spoken to the stranger, it is not until the man's hat is mentioned that she begins to find a new train of

[383] Dyman, 1996, p. 49.

thought. It is the difference of the man's appearance, followed by the description of his hat with its wide brim that stimulates her memory, resulting in a revelation of time as a series of impressions, each of which obscures the previous one, but which can be regained through the process of the active faculty of memory. The fact that he is 'different' is a stimulant that allows Mary's mind to focus on his individuality, relating difference to that which is foreign and recalling Mary's initial interpretation of the figure who she had met in the garden - and whom she is now convinced is the same man who has taken her husband. There is here an echo of the Biblical account of Christ appearing to Mary Magdalene in the garden after his resurrection and her assumption that he is a gardener, which gives the text a greater scope of reference by suggesting a spiritual authority disguised in a humble form. It is necessary to stress that the drama in this section of the narrative is provided by the workings of Mary's mind, as she grasps pieces of information and tries to build up a new picture of the situation.

The next section of the story moves the narrative on by two weeks with Mary playing the role of a detective trying to solve the mystery of her missing husband. This represents not only Mary's need to find closure in an emotional sense, but also her need to understand her altered position and how it relates to the disappearance. The only material evidence presented to the reader is an unfinished letter that suggests Edward was still concerned about Mr. Elwell, the who had accused Edward of cheating him over the Blue Star mine. In spite of these anxieties the passing of time causes Mary to become increasingly apathetic, due in no small part to her lack of engagement with the reality of her husband's working life. Wharton has already made the reader aware that Edward was

working on a thesis about the 'Economic Basis of Culture' earlier in the story, and his wife appears, in the aftermath of his vanishing, as little more than another part of the culture created by his finance:

> Even Mary Boyne's consciousness gradually felt the same lowering of velocity [as the press and police]. [...] She watched the familiar routine of life with the incurious eye of a savage on whom the meaningless processes of civilisation make but the faintest impression. She had come to regard herself as part of the routine, a spoke of the wheel, revolving with its motion; she felt almost like the furniture of the room in which she sat, an insensate object to be dusted and pushed about with the chairs and tables. (p. 61)

Allan Gardner Smith has claimed that Mary struggles to become 'aware of the foundations of her domestic milieu', and it is symbolic that she be described as merging with the material objects of this environment.[384] Wharton indicates that if Mary cannot realise the true nature of her existence, then she is no different than the items that belonged to her husband. So while Wharton may not have been willing to wholly identify with the feminists of her own day, the evidence of her writing provides a telling critique of the American patriarchy and its effect on women. Vernon Lee was interested in 'the role of aesthetic phenomena in the life of the individual', and here Wharton demonstrates the consciousness of Mary degenerating to the point where there is no possible appreciation of the products of civilisation or of beauty, leaving us with an individual submerged in a state of unfeeling.[385] It is testimony to the extent to which Wharton has been unable to see through the established values of a society that is patriarchal which gives the story its power to disconcert. Mary is presented as someone who is complacently ready to avoid asking awkward questions about her husband's business as long as her material security is

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[384] Allen Gardiner Smith, 'Edith Wharton and the Ghost Story', *Women and Literature I*, 1980, 149-59 (p. 154).
[385] Lee, 2018, p. 24.

maintained. However, the external security is undermined by the supernatural occurrence of the arrival of the unknown man and the disappearance of her husband. These circumstances necessitate an examination of the basis of Mary's comfortable life, and the reality is as hidden and secret as the supernatural.

If Mary Boyne seems no longer able to feel, then, conversely, it is the house, and its ghost, that bear witness to what has occurred, leaving Mary to imagine that the secret is stored in the building's consciousness:

> But the *house knew*; the library in which she spent her long, lonely evenings knew. For it was here that the last scene had been enacted, here that the stranger had come, and spoken the word which had caused Boyne to rise and follow him. The floor she trod had felt his tread; the books on the shelves had seen his face; and there were moments when the intense consciousness of the old, dusky walls seemed about to break out into some audible revelation of their secret. (p. 61)

The supernatural personifies the house, enabling Lyng to transcend from an inert building and assume its own consciousness. What Wharton has created here is a situation of inversion, with the human consciousness of Mary taking on the characteristics of the furniture, the bricks, and the mortar, while the house takes on an ability to feel, to understand, and to form memory. Consciousness is embedded in materiality for both, and the effect is that the boundaries between objects and the subjective self are broken down. Whilst Wharton wanted to see herself as a traditional writer working within the legacy of the great nineteenth-century realist novelists, her use of the supernatural is a means by which she is able to express modernist notions of literary impressionism, placing emphasis on a limited subjective viewpoint influenced by empathetic understanding. She does this not by adopting new techniques, but by making use of the deconstruction affected by the

supernatural to personalise the external world. This is primarily possible because she is concerned in this narrative with the consciousness of the perceiving mind, allowing her to express feeling and emotion and to break through Mary's conventionality of being a wife who accepts that her husband's business is no concern of hers to a realisation of the factual choices which have constructed the superficially security of a life of economic success. Wharton is able to achieve this through the fantastic elements of her tale.

The final fifth section of 'Afterward' shows Mary's limited view of the world becoming more explicit to herself and the reader. The opening two sentences are reported direct speech from American Lawyer Mr. Parvis, to whom Edward Boyne had addressed his final letter before disappearing: ''I don't say it wasn't straight, yet don't say it was straight. It was business'' (p. 62). By presenting the words of Parvis at the beginning of the section, isolating them without any context (their context follows in the next paragraph), Wharton gives them greater emphasis so they appear in the text almost like an epigraph, a motto, or much repeated aphorism. This recalls Schaffer's contention that one way in which literary experimentalism can be located in the works of female aesthetes is through the 'employment of epigrams'[386], here taking the form of repetitious comments which undermine their ostensible meaning more than they act as the witty conceits the likes Oscar Wilde might be attributed. One effect of this emphasis is to jolt the reader out of the reverie of the previous section where Mary's subjective self merges with the house around her placing her back in the world of cold, rational business. The statement by Mr. Parvis is ambiguous suggesting an unwillingness to make a judgment, and it is clear that the

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[386] Schaffer, 2000, p. 4.

statement is regarding American business in general and not just the morality of Edward Boyne. Dyman suggests that 'Wharton admired the vitality of the mercantile New Yorkers of the twentieth century and attacked the passivity and rigidness of Old New York, but she came to value and satirize aspects of both the old and new orders.'[387] On the one hand, Wharton could see the way modern America was becoming a major economic force in the world and catching up with Europe in terms of industrialisation, leading to the further modernisation of attitudes – which in time would offer women greater freedom than they had experienced in more traditional society – and on the other hand, Wharton had a nostalgia for the 'scrupulous probity in business and private affair' that she associated with a period before the advent of Social Darwinism.[388] Mr Parvis claims that Robert Elwell was the victim as he had not been as smart as Edward Boyne, even though it had been Elwell who had first "put him on' to the Blue Star scheme' (p. 62), with Parvis going on to say: 'It's the kind of thing that happens every day in business. I guess it's what the scientists call the survival of the fittest' (p. 63). Mary, in the process of losing her ignorance regarding the economic underpinning of her day-to-day existence, asks whether her husband has done something 'dishonourable' (p. 63), to which Parvis replies ''I don't say it wasn't straight, yet don't say it was straight. It was business''. This has a strange effect on Mary, looking at Parvis in horror as the reader is told that he seems to her 'like the indifferent, implacable emissary of some dark, formless power' (p. 63). The reassertion of the supernatural at this point, in language which recalls the ghost storries of M. R. James, such as 'A Warning to the Curious' (1925), is curious, having the effect of suggesting evil. Parvis is, after all, only a lawyer speaking in conventional terms, his conventional, contemporary rational not

[387] Dyman, 1996, p. 45.
[388] Wharton, 1934, p. 21.

intended to cause harm or hurt her feelings. Wharton wants to suggest the narrative is driven by Mary's consciousness rather than objective reality; it is in Mary's consciousness the notion American business is no longer, or never has been, an innocuous means by which she has lived a life of relative leisure is formed.

What follows in the narrative is more straightforward, as Mr Parvis outlines the details surrounding Elwell's attempted suicide and eventual death. These details and the way they are revealed contribute to the sense that 'Afterward' is a simple melodrama, but more importantly we the reader are placed in a position to the witness Mary's encounter with a truth she has been long denied because it runs counter to the ideal of the American wife, someone removed from the details of business. Mr. Parvis says that he assumed she might know more than she does, which contributes to Dyman's reading of the text as an '*exposé* of Mary Boyne' and the type of American woman that she represents.[389] This is partly justified by the text, which confuses the issue by the lawyer's curious attitude to making the facts of the case known to Mary. Having openly expressed a non-judgmental opinion about Edward Boyne's activities, stating that he regarded them as not essentially different from the practises of others in American business, Parvis then begins to give Mary an account of what he says has 'only come out lately' (p. 64) and he could not have expected Mary to have known these details as they only recently occurred. The details themselves are presented in such a way as to stimulate Mary's – and the reader's – capacity for empathy:

[389] Dyman, 1996, p. 47.

> You see, it's only come out lately what a bad state Elwell's affairs were in. His wife's a proud woman, and she fought on as long as she could, going out to work, and taking sewing home, when she got too sick – something with the heart, I believe. But she had a bedridden mother to look after, and the children, and she broke down under it, and finally had to ask for help. That attracted attention to the case, and the papers took it up, and a subscription was started. Everyone out there liked Bob Elwell, and most of the prominent names in the place are down on the list, and people began to wonder why –
> (p. 64)

This is far from Mr Parvis's previous assertion that Edward Boyne had done nothing dishonourable. By giving voice to these details and allowing them to take effect by building up a picture of hardship, there is a suspicion that Mr Parvis is indulging in a mild form of psychological sadism – when he adds later that he wondered whether Mary felt 'disposed to put your name down' on the subscription list it is another turn of the screw (Henry James's narrative 'The Turn of the Screw' being one of the inspirations of the work, its menace being provided that by the fact that it concerns children). Parvis is, in effect, an instrument of Wharton's determination to influence the reader's view of the falsity that exits beneath the lifestyle the Boynes have rewarded themselves. Parvis begins pointedly by saying 'You See' – and it is ironic that it has been long established in the story that Mary doesn't see very well, both on a literal level but also in relation to her husband's affairs. It is also worth noting that the campaign to raise funds for the Elwell family prefigures Wharton's own public campaign to raise funds to support Belgian refugees during the First World War, culminating in the production of *The Book of the Homeless* in 1916, which highlights her own sense of personal responsibility and willingness to assist in providing assistance to those in need.

Mary is shocked when she is given a newspaper account of the appeal for aid, echoing her previous reaction to reading a newspaper article about her husband's business practices, only now Edward isn't present to make excuses, and so Mary isn't encouraged passively accept his account. In this second newspaper article there is a photograph of Edward – the photograph that 'she liked best' (p. 64). Mary's eyes meet the eyes of the past photographic capture of Edward Boyne and she is unable to read what is said about him, and, once again, Wharton is placing emphasis on the acts of seeing and not seeing. It is also an encounter that occurs through the medium of the popular journalism of the day, reflecting on the impact photography and newspapers printed on mass bear upon the subjective self. These innovations allow for the spread of factual information and are used by Wharton to provide the implication of verified fact – Mr Parvis explicitly provides the cutting as evidence. The image of her husband appearing in the paper causes Mary to feel emotional, but her reaction to the juxtaposed photograph of Robert Elwell provides the story's climax. Mary identifies the man in the photograph as the mysterious man of 'foreign' appearance who had arrived at Lyng on the day that Edward Boyne went missing, exclaiming: ''It's the man! I should know him anywhere'' in a voice that 'sounded in her own ears like a scream' (p. 65). In view of Wharton's presentation of Mary's eyesight as being unreliable, we might have been encouraged to treat her confident assertion here with suspicion, but in the construction of the story it is presented as a final proof of the identity of the ghost. The final act of the story is Mary's attempt to piece together a narrative that fits with her belief that Lyng is haunted by a ghostly presence and that the prediction of her friend, Alida Stair, that 'You won't know till afterward' (p. 67) has been realised. It is noticeable throughout this last section of the story that the subjective interpretation of

what has happened drowns out most any other possible version; the possibility that Mary has lost her mind is maintained alongside her supernatural interpretation of events which she desperately wishes to prove true. Once again, Mr Parvis uses a sensationalist newspaper account as the source of his factual information, and opposition to this rational approach is Mary's inward experience:

> She felt the walls of the room rush toward her, like inward falling ruins, and she heard Parvis, a long way off, as if through the ruins, crying to her, and struggling to get at her. But she was numb to his touch, she did not know what he was saying. (p. 67)

It is telling that throughout the story it is Mary's eyesight which is questioned, but at the denouement her other senses also break down, and she can no longer feel nor hear. This emphasises the claustrophobic sense of her collapsing world, serving to remind the reader, I would suggest, that women are often trapped in situations which they cannot not fully understand because they conform to the expectations of society and it is not until some dramatic event intervenes, that they are able to liberate themselves with a full realisation of the actual circumstances. This type of knowledge is conveyed in the fiction of the ghostly sisterhood through the means afforded by the supernatural to give renewed understanding of material circumstances.

**'A Bottle of Perrier': Uncanny Exoticism**

'A Bottle of Perrier' takes up the themes Wharton had explored in her previous ghost stories and gives them a fresh twist. The ghostly sisterhood had given the supernatural tale a new feminist orientation often obliquely revealing anxieties about existing and not being seen. By referring to states of consciousness that revealed uncanny

experiences where the past and present interact, Lee and Wharton had managed to find a medium for the expression of marginal experiences. Female characters were presented as either mythologised into the role of the femme fatale or were passive victims of experiences which they try to interpret based on their limited viewpoints. Rather than examining women's experience, in 'A Bottle of Perrier' Wharton places a man in a situation where they are no longer the figure of authority by writing a tale in which the protagonist is isolated from his habitual cultural environment. At first they experience the luxurious lifestyle of being a colonial master, but as the narrative develops the oppressive circumstances create a story which enacts an uncanny exoticism. This emphasis is ultimately enhanced by a feeling of nostalgia for something that was being threatened by the modernists and was characteristic of the aesthetic writers who were still active into the 1920s. Talia Schaffer notes that 'this wistful nostalgia, this love of the decaying and dying, is, of course, a centrally aesthetic preoccupation. Had aestheticism not been dying, aesthetic writers would have had to poison it.'[390] 'A Bottle of Perrier' negotiates this moment of crisis, with Wharton's status in the literary marketplace in the later part of her career designating her part of an older generation responding to new trends and new young writers - writers such as her compatriot F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was born only two years after the publication of *The Decoration of Houses*.[391] Wharton's anxiety about her place in this world shaped 'A Bottle of Perrier', a tale that moves from the turn of the century adventure genre to another version of aesthetic death. Despite the perceived generational

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[390] Schaffer, 2000, p. 251.

[391] Wharton received a copy of *The Great Gatsby* with a 'friendly dedication' from Fitzgerald on its first publication in 1925. She wrote in reply: 'I am touched at your sending me a copy, for I feel that to your generation, which has taken such a flying leap into the future, I must represent the literary equivalent of tufted furniture and gas chandeliers.' Letter dated June 8th, 1925, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, edited by R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, 1988, p. 481.

difference, Wharton was praised by younger writers, such as L. P. Hartley, Graham Greene, and Ellery Queen, who were not modernists, but writers of a younger generation.[392] 'A Bottle of Perrier' was first published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in March 1926 as 'A Bottle of Evian', and subsequently collected in *Certain People* (1930). The change made to the title, with the brand name of bottled water being foregrounded and then being altered from Evian to Perrier, draws attention to the commercial packaging of 'natural' resources. This is significant in that one of the features of the story is the interplay between the remote and exotic setting and the impact of the encroachment of Western economic imperial power on the peoples of North Africa. The immediate background to the story was provided by Wharton's trip to Morocco in 1917, which she had written about in her travel book *In Morocco* (1920).[393] By the time she had come to write the story, interest in the Islamic world had been popularised by the celebrity status attached to T. E. Lawrence - or 'Lawrence of Arabia', as he was promoted in the media of the time. This fed into popular escapist fantasies, such as the silent film 'The Sheik' in 1921, starring Rudolph Valentino, which was marketed as an antidote to the horrors of the First World War, mixing erotic romance with glamour in a setting remote from the everyday world and its reminders of the recent conflict. The discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1922 by Howard Carter similarly received mass media coverage, bringing a taste for Egyptian themes into the popular culture of the day.

[392] David Stuart Davies, 'Introduction', *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, 2009, pp. xi-xii.
[393] See Adam Jabbur, '"Land of Contrasts," Land of Art: Morocco and the Imagination of Edith Wharton', *Edith Wharton Review,* Vol. 26, No. 2 (Fall, 2020), 5-11.

Against this cultural background it is possible to read ‘A Bottle of Perrier’ as the exploration of the kind of material once treated by H. Rider Haggard (who died in 1925) in the 1880s, subverting patriarchal, imperialist Victorian narratives and imbuing them with a renewed relevance for a post-war climate of disillusion.[394] The very fact that Wharton’s story uses a commercial product in its title can be read as a deliberate attempt to undermine the notion of heroism associated with earlier narratives, by reminding the reader of the everyday world of contemporary modernity. It is also a story in which individuals are forced by circumstances to engage with notions of identity in a context where conventional reference points are lacking.

The narrative begins by introducing the reader to Medford, ‘of the American School of Archaeology at Athens’, who is making a journey into the North African desert to visit his ‘queer English friend’ Henry Almodham’ (p. 271). We are told three times in the opening few paragraphs that Medford is ‘young’ so as to create an expectancy that his inexperience may have an impact on the way the story is told. Although it is a third-person narrative, it is Medford’s perspective that is followed, similar to the method adopted with the character of Mary Boyne in ‘Afterward’. So when we are informed by the anonymous narrative voice that ‘Now he understood’ (p. 271) why his friend had chosen such a remote place to live, we may suspect that Medford’s understanding is limited to the essential romance of the location. Even so, it is suggested that the building he finds may only be his friend’s ‘pretext; or one of them’ (p. 271), noting that the site must be for a ‘scholar and misogynist’ a ‘wonderful refuge’ (p. 271). How much this assertion is based on Medford’s experience of

[394] H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and *She: A History of Adventure* (1887) are perhaps the best-knownexamples of such narratives.

his friend's character and how much is based on the place itself is left unspecified, but it the writing implies it is an impression formed by the location itself, and this comment on Almodham reinforces his being one of those dying aesthetes referred to by Schaffer in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, seeking refuge in the desert as a last stand against the forces of encroaching modernity.

The house occupied by Almodham is described as being 'half Christian fortress, half Arab palace' (p. 271) as if to give emphasis to a cultural inheritance that is not only ancient and physically remote physically from the modern world, but is also of a hybrid construct with the legacy of different ideologies mixed together in an ambiguous present moment. This again gives the setting the feel of that which is appropriate for a person of aesthetic tastes:

> Below, in an inner court, a little wind, rising as the sun sank, sent through a knot of palms the rain-like rattle so cooling to the pilgrims of the desert. An ancient fig tree, enormous, exuberant, writhed over a whitewashed well-head, sucking life from what appeared to be the only source of moisture within the walls. Beyond these, on every side, stretched away the mystery of the sands, all golden with promise, all livid with menace, as the sun alternately touched or abandoned them. (p. 271)

This passage establishes the location and subtly introduces the importance of the fig tree and the well, and the idea that this is an environment in which moisture is a precious commodity. Nonetheless, in Medford's eyes the scene has the promise of a place removed from daily cares:

> And what a place it was to rest in! The silence, the remoteness, the illimitable air! And in the heart of the wilderness green leafage, water, comfort – he had already caught a glimpse of wide wicker chairs under the palms – a humane and welcoming habitation. Yes, he began to understand Almondham. To anyone sick of the Western fret and fever the very walls of this desert fortress exuded peace. (p. 272).

The effect created is one of security, comfort, and inertia, which reflect Medford's mindset. He has recently been suffering from malarial fever and his journey through the desert has left him with a touch of sunstroke, circumstances which contribute to his sense of disorientation and need to find peace.

The romantic descriptions of the isolated home by Medford fills the void left by the absence of Almodham, who has apparently ridden off to view some ruins. In his place there is just a manservant, Gosling, who is described as he appears in Medford's consciousness as being of uncertain cultural background. It is telling that it is the dwelling that first stimulates Medford's interest, and it is seen initially as a manifestation of its owner's personality. As a servant, Gosling is seen only as a means of obtaining information and refreshment, not as an individual, but he does sufficiently attract Medford's interest for him to note a supposed 'cosmopolitan' background and to speculate about his origins – 'English, Italian or Greek, which was he?' (p. 271). This is developed further when the young American observes Gosling's face as he rises up the 'ladder-like stair' that leads to the roof. His close examination of the servant's head in particular reveals certain physical characteristics, all of which are presented as being a casual response to the circumstances of Medford's position as Gosling comes in to view:

> [He] saw the manservant's head rising towards him. It rose slowly and Medford had time to remark that it was sallow, bald on the top, diagonally dented with a long white scar, and ringed with thick ash-blond hair. […] The servant, moving aside, looked up, and Medford perceived that his air of surprise was produced by the fact that his intensely blue eyes were rather wider open than most eyes, and fringed with thick ash-blond lashes; otherwise there was nothing noticeable about him. (p. 272)

This intensity of Medford's gaze is significant partly because it raises the question of to what extent there is a homoerotic element in such close observation, but also because it again contributes to the sense of the story as being concerned with aesthetes who take particular notice of details. In this context it is worth noting that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes was conceived an aesthete, one who had cultivated particular skill in observing details to draw conclusions that would not be obvious to less observant individuals. Because of the way in which the encounter takes place there is an echo of Vernon Lee's description of the way language can be used to express empathy:

> *Einfühlung* [empathy] … is at bottom of numberless words and expressions whose daily use has made us overlook this special peculiarity. We say, for instance, that hills *roll* and mountains *rise* …. We attribute movement to motionless lines and surfaces; they *move*, *spread out*, *bend*, *twist*, etc. They do, to quote M. Souriau's ingenious formula, what we should feel ourselves doing if we were inside them. For we *are* inside them; we have felt ourselves, projected our own experience into them.[395]

Medford's scrutiny of Gosling is not expressed in this kind of figurative language, but it does demonstrate a degree of visual engagement with, it seems, little desire to get beyond the material appearance. But when he attributes the serving man's 'air of surprise' to the widening of his eyes, Medford begins to project himself into his idea of Gosling. A conversation follows in which the servant tries to tempt Medford into having wine with his dinner, and what follows is an attempt to construct empathetic communication between master and manservant, marked when Medford asks Gosling for his name – a gesture that results from a feeling that he has been too abrupt in his refusal to take wine with his meal – which is followed up by Gosling giving an account of his background. In some respects, this narrative reverses the situation presented in 'The Lady's Maid's Bell' as the centre of

[395] Lee, 'Recent Aesthetics', *Quarterly Review* 199, No. 398 (April 1904), 420-43 (433).

consciousness in 'A Bottle of Perrier' is provided by the privileged character rather than the servant. What is recorded from Medford's perspective is that Gosling manner of speech revealed a 'sort of palimpsest Cockney lined with Mediterranean tongues and desert dialects' (p. 271). This concern with language can also be attributed to the kind of concern with 'careful delineation of regional speech and customs' which Schaffer identifies as being part of 'aesthetic territory' when the 'emphasis [is] on the sensuous exoticism' of spoken words.[396] In fact, we learn that Gosling was born in Malta, although he claims to 'know England well' (p. 273). This is followed by what is a key revelation in the narrative as he confesses that he desires 'to have 'ad a look at Wembley', but for some reason Almodham has not yet granted this request, even though Gosling believes that it has been promised. An author's footnote in the text states that Wembley Stadium had been the site of the 'famous' Empire Exhibition in 1924 (p. 273). These details, including speech reminiscent of the rendering of soldier's language in Rudyard Kipling's 'Barrack-Room Ballads' (1890), with the emphasis in a capturing non-standard working-class idiom, not only helps to place the story in the context of the aesthetes, but also of British imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century.

There is a sub-text in the narrative concerning the spread of Western culture, developing further on the titular bottle of Perrier, a brand name adopted by St John Harmsworth (1876-1933) after he had purchased a spring in France from Dr Louis Perrier.

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[396] Schaffer, 2000, p. 48. Schaffer notes that E. Nesbit,also transcribed 'local diction' in this manner. For a fascinating discussion of one of Edith Nesbit's supernatural stories, 'The Ebony Frame', see Anne DeLong, 'Framing the Fin-de-Siècle Female Narrative', in McCormick, Mitchell, Soares, eds., 2020, pp. 16-21. See also Andrew Hock Soon Ng, 'The Fantastic and the Woman Question in Edith Nesbit's Male Gothic Stories', McCormick, Mitchell, Soares, eds., 2020, pp. 135-151.

His elder brothers – Alfred, Lord Northcliffe, and Harold, Lord Rothermere - were responsible for developing popular journalism in Great Britain, and in order to buy the Perrier site St. John sold his stake in the *The Daily Mail*. The following account of the commercialisation of the bottled Perrier Water is given on the website of Perrier, which is now part of the Nestlé group:

> Harmsworth decided to abandon spa activities at the site - a fashion that went out of style early in the century - refocusing on the production of drinking water. It was a logical decision for an Englishman, since the British were having a love affair with soft drinks at the time. His goal was simple: to convert everyone in the British Empire to the benefits of mineral water. […]
>
> Harmsworth reasoned that if he could convince the British army in India of the unique qualities of his little bottle, he could go on to conquer the remaining British colonies. It was a simple idea - and it worked. Following its success in the colonies, Perrier water was served at Buckingham Palace, and Harmsworth was awarded the title "Purveyor by appointment to his Majesty".[397]

A bottle of Perrier has significance within British culture as a symbol associated with colonialism – even the distinctive shape of the bottle was derived from the Indian clubs that Harmsworth used for physical exercise.[398] When Medford insists that he will not have wine, it is Gosling's suggestion that he should have mineral water, saying: '"Shall we say a bottle of Perrier?"' (p. 273). Medford responds - and at this moment the narrative shifts so that it partly captures his inward feeling: 'Perrier in the desert! Medford smiled assentingly, surrendered his keys and strolled away' (p. 273). Wharton hints that he has given himself up to the atmosphere of the place and his idea of colonial luxury, but it should be remembered that this is partly Medford's fantasy based on the perception of comfort and ease implied by wicker chairs and the shade of palms. The inclusion of the bottle of Perrier

[397] https://web.archive.org/web/20020315070100/http://www.perrier.com/EN/EntrezBulle/rubrique4.asp [accessed: 22.10.20].
[398] Ibid.

reiterates the image of Western imperialist dominance and the extent to which commercialisation is part of that cultural dynamic, and by surrendering his keys to the manservant, Medford is giving up his independence of thought – the theme of Medford surrendering himself is repeated in the text (see also p. 275). In fact, there is something distinctly uncanny in the way in which he succumbs to what will increasingly become a situation in which he feels entrapped.

This sense of ease is seductive to Medford, and Wharton effectively conveys this through her description of the locality, her interests in house design aiding her ability to capture the feeling of the setting:

> There was something vaporous and insubstantial about the whole scene; even the long arcaded room opening on the court, furnished with saddlebag cushions, divans with gazelle skins, and rough indigenous rugs; even the table piled with old *Times* and ultra-modern French and English reviews – all seemed, in that clear mocking air, born of the delusion of some desert wayfarer. (p. 273)

Wharton manages to evoke the notion of the oasis as being partly a mirage - or even of a drug-fuelled hallucination, with its associations with opium dens frequented by aesthetes. At the same time, hers is a vision of the world that is counterpointed by the trappings of modernity, with the appearance of newspapers and periodicals. The periodicals are described as being 'ultra-modern French and English reviews', and this particular detail – perhaps suggesting publications such as T. S. Eliot's *Criterion* (founded in 1922) – places Wharton's narrative within the wider context of literary modernism.[399]

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[399] See Jason Harding, *The Criterion: Cultural Politics and Periodical Networks in Inter-war Britain* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2002).

**Wharton's Modernism: Empathy and Rejection, Past and Present**

Wharton's relationship with modernism relates to a complex set of interactions between her own practice as a writer, which was strongly influenced by the aesthetes, and the emerging generation of artists that appeared before and after the First World War. Wharton was a writer who took a keen interest in the trends among her contemporaries, attempting to understand new perspectives and commenting on the way fiction had changed during her lifetime. Whilst she was firmly rooted in the practice of her generation, she could as has already been mentioned appreciate a major modernist such as Proust. Nonetheless her position in the literary marketplace was not fundamentally dissimilar to that faced by other members of the ghostly sisterhood in that she became aware in the post-war period, apart from the success of *The Age of Innocence*, that her work was increasingly treated by the critics (as was that of her friend Vernon Lee) as a survival from a previous era. To the world of Jazz and the 'Bright Young Things' of the flapper generation she must have felt as if she was a writer of a world that seemed to have passed away. May Sinclair was the member of the sisterhood who was most clearly aligned with the pre-war modernists (and as a suffragette aligned with the younger generation of feminists) and continued to be associated with them following the First world War when her most successful work was published (*The Life and Death of Harriet Frean*), but she too soon found that her work was no longer regarded as one of the writers who were seen to be in harmony with the world of the 1920s.  As Jennifer Haytock states, Wharton 'participated in the literary, social, and political questions of the modernist era without necessarily

agreeing with other modernist writers.'[400] Wharton's instincts were to be suspicious of new attitudes and new ways of interpreting the world, but at the same time, and as a woman in particular, she was liberated by the new age which allowed her to engage in a critique of a culture that was based around dominant male power. Dyman states that the well in 'A Bottle of Perrier', which we finally learn has become contaminated by the corpse of Almodham, 'symbolizes a pervasive, clinging problem: patriarchal authority and elitist insensitivity passed from level to level in the hierarchy and from generation to generation'.[401] Haytock amplifies this point and suggests that 'Wharton's short stories show, through form and content, a concern with masculinity and the nature of male social and political power'.[402] Such readings place Almodham as a representative of male power in the text, as he is portrayed to be a relic of a dying aesthetic culture Coupled with speculation regarding the significance of the modernist periodicals present, this all help to imply Almodham was someone wholly engaged in being up to date with the latest thinking in the arts, rather than just the embodiment of inherited patriarchal tradition. Wharton questions the dominant 'idea that modernism was a radical break with a repressive Victorian past' by suggesting that an 1890s aesthete such as Almodham is, in contrast, quite a disciple of later modernists.[403]

Wharton was openly scornful of the idea of new for newness's sake, writing in her essay *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) that she believed that modernists were convinced to

[400] Jennifer Haytock, *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 182.
[401] Dyman, 1996, p. 123.
[402] Haytock, 2008, p. 182.
[403] Schaffer, 2000, p. 250.

break with the past because of 'the fear of being unoriginal'.[404] This anticipates the view of critics like Schaffer, who suggest that 'the need to make it new came, not from the general sense of "coming late in a tradition," but from many modernists' very specific anxiety about the influence of the previous generation.'[405] As Almodham is physically absent from the text, his presence is felt in the traces that have been left behind to haunt the narrative. This is suggestive of the way in which the modernists were haunted by the 'tragic generation' of the poets of the 1890s – Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, and John Davidson. The method of authorial invisibility that T. S. Eliot described in his essay 'Tradition and The Individual Talent' – first published in one of the 'ultra-modern […] review[s]' of the kind mentioned in the story, (p. 273) *The Egoist*, in 1919, and can be read in the light of being haunted by literary tradition. Of course in 'A Bottle of Perrier' the invisibility of the man who is known to live in a castle built during the Crusades is because he is already dead, but it is interesting to consider Eliot's call on the poet not to express their personality and instead be 'a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways'.[406] In this formulation, when applied to 'A Bottle of Perrier', the narrative becomes a means through which the supernatural represents a past which continues to live in the present, transcending chronological time, for although Almodham and his values have ceased to exist in a material sense, they still exert an influence on the living. Monika Elbert in 'T. S. Eliot and Wharton's Modernist Gothic' suggests that both 'A Bottle of Perrier' and *The Waste Land* (1922) describe 'the fragmentation of the modern mind and the possible

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[404] Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (New York: Scribner's, 1925), p. 14.
[405] Schaffer, 2000, p. 247.
[406] Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 1953, p. 28.

solutions for healing and integration in some distant past'.[407] The continuing existence of the past is expressed by Gosling's repeated references to his master as if he were still alive, and while this is obviously expedient of him as he doesn't want to reveal what has happened, as well as his guilt, it creates within the text the feeling of Almodham's presence – and the prospect that he might turn up at any moment, as well as the prospect that he might never return. These are the conditions of a haunting, where a presence is elusive and felt to be exerting power without any tangible evidence of being physically present. In 'A Bottle of Perrier' the connection of the past with the present is ironically associated with a feeling of timelessness that the location provides, creating an interplay between the trappings of modernity and a sense of the infinite as Medford observes, 'there were no time measures in a place like this' (p. 276). It can be argued that there are no time measures because he has entered an elaborate tomb of aestheticism which only superficially resembles a place of the living. The modern world has no place anymore for the aesthetes values, and such values are ultimately not so very different from those of the modernists that followed, but as Schaffer writes, 'if the modernists wrote an oddly optimistic tale of themselves, the aesthetes were true to their own salient styles when they wrote themselves a slow tragedy.'[408] By this light it is possible to interpret the modernist magazines which pile up in the Almodham's desert retreat, where there is no one interested in reading them, as symbolic of both the slow tragedy of aestheticism and the dead end of modernism in Wharton's sardonic view.

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[407] Monika Elbert, 'T. S. Eliot and Wharton's Modernist Gothic', *Edith Wharton Review* 11:1 (Spring 1994), 19-23 (19).

[408] Schaffer, 2000, p. 251.

When Medford asks whether there is any news of Almodham, it sets up the following key exchange:

> Gosling was gathering up the dishes with dextrous gestures. For a moment he seemed not to hear. Then – from beyond the candle gleam – 'News, sir? There couldn't 'ardly be, could there? There's no wireless in the desert, sir; not like London.' His respectful tone tempered the slight irony. 'But tomorrow evening ought to see him riding in.' Gosling paused, drew nearer, swept one of his swift hands across the table in pursuit of the last crumbs, and added tentatively: 'You'll surely be able, sir, to stay till then?'
>
> Medford laughed. The night was too rich in healing; it sank on his spirit like wings. Time vanished, fret and trouble were no more. 'Stay? I'll stay a year if I have to!'
>
> 'Oh – a year?' Gosling echoed it playfully, gathered up the dessert dishes and was gone.' (p. 276)

There are several things to note about this passage, but I want to look in detail at two specifically: Firstly, it places Medford – as one who is temporarily assuming the role of the absent master and his values – and Gosling as servant in opposition. In this role, Gosling is seen to be entirely domesticated, assuming a gendered role that has been traditionally associated with women, taking away what hard power he had in Almodham's absence, and replacing it with the soft power of influence, using casual remarks as an endeavour to place ideas in Medford's mind that support his best interests. As Dyman states, although there are suggestions that the relationship between Medford and Gosling might have the potential for starting on a more even basis, 'the patterns of the story show deeply engrained traditional behaviours'.[409] It should not be overlooked that Medford is an American, and it is possible to read the narrative as a criticism of Americans who are seduced by European imperialism. This indicates that Wharton sees America at a crossroads in its development; in its inheritance of European values and in a danger of

[409] Dyman, 1996, p. 120.

becoming another dominant power rather remaining true to the democratic ideals of its constitution. However, Dyman's analysis is more complex than such a simple conclusion would imply, as she describes Gosling as 'conditioned to servitude, dependent on the praise he receives for doing his job properly, […] imprisoned in a state of mind'.[410] Gosling is placed in a position similar to women in patriarchal society, making it far easier for Medford to relax into the status quo of recent political and social arrangements, as implied by the manner in which the night (suggestive of a more symbolic darkness) subtly invades his consciousness and causes him to give up the more critical attitude that he had been endowed with at the beginning of the story.

Secondly, this passage expresses an irony that juxtaposes the trappings of modernity, those items which are used to give the Englishmen a sense of security, and the timelessness of the ancient desert landscape. In fact, the desert only seems to be unchanging because its features are monotonously repeated, the 'healing' that Medford associates with the timelessness of the place based on the collapse of its 'spirit'. Medford is a modernist, but also an inheritor and admirer of Almodham's aestheticism, while Gosling, in contrast, has a practical view of the situation (the comment about his 'dexterity' is an indication of this), noting that the restfulness that is felt by Medford is no more than simply the consequences of the usual methods of up-to-date information provided by the wireless being unavailable, allowing a slippage into a superseded moment of cultural change. This is a reminder that, although the Crusader castle might seem to imply a return to an older way of existence and evoke memories of the troubadour poets championed by Ezra Pound, it is

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[410] Dyman, 1996, p. 120.

still not part of the modern world. In contemporary global reality events are occurring at the pace with which they normally do in modern industrialised societies, rendering such immersion in the past as a form of death, perhaps of spiritual death, but certainly of a lack of engagement with external realities which must determine the economic viability of such an existence is likely to be unsustainable and must eventually come to an end. Furthermore, it is the realism of Gosling's consciousness, with his understanding of power relationships, that are based on a grasp of the material world of the present. He knows that the life fantasies, such as those acted out by Almodham and Medford, can only exist where there is a presence, whether it's a person or an object, standing between the harsh environment and the last remote vestiges of imperialist civilisation. In this context, the availability of bottles of Perrier is a luxury that maintains the veneer of order and security, indicating the reliance on commercial products and, as is revealed, concealing the fate of Almodham. Simultaneous with this skill in maintaining, in unobtrusive ways, the necessities of everyday life is the associated means by which Gosling carries on the fictional notion that his master is likely to return. Gosling serves as one who maintains illusions, but the strain of performing this function has caused him to want to return to contemporary London. Wharton is very skilful in the way in which she creates in the reader empathy for both Medford and Gosling's viewpoints, as well as showing the interplay of how these viewpoints work in relation to each other. Both characters exist within their own limited perspectives, and a mix of both humour and irony are created by the dramatic situation. Haytock suggests that Wharton's 'subtle deployment of irony combined with a carefully controlled use of point of view' was used effectively in her major novel *The Age of*

*Innocence* (1920), and I believe that the same can be said of 'A Bottle of Perrier'.[411] While she avoids the modernist abruptness employed by Eliot in *The Waste Land* when handling the contrast between the commonplace-present and the historical-past, Wharton does question modernity. In the light of a female feeling for time awareness she ironically suggests that the apparently timeless desert and antiquities of the Middle Ages are valued by those unwilling to take their part in the modern world. This is emphasized when, at the end of the passage, Gosling takes seriously Medford's flippant remark that he might stay a year, which is seen as an unrealistic adherence to a doomed situation.

The extent to which Medford has been cut adrift from the contemporary world is revealed the next morning when he realises that conventional notions of the passage of time no longer apply in the desert: 'There were no time measures in a place like this' (p. 276). Significantly, the experience becomes one in which the expected arrival of his friend gives way to a sense of infinite time, and this in turn gives rise to a feeling of the mystery of experience. The following evening we are told that Medford 'absently fingered the ultramodern reviews – three months old, and already so stale to the touch' (p. 276). Wharton stresses here the dated feel of these publications, which for her are marked by the intention to demonstrate their self-conscious modernity, making them prone to become dated in the sense of rapidly becoming passé – her implied criticism being that anything that aspires to modernity is in constant danger of ceasing to be modern due to the inevitable passage of time. This is not only expressed by an intellectual sense of awareness of noting dates, but through the sensuous feel that their 'stale touch' conveys. This adds to

[411] Jennifer Haytock, 'Modernism', in Laura Rattray, ed., *Edith Wharton in Context* (New York: C.U.P., 2013), p. 365.

the feeling that the story is concerned with death, and that death has already occurred, the consciousness therefore presented as a response to the physical aspects of the reviews as much as their contents.

Medford soon throws himself down on to the divan, further removed from the world and indulging his capacity for being able to dream. He attempts to enter Almodham's mindset, and concludes, through his imagination rather than through any evidence, that the elder man spent 'a lot of time in dreaming' punctuated by sudden excursions into the desert in search of 'unknown ruins' (p. 277), deciding that this is 'not such a bad life' (p. 277) and, once again, confirming his allegiance to the previous generation of aesthetes. Whilst this may be an insightful and intuitive response to letting his mind loose in the context of Almodham's material circumstances, there is no factual support for such notions. What informs Medford's interpretation is his capacity to feel Almodham's impressions and to make them the substance of his thought, in a way that recalls Pater's call on 'the aesthetic critic … [to] regard […] all objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations'.[412] This ability to surrender the self to aesthetic pleasure is what leads Medford astray. To some extent, this reflects Lee's concept of empathy, although she remained ambivalent about Pater's ideas, believing that they could lead to 'a crumbling away of all such possible unity and efficiency of living'[413], precisely the kind of malaise suggested by Wharton in relation to the aesthetic world that Almodham has created for himself. Lee

[412] Pater, *The Renaissance*, 1980, p. xxx.
[413] Lee, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1895), p. 255-257, as quoted in Kandola, 2010, p. 24.

evolved her theory around the way in which seeing and understanding aesthetics was not simply a matter of engagement with an object, but recognition of the importance of all kinds of secondary influences relating to the body and the mind in physical space. As she states, 'my aesthetics will always be those of the gallery and the studio, not of the laboratory.'[414] The experience that she tried to pin down was one that was forged through sensory responses and the ways in which these informed the mind, subsequently forming into language. In Wharton's 'A Bottle of Perrier', it is bodily torpor that dominates Medford's consciousness, and he is presented as being seduced by the way in which he allows himself to respond to what he perceives as being a tempting lifestyle, presenting a critique of the limits of empathy in relation to aestheticism.

The things that seduce Medford are undercut by the intrusion of the everyday modern world, as provided by Gosling. A casual piece of conversation that follows Medford's reverie reveals that Gosling has been working for Almodham for nearly twelve years without a holiday, which prompts Medford's assurance that he will intercede on his behalf when the master returns. Significantly, we are told that

> the servant stood still regarding him, turned by the moonlight to a white spectral figure, the unquiet ghost of a patient butler who might have died without his holiday. (p. 278)

This is as symbolic as it is grimly comic. Gosling briefly becomes an unreal presence in the narrative, foreshadowing the link between death and the lack of a holiday – holidays would have been comparatively rare until the early twentieth century when increased leisure time became a feature of working class life, and therefore an indication of the intrusion of

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[414] Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness* (London: John Lane, 1912), p. viii.

the contemporary world. We should remember that this is how it is implied Medford regards Gosling, a man from a lower social class and with a racial background which Medford appears to regard as inferior, and therefore Medford's view is one of suspicion and distrust. This image is a symbol of an alternative outcome, the ghost of what might have been, and so Wharton here uses the supernatural element to stress the potential in the narrative for a different ending, and in doing so anticipates the kind of fiction that acknowledges its own artificiality – the sort of metafiction of which John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is an important example, wherein 'the 'author' breaks the illusion of omniscience and thereby, consciously exposes the fictionality of the text.'[415] As Wharton was writing in a tradition of a broadly realist narrative, she uses the supernatural aspect in her stories to allow for the breaking of realist conventions by allowing the possibility of fantasy to break through the boundaries of the page to suggest a double outcome. I would also suggest that her narrative perspective works as a method that allows her to dramatise an empathetic response in relation to Medford's consciousness who, as a result, is then momentarily able to imagine this alternative view of events. This duality complicates 'the distinction […] between the real and the fantastic' which Maxwell claims is to be found in both Henry James and Vernon Lee.[416]

It is the mystery of what has happened to Almodham that gives drama to the story, but there is also the growing awareness that Medford is in a place that is remote from the familiar; a growing sense of his vulnerability in the midst of a culture that is different from

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[415] Kandola, 2010, p. 60. Kandola points out that Vernon Lee looks forward to this kind of fiction in 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', which in its final English form was published in 1926, the same year as 'A Bottle of Perrier'.
[416] Maxwell, 1997, p. 268.

what he understands. Haytock states that, in her travel book *In Morocco* (1920), Wharton expresses 'her feelings of alienation – of being a visitor in an impenetrable culture'.[417] This is exploited in the story of 'A Bottle of Perrier', but here it is given an extra dimension by the way in which Gosling contributes to Medford's feeling of isolation, suggesting to Medford that an excursion into the desert would be dangerous without knowing the trails or having a guide; Gosling then further suggests, with a 'careless contempt', that the Arabs are, 'not – wholly trustworthy' (p. 277). These are conventionally racist opinions and reveal that Gosling does not share a romantic attitude towards his existence in the desert. Unconsciously, this shared form of racist attitude isolates the two Western men in a relationship of intimacy, based on 'terms of real friendship' (p. 278), partly initiated by Gosling's need to maintain control of the situation and, therefore, make it seem that the only person who Medford can trust is him, suggesting a degree of cunning about and that perhaps Gosling overplays his role to such an extent as to rouse suspicion. Medford finds the situation 'odd', declaring:

> 'It's odd that you say you don't trust any of these fellows – these Arabs – and yet that you don't seem to feel worried at Mr Almodham's being off God knows where, all alone with them.' (p. 280)

Medford is seduced by the strangeness of the place, allowing himself to interpret his circumstances in regards to an inter-textual relationship with Shakespeare's *Tempest*: 'the land was full of spells' (p. 280). This literary way of responding to the situation is presented as belonging to the temptation to indulge in a subjective vision of the place (as an illustration of remembered and familiar texts), which serves to make the unfamiliar and threatening colonial world in fact tamed by association, Wharton making it clear that these

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[417] Haytock, 2013, p. 367.

are 'dreams' - a delusion, a form of dream that excludes reality and attempts to construct meaning based on a romantic idea of the exotic. Wharton subtly introduces the notion that the narrative is concerned with the business of interpretation, something Henry James observed when he wrote 'it is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance' in a correspondence with H. G. Wells[418], something of which Wharton was also self-consciously aware, stating in her essay *The Writing of Fiction*:

> Is it useless to try for a clear view of the meaning and method of one's art? Surely not. If no art can be quite pent-up in the rules deduced from it, neither can it fully realize itself unless those who practise it attempt to take its measure and reason out its processes. It is true that the gist of the matter always escapes, since it nests, the elusive bright-winged thing, in that mysterious fourth-dimensioned world which is the artist's inmost sanctuary and on the threshold of which enquiry perforce must halt; but though that world is inaccessible, the creations emanating from it reveal something of its laws and processes.[419]

[418] July 10th, 1915. Henry James, *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, edited by Philip Horne (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1999), p. 555.
[419] Wharton, 1925, pp. 118-119.

**Wharton's Uncanny**

In 'A Bottle of Perrier' this 'mysterious fourth-dimensioned world' is given its expression through the way Wharton shifts the story's focus away from Medford's relatively passive impressionist consciousness as he becomes more aware of his situation, attempting to resolve the mystery of where his host might be. At first he had accepted the narrative that he had been given by Gosling, assuming that Almodham had gone off to look at ruins in the desert, but as his consciousness develops ways of seeing through the way circumstances have been presented to him, he becomes more critical and active. There is an undercurrent of homoeroticism in the various interactions that Medford establishes with the exclusively male world which encounters in the desert: from coming to visit the older man living a bachelor life, to his sympathy with Gosling's desire to be seen as a human being rather than as a servant, and finally to his encounter with Selim, the groom: 'over the shared match they drew nearer and the Arab's diffidence seemed to lessen' (p. 281). Medford begins to consider that Almodham might be very much nearer than he had imagined and that he, Medford, is being watched by his friend from some hidden vantage point in the castle, lamenting 'he no longer knew what to believe or whom' (p. 285) and as his suspicions develop, Medford becomes 'oppressed by the uncanniness of the place' (p. 289). In this he is forced to consider that, as Freud suggested, that 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.'[420] This formulation suggests that which is alien and threatening can also be that which is in some way close to home. Freud complains that 'treatises on aesthetics' only focus their attention on 'what is beautiful, attractive and sublime – that is, with feelings of a positive nature –

[420] Freud, 2001, p. 219.

and with the circumstances and objects that call them forth, rather than with the opposite feelings of repulsion and distress'.[421] This is a critique of the kind of systematic aesthetic thinking that emerges in the work of Vernon Lee, though Freud may have had in mind the work of German theorists such as Oswald Külpe, whose laboratory in Würzburg Lee had visited in 1911. It is important to note that Freud stresses the essence of these experiences is based on 'feelings' as opposed to any objective reality, therefore centring the concern on the nature of how things are experienced. In Wharton's 'A Bottle of Perrier' the familiar, the exotic, and the repulsive are brought together in a way that challenges the reader with an increasing sensation of growing horror and claustrophobia. For Medford what is 'familiar' is what he has taken for granted - his immediate surroundings, the water which he has drunk and in which he has bathed, and the personality of Almodham, his absent friend – and these uncanny revelations are eventually drawn together:

> Medford went back to his seat; but as soon as he had resumed it he fancied that the gaze of his hidden watcher was jealously fixed on the red spark of his cigar. The sensation became increasingly distasteful; he could almost feel Almodham reaching out long ghostly arms from somewhere above him in the darkness. He moved back into the living-room, where a shaded light hung from the ceiling; but the room was airless, and finally he went out again and dragged his seat to its old place under the fig tree. From there the windows which he suspected could not command him, and he felt easier, though the corner was out of the breeze and the heavy air seemed tainted with the exhalation of the adjoining well. (p. 289)

Medford is trying here to regain some of his previously held illusions about the romantic beauty of an exotic setting he once indulged himself in upon first arriving at the castle. Now his experience is spoilt by a persistent feeling of unease that will not allow him to settle in peace, even though Wharton continues to convey the domesticity of these circumstances. Something unspecified and beyond the conscious mind is active in the scene and is felt by

[421] Freud, 2001, p. 218.

Medford in terms that suggest to him the ghostly presence of Almodham. Significantly the older man's arms are stretched out to him, but to what purpose is left unsaid – in desire, perhaps, or maybe in warning. Dyman suggests that 'Wharton's sensitive portrayal of the vulnerable Medford reflects her situation as a female at the mercy of male power', but here that vulnerability is highlighted as being at the mercy of the dead. Dyman reads the stretching arms as representing 'patriarchal authority and elitist insensitivity passed from level to level in the hierarchy and from generation to generation' and this is symbolised in the foul smell emanating from the well, as well as in the 'sick and viscous' (p. 286) substance that clings to Medford's body after washing in water that was meant to purify.[422] We might also consider it a result of the clinging aesthetic sensibility from which he cannot free himself from. Medford can sympathise with Gosling's modernity, but his background drives him to align himself with Almodham and his values. That what is clinging to his body contains elements of Almodham's decaying corpse adds to the element of 'repulsion and distress' that Freud identified as being part of the uncanny experience. Wharton has inverted the ritual of washing into a symbol of contamination, making Medford's horror one of a physical revulsion that he literally feels on his skin and works on his conscious mind: 'His head ached, and he fancied that the sweetish foulish smell clung to his face as it had after his bath' (p. 289).

Medford is stirred by an interest to look into the well after slowly becoming aware of its importance in the wider mystery, although 'the moon was not yet high enough to light those depths, and he peered down into blackness' (p. 290). It is implied that it is the

[422] Dyman, 1996, pp. 121-123.

blackness of hell that he stares at as he peers into the well. Gosling appears and seems to be trying to push Medford down into the well, but when he resists and challenges the servant, he is told by Gosling that he was trying to save him from falling into the well as a result of his former feverish condition. Medford suggests to Gosling that Almodham is close at hand, although he still believes him to be loitering somewhere hidden and watching the scene from above. Gosling's assertion that Medford should not spend the night in proximity to the well leads Medford to make the chance declaration that it is perhaps 'the hour when Mr Almodham comes out to take the air?' (p. 290). Medford had meant to surprise Gosling into a confession that he knows that his master is present in the castle, but this instead produces Gosling's sudden breakdown. Medford's suggestion that Almodham might take the air is ironic in the context of the narrative's claim that the air surrounding the well is 'unpleasant' and 'unhealthy' (p. 289), but this is lost on the characters in the moment of dramatic confrontation while it reminds the reader the location is one associated with death. It becomes obvious that Gosling understands by Medford's comment that Gosling has witnessed Almodham's ghost, whereas Medford had merely meant to imply the living Almodham had been walking in the courtyard. However, Medford quickly readjusts to the 'new fear [that] scuttled down [his] spine' (p. 291). This is the feeling that the presence of the uncanny can produce, leaving impression on the senses in response to that which the mind is on the point of discovering, but has yet to consciously process. It is not the unconscious that Wharton conveys, but rather the moment before consciousness is fully realised and conveys in anticipation a faint intuition of the true horror of the situation. A degree of heightened awareness follows from this sudden revelation that Gosling believes in his conscience that the place may be haunted by Almodham's ghost.

Curiously, it is not Medford's physical reaction that is brought to fore of the narrative in the denouement, but the revelation of Gosling's 'madness' and his self-confession. Medford makes no reply and does not move; Gosling reiterates that his tipping point was reached by the failure to allow him a holiday, and the chance to spend time at his cousin's house in Hammersmith in order that he can visit Wembley Stadium: ''im driving me to madness, sir, sheer madness' (p. 291). Now, though, Medford is implicated in the argument that Gosling previously had with his master as he suggests that Almodham had a sudden breakout of enthusiasm at the prospect of being visited by the young American. In the reported speech, Almodham proposes to keep Medford at the castle stating that he is '"just my kind"' – precisely what is meant by this is not stated, and it may imply that the two men share similar antiquarian interests or a common view of society, but more likely it is a shared misogyny and similar aesthetic values. It could also hint at same sex desire, an interpretation given further credence in Gosling's rambling speech when he suggests that Almodham 'was getting used to 'aving Selim about 'im and his 'ealth was never better' (p. 291). This may serve to establish the extent to which Gosling feels marginalised, and the real cause of his racist abuse of the Arab servants.

For most of 'A Bottle of Perrier' the authorial perspective has followed Medford's impressions, but at this point the reader comes close to seeing the events through the eyes of Gosling. This is achieved through what is essentially a monologue – the reader does not enter Gosling's consciousness, but listens to his words. This has the effect of making it impossible to know whether what Gosling relates of Almodham is faithfully told, the

voracity of which is implied only by the intensity with which he speaks. According to his testimony, Gosling blames the lack of Perrier water as the cause of the discovery of his crime – suggesting that a regular supply of the bottled water would have allowed him to deflect Medford's attention away from the well and keep him in a state of privileged complacency as to the actual situation. It is by this interpretation at the point when modern conveniences are no longer available that questions are asked about the circumstances.

The status of the ghost is left ambiguous as only Gosling believes that it might exist, and he is clearly suffering from a mental breakdown. It is never stated whether Gosling has actually seen a ghost, rather that he convinced by that Medford has through a misunderstanding. Medford does not see Almodham walking in the courtyard as a ghost, but simply imagines that the living man has been playing a trick on him, secretly frequenting the place and giving it an uncanny feeling. This complicated set of perspectives generates the implication of the ghostly and thus Wharton effectively uses the possibility of the supernatural to shape the final scene of the drama. Almodham the aesthete is already long dead, but the man who inherits his values in the text senses his presence everywhere around him. Gosling, acting as the spokesman for the contemporary world, knows that aestheticism is really dead. However, he is thrown into confusion and confession because Medford seems to indicate that he has been haunted by the presence of that which he knows could reveal the truth about the murder. Both Gosling and Medford have a claim on the legacy of this aesthetic relic in the desert and the man who made it an romantic setting. Modernity is a space that is haunted by the previous aesthetic generation, a place where the conveniences of technology call into doubt the necessity of much cultural baggage.

There is another way in which the story makes use of the uncanny dimension through the personification of the moonlight just before Gosling's final confession: 'Gosling, getting to his feet, stood there bowed and shrunken in the accusing moonlight' (p. 291). Whilst Medford makes no comment, it is the purity of the ethereal moonlight that casts a sense of final judgement. Ironically, the moonlight casts an aesthetic spell over the scene, as is given emphasis in the last sentence of the story: 'The moon, swinging high above the battlements, sent a searching spear of light down into the guilty darkness of the well' (p. 292). Monika Elbert suggests that the moon, representing 'the dark feminine realm', illuminates 'the secret of male bonding'.[423] This presupposes a conclusion in which the intimacy and understanding established between the men could lead to forgiveness. There is no clue in the text to support this point of view, as Medford's reaction is left as a blank and the reader is left to draw their own conclusions.

**Conclusion**

Wharton considered modern literature 'really began when the 'action' of the novel was transferred from the street to the soul'[424], implying a rejection of the notion of realism in its purist form as materialism. While she associated what she understood as 'Freudianism & all its jargon' with 'sewerage', she realised that consciousness was the area of importance that defined modern fiction and separated it from the realism of the mid-nineteenth century.[425] However, she was openly opposed to the hidden – whether occultism or the sub-conscious – which she regarded as being forms of 'third-rate flashy

[423] Elbert, 1994, p. 22.
[424] Wharton, 1925, p. 3.
[425] Letter to Bernard Berenson, February 21st, 1922. Wharton, 1988, p. 451.

rubbish'. [426] Writing to Bernard Berenson, Wharton suggested that it was better to 'develop the *conscious*, & not grub after the sub-conscious'. She believed the conscious mind should be trained 'to see, to attend, to reflect'.[427] Her supernatural fictions are thus attempts to use the fantastic to look through the surface of life and to engage the mind to see more clearly as a result of reflection. Her concept of seeing is complicated by the attendant processes of understanding and thinking, which is similar to Lee's notion that seeing is about much more than recording only what the eye observes, but is also related to the faculties of mind, memory, and heart. This emphasis on what is not materially present is another indication of how Wharton understood the way in which people were haunted by the past. When writing these stories – 'The Lady's Maid's Bell', 'Afterward', and 'A Bottle of Perrier' – Wharton exhibited and brought together the range of 'reading experiences' which Schaffer identifies as being found in the aesthetic novel of the 1880s:

> The genre of aesthetic fiction combined the apparently incompatible elements of the Gothic, the male homoerotic continuum, the adventure story, the Angel in the House, and the protomodernist psychological novel.[428]

In 'A Bottle of Perrier', Wharton re-examines this heritage and constructs a narrative which celebrates aestheticism's radical challenge to the realist school of writers whilst demonstrating that, by the 1920s, it was being superseded by the insistent needs of modernity for utility over beauty. One of Freud's criticisms of the aesthetics of his time is that they had not much to say about negative feelings, those 'feelings of repulsion and distress' which he claims are associated with the uncanny.[429] In this context Wharton can

[426] Wharton, 1988, p. 451.
[427] Wharton, 1988, p. 451.
[428] Schaffer, 2000, p. 157.
[429] Freud, 2003, p. 123.

be seen to be responding to such a criticism by writing a narrative which subverts the dominant aesthetic assumptions associated with a Crusader fortress by introducing the banal and the sheer physical repulsion induced by the presence of a rotting corpse in the water supply, and not just any corpse but that of the protagonist's friend. It is almost as if Wharton takes Lee's ideas about the perception of the beautiful and reverses them, creating an uncanny experience that is truthful to the feelings of repulsion. In this way she responds to the challenge of modernity and creates a state of consciousness where the ancient setting is one which deludes the characters into a complacent assumption of ease and escape from the world, where their acquired culture is an impediment which prevents them seeing things clearly. The presence of the past in the present is one which is linked to misreading the situation as it materially exists. In is difficult not to see this as evidence that Wharton wanted to demonstrate that the real circumstances of Western colonial control were at a point of collapse where the myth of the past breaks down when confronted by the reality for the need for water in a hostile environment. In contrast, Sinclair, also writing in the post-First World War period, develops a variation of the ghostly sisterhood's feminist supernatural fiction to explore ways in which perceptions are transformed through the agency of the uncanny.

# Chapter Three

## May Sinclair: Borderlands, Consciousness, and Feeling in *Uncanny Stories* (1923)

'We have authentic evidence bearing on the existence of a fairly extensive borderland, lying between Magic and Mysticism – the region of the so-called "psychic powers." '
- **May Sinclair**, *A Defence of Idealism* (1917), p. 293.

### Introduction

May Sinclair was the most self-consciously forward looking of the ghostly sisterhood, and yet her work is as frequently haunted by the past as that of Lee and Wharton. It was natural for Lee with her interest in cultural history to look back into the remote past as a means of investigating the present moment; for Wharton it was her own experiences in life which allowed her to measure the past and the present as something which was linked to the changes in society which had occurred in her lifetime: the very titles of her most successful novel *The Age of Innocence* and of her autobiography *A Backward Glance* suggest this sense of being in the present and yet conscious of the recent past which was also part of her life. In both the cases of Lee and Wharton the present was habitually haunted by the past. This was the source of their feelings of the uncanny as a recurrence of something which had seemed to have been lost. The case of May Sinclair is slightly different in that she began to write her stories under the influence of her studies in mysticism and psychoanalysis. She exploits what Freud called the 'old *animistic* view of the universe' to invest her tales with a magic which is very much of its own time being concerned with states of consciousness. She also responds to the notion put forward by Freud that the uncanny relates to the

suppression of an emotion which creates fear through being 'something that has been repressed and now returns.'[430] In that sense her supernatural fiction is also about the survival of the past in the present and it is which leads to her admittance to the ranks of the ghostly sisterhood.

In this chapter I will explore the work of Sinclair in relation to the cultural shifts of the early twentieth century and how newly emerging ideas about modern mysticism, consciousness, psychology, the occult, and the aesthetics of modernism, helped to shape her thinking. The critical and philosophical writings of Sinclair afford us an insight into the development of her ideas and they formed the direction her writing was to take. In particular, supernatural fiction allowed Sinclair to explore states of consciousness that existed outside the boundaries established by the dominant realist narratives of the nineteenth century - although some of the writings of Dickens and the Brontë sisters anticipate her use of the supernatural to examine beyond the materiality of existence, her peculiarly-modern vision focusing on the complexity of human psychology and the hidden elements behind selfhood, elements of which dramatise and empower resistance to conventional society. In a number of ways, the ideas that Freud was developing in relation to the unconscious had an important impact on Sinclair's thought, with those expressed in *The Uncanny* having particular relevance to her work, forming a 'suggestive' background.[431] It is in *Uncanny Stories* – published in 1923 – that Sinclair is able to give expression to a complex range of interests that reflect not only her particular concerns, but also those

[430] Freud, 2003, p. 147.
[431] Hugh Haughton argues that Freud's writings about art and literature are 'scattered and fragmentary', belonging to the tradition of essays by influential writers such as William Hazlitt, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Baudelaire, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde. Haughton refers to what he calls their 'peculiarly suggestive charge'. Hugh Haughton, 'Introduction', Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. xiv.

which coincided with the concerns of the wider culture in a period when modernism was creating an 'intense creative ferment'.[432] My interpretation of the period's dynamism is one in which orthodox religious structures of faith in Western Europe were being challenged - challenged in part by a general interest in occultism, with its private sense of the mystical, as well as the survival of a pre-historical sense of the past which to haunts the present. This mysticism answered people's needs, running counter to the materialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and reacting to the scale of death caused in the First World War. These occult or mystical notions can be found in what is hidden or not openly expressed in the culture of the times, incorporating a range of philosophical and spiritual responses to human experience which, in turn, relate to an understanding of moments being on the borderland between space and time. The important point I want to stress is that although Sinclair was developing her own understanding of the world, she was also responding to tendencies found in the works of many of the major writers and thinkers of the period. Not only that, but these ideas were shared with a diverse range of people as part of the wider experience of what represented the common culture of the period. Vernon Lee, for instance, was among those concerned with uncovering what was understood to exist beyond material existence, such as in *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912), where she and Clementia Anstruther-Thomson had observed that 'in a certain obscure region of the soul […] odd, enigmatic, half-hidden vestiges' might be discovered and lead to 'the God whom we believed to lie hidden in that unnoticed corner of the mind, Apollo himself. The radiance of life shaped in the image of man.'[433] Lee is appealing to a search for

[432] Schaffer, 2000, p. 251.
[433] Vernon Lee and Clementia Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), pp. viii-ix.

the occult, while also expressing herself in relation to the aesthetic movement by reference to Apollo, who as the Greek god of music, dance, truth and prophesy, was usually represented as an ideal of male beauty. By equating her investigations into aesthetics and psychology with a mystical awareness of the universe, Lee was articulating views which anticipated some of the key debates of the period, portraying obscure areas of the mind as indicators of ways in which human knowledge was created in relation to consciousness and unconsciousness. The key task of the writer was increasingly focussed on examining the function of the individual mind and the articulation of that which was beyond material reality.

Occult ideas can be seen to be generally present in Western societies at this time and find expression in a variety of ways. Henri Bergson (1859-1941) rejected the kind of nineteenth-century materialism to be found in the theories of Herbert Spencer 'on the grounds that it neglects or distorts crucial aspects of conscious experience.'[434] Sigmund Freud took matters further by revealing that material life was influenced by the subconscious – asserting, as Raymond Williams put it, 'the claim that there is a reality beyond man's reach'.[435] In regards to these emerging ideas, later in this chapter I will investigate May Sinclair's use of the supernatural in her short fiction as a means to express her radical philosophy of consciousness, and the emphasis on the vital part played by feeling in the expression of Sinclair's modernist ideas about the complex nature of human consciousness. Among those responsible for helping shape these ideas was Remy de Gourmont (1858-1915), whose essay 'The Value of Education', first published in 1900,

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[434] Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Dover Publications, 2010), translated by Mabelle L. Andison, pp. 11-13 (p.11).
[435] Williams, 1961, p. 14.

expressed: 'life is a series of sensations bound together by states of consciousness.'[436] In de Gourmont's interpretation, ideas should only be engaged with when they lead back to a sensation, creating a link between consciousness and ideas by stating that it is ideas experienced as sensations that are most valuable to the human mind. In this period there was a great deal of stress placed upon the relationship between the body and the mind, with the consciousness providing a means by which existence is linked together, and Remy de Gourmont was a major influence on the ideas of emerging modernism. T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were profoundly influenced by de Gourmont, and some of his writings had appeared in *The Egoist* in 'authorized' translations by May Sinclair's friend Richard Aldington in 1915. These theories about consciousness also relate to a developing understanding of human responses to individuals and nature, embracing a conception of aesthetics that, as Freud suggested, is 'not restricted to the theory of beauty, but described as relating to the qualities of our feeling.'[437]

**Sinclair's Success and Neglect**

Before exploring these ideas further, it is necessary to examine Sinclair's critical reputation through the twentieth century. Andrew J. Kunka and Michele K. Troy suggest 'Sinclair's place within the pantheon of modernism has often been overlooked because she began the twentieth century as a widely successful novelist'.[438] This formulation assumes that her status as a writer at the beginning of the twentieth century marks her as belonging to an aesthetic background that has already established itself as the dominant culture before

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[436] Remy de Gourmont, *Decadence and Other Essays on the Culture of Ideas*, translated by William Aspenwall Bradley (London: Grant Richards, 1922), pp. 102-117 (p. 107).
[437] Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 123.
[438] 'Introduction', Andrew K. Kunka and Michele K. Troy, eds., *May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 2.

those more modernist experiments had been fully formed. This can make her early work appear to belong to outdated fashions in comparison with the generation of writers beginning to emerge in during the Edwardian-era, although surviving aesthetes were still active and, as has been argued by Jonathan Freedman and Talia Schaffer, 'aestheticism segued into modernism by producing a new image of the author as an elite, high-art professional.'[439] As Suzanne Raitt makes clear, Sinclair's first truly successful novel, *The Divine Fire* (1904), 'made her both famous and relatively wealthy'.[440] Whilst it may be true to say that her comparative commercial success in this period has made later critics ignore the seriousness of her work, it has to be admitted that Sinclair's critical neglect began in the later 1920s as the work of her younger contemporaries, such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence, began to eclipse her own, so that by the time she died in 1946 she was almost forgotten in literary circles and among the wider public. The critic Martin Seymour-Smith recorded in his *Guide to Modern World Literature* (1973) that, although her work merits attention, by the early 1970s 'not a single book of hers is in print'.[441] However, if we are to understand her work at all we should not forget that, as already stated, her early novel *The Divine Fire* (1904) was a bestseller, making her a celebrity, and in 1920 the poet and journalist Thomas Moult wrote that she was 'the most widely known woman artist in the country and America'.[442] Sinclair was regarded as being an important figure in the literary world of her own times in the early twentieth century.

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[439] Schaffer, 2000, p. 251. Freedman, 1990, pp. 245-257.
[440] Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 77.
[441] Martin Seymour-Smith, *Guide to Modern World Literature* (London: Wolfe Publishing, 1973), p. 283.
[442] See Theophilus Boll, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist: A Biographical and Critical Introduction* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1973), p. 16. See also Raitt, *May Sinclair*, p. 77.

As evidence of this contemporary fame, Sinclair travelled to the United States in 1905 and was given the kind of welcome provided to significant novelists by her American publisher Henry Holt, meeting Charles Eliot Norton, William James, as well as being invited to the White House, and later sitting next to Mark Twain at a reception to celebrate his seventieth birthday.[443]

In addition to this public acclaim she was a writer who was personally associated with some of the key figures in literary modernism, such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, and she contributed to the popularisation of one of the most familiar terms in modernist discourse, 'stream of consciousness', a term she applied to the prose fiction of writers such as Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.[444]

Sinclair can be thought of as displaying particularly modernist tendencies not only through her defining of 'stream of consciousness,' but through her interest and support of the early developments of psychoanalysis. She was a writer who was interested in trying to understand that riddle of modern life and science; a writer interested in exploring an unconscious still considered to exist in a region of human experience beyond the material. Sinclair was drawn towards the supernatural as representing an aspect of the psychic forces which she believed could be discovered working under the surface of life, but there is further parallels to be found in her feminism and an awareness that conventional society denied women the opportunity to express themselves, their thoughts, feelings, and

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[443] See Raitt, *May Sinclair*, pp. 96-98.

[444] 'Stream of Consciousness' is a term that was coined by William James to describe the consciousness in relation to the experience of subjective life in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). It was later applied to the new method of the novel as it was emerging in the first two decades of the twentieth century in Sinclair's essay 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson' (*The Egoist*, April 1918), 57-59. I have called this an essay because it is clearly intended to be something more than a review, taking as its theme an attempt to account for features that characterise the new fiction being written in the period.

livlihoods as confined and unacknowledged as the unconscious, possessing the raw energy to disrupt the comfortable surface of Edwardian patriarchy. That she was passionately engaged with the modernist school of writers who emerged around 1908-10 is an indication of the radical relationship between aesthetics, mysticism, and feminism in Sinclair's work.[445]

**Sinclair's Non-Fiction**

The range of Sinclair's interests is comparable to that of Vernon Lee, a writer and thinker who also suffered neglect for belonging to the period of transition between Victorian realism and the twentieth-century's experimental modernism, engaging in the development of aesthetic theory and the establishment of a deeper understanding of the relation between the work of art and the individual (see Chapter One). Sinclair was another embodiment of the type of woman writer that Virginia Woolf notes as part of the contemporary scene in the 1920s in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), identified amongst those women who no longer confined themselves to fiction alone, writing on all kinds of subjects, from literary criticism and history through biography, philosophy, and the sciences.[446] Others cited being by Woolf include Gertrude Bell and Jane Harrison, all of whom were praised as this new kind of woman writer that developed 'a wider range, a greater subtlety' than previous women writers.[447] It is important to remember that Woolf was influenced by

[445] See Rebecca Bowler and Claire Drewery, 'Introduction: May Sinclair's Interdisciplinarity', in Rebecca Bowler and Claire Drewery, eds., *May Sinclair: Re-Thinking Bodies and Minds* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 1-17 (p. 1).
[446] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own & Three Guineas* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 74. Paul March-Russell states that Sinclair attempted to 'integrate her fiction with her reading and philosophical thought', in his introduction to May Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), p. 9.
[447] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own & Three Guineas* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 74. However, on a personal level Woolf seems to have not have been impressed by Sinclair, writing of her as a 'woman of obtrusive, and medicinal

her predecessors, although she tended to contribute to the marginalisation of their importance, and Schaffer rightly notes that these included Vernon Lee and May Sinclair: 'Woolf's use of psychological studies, impressionistic language, and stream-of-consciousness may well derive from the pioneering work of Sinclair, Lee, and [Lucas] Malet.'[448] Taking this point further, Claire Drewery has suggested in a recent article that Sinclair's short fiction resonates:

> with the pertinent contemporary intellectual discourses of her era, across the rich, interdisciplinary fields of psychoanalysis, philosophy, fiction and modernism, and illustrate the value of her contribution to the radical contemporary shift in literary representations of the textual, corporeal and conscious forms of the modernist subject.[449]

To understand Sinclair's modernity, it is necessary to analyse the ways in which her supernatural fiction, predominantly collected into *Uncanny Stories* (1923), drew upon her multidisciplinary work in other fields of study and thought, as well as cementing her reputation as a late comer to the 'ghostly sisterhood'. The very title of the work, with its emphasis on the word 'uncanny', published only four years after Sigmund Freud's influential essay, indicates a resonance between his work just after the end of the First World War and her own concerns during the same time period.[450] Before we look further

morality' in 1909. See Suzanne Raitt, '"Dying to Live": Remembering and Forgetting May Sinclair', in Rebecca Bowler and Claire Drewery, eds., *May Sinclair: Re-Thinking Bodies and Minds* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 21-38 (p. 21).

[448] Schaffer, 2000, p. 195. 'Lucas Malet' was the pseudonym of Mary St. Leger Kinsley Harrison (1852-1931), author of *The Wages of Sin* (1891), *The Gateless Barrier* (1900), and *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901).

[449] Claire Drewery, 'Transgressing Boundaries; Transcending Bodies: Sublimation and the Abject Corpus in *Uncanny Stories* and *Tales Told by Simpson*', in *May Sinclair: Re-Thinking Bodies and Minds*, edited by Rebecca Bowler and Claire Drewery (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 213-31 (p. 229).

[450] Freud uses the term to identify a tendency to discover the 'strange' existing in the context of the ordinary. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' [translated by Alix and James Strachey], *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 17 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 217-256. According to the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, Fifth Edition (2003), the use of the word uncanny in English to describe something 'supernatural or occult' can be traced back to the late sixteenth century in Scotland. The use of the term that most

at her supernatural stories and how they relate to her wider concerns with modernity, psychology, and individual freedom, it is important to identify some of the reasons that led Sinclair to engage with the radical literary work being undertaken by her younger contemporaries, such as Dorothy Richardson, Ezra Pound, F. S. Flint, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), T. S. Eliot, and Richard Aldington.

Suzanne Raitt points out that Sinclair's 'journey into the twentieth century began with a characteristically Victorian crisis of faith.'[451] Although her family background was not especially intellectual, she was nonetheless drawn towards a life of study and investigation. Her life was deeply affected by an insecurity stemming from the failure of her father's business and his bankruptcy, and she responded to these changes in lifestyle by retreating into a solitary existence and finding the emotional attachments of home life a burden. Later, the untimely death of her father and an uneasy relationship with her mother, followed by the deaths of her brothers (four died between 1887 and 1896 from heart failure, and the last in 1905), confirmed a tendency of withdrawal from close personal relationships.[452] Running alongside this was a need to communicate with others and find ways to counter her lack of faith in traditional Christian belief – something that was tested when, in the 1890s, Sinclair rejected a marriage proposal from Anthony Charles Deane, a Church of England curate and later ordained a priest.

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closely matches Freud's to describe something 'uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar' dates to the mid nineteenth century.

[451] Raitt, *May Sinclair*, p. 16.

[452] Raitt, *May Sinclair*, p. 20. Max Saunders suggests that, 'Her self-effacing nature – Mark Twain, who sat next to her during a dinner in 1905 in New York in his honour, thanked her for her "remarkably interesting silence" – gave her a particularly sharp eye for arrogance and egotism, especially in the male … .' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37966 [accessed 18.05.2019].

The most important elements of Sinclair's intellectual development are concerned with modernist aesthetics, female psychology, and idealist philosophy, three strands can be related to her desire to transcend the limitations of a fixed bodily existence and circumstance. This awakened in Sinclair a desire to discover another dimension to material existence, which she found through an exposure to ideas characterising the examination of thought, and similar developing intellectual arguments. Her essay, 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson', first published in *The Egoist* in April, 1918, is now regarded as one of the most significant statements about the emerging modernist novel.[453] This was Sinclair's attempt to account for certain tendencies she found in emerging fiction, such as Dorothy Richardson's *Pointed Roofs* (1915). The term 'stream of consciousness' had originated in relation to psychology and was used by William James in his study *Principles of Psychology* (1890) to denote the relationship between consciousness and the subjective experience of life which he identified with the metaphor of flowing water. Making use of a term borrowed from psychology illustrates the way that Sinclair was able to draw upon ideas and terms in other fields of human knowledge and indicates her interdisciplinary range of interests. This diversity and her important contribution to the intellectual life of her time is increasingly being recognised, but can make her career difficult to assess as it crosses into different areas of activity and knowledge, requiring those studying her work to also travel across a broad intellectual territory.

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[453] May Sinclair, 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson', *The Egoist* (April 1918), pp. 57-59. Rebecca Bowler writes: 'What Sinclair did do was link the phrase 'stream of consciousness' with the emergent psychological novel, and the label has been a feature of discourse about modernism ever since.' Bowler, ''Stream of Consciousness', Drama, and Reality', May Sinclair Society, July 2013, https://maysinclairsociety.com/may-sinclair-and-stream-of-consciousness/ [accessed 17.06.2019].

Rebecca Bowler and Claire Drewery state that 'the interdisciplinarity of Sinclair's output, whilst ensuring her success as an author, eludes straightforward categorization and this has arguably contributed to the traditional critical neglect of her writing.'[454] Sinclair was an author whose work attracted critical analysis in her own time, with the influential magazines such as *Little Review* featuring essays on her creative work,[455] and she was on friendly terms with many of the most important writers of day, including Thomas Hardy, Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford), Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, H. G. Wells, and W. B. Yeats. Some of these writers were engaged in a critical re-shaping of English literature, and whilst Hardy may not have been an innovator in regards to literary form, his work had challenged Victorian notions of morality in writing *Jude the Obscure* (1896). It can be argued that Sinclair's range of critical and creative work matches that of her contemporaries, and although her range of interests were not necessarily unique in the period, it remained unusual for a female writer. Her reputation has suffered a neglect that has not been found to be the case with the men in her circle. It is not sufficient to state that she was not adequately recognised in her own time, as there is evidence that she was regarded as of significance as one of the leading writers of the day – as just one example, the serialisation of *Mary Olivier: A Life* in the *Little Review* occurs alongside the serialisation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (January-May, 1919). One may suspect that, as a woman, Sinclair's reputation has been more easily marginalised than would have been the case if she had been man, but the fact that she was already the age of fifty when literary modernism was establishing itself

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[454] Bowler and Drewery, 'Introduction: May Sinclair's Interdisciplinarity', p. 1.
[455] The *Little Review*, edited by Margaret Anderson, was one of the most significant magazines of the period 1914-1922 and made the claim, "Making No Compromise with the Public Taste". *Mary Olivier* had been serialised in the periodical and the issue for December 1919 contained a discussion of the book by Edna Kenton and Jane Heap (*The Little Review*, Vol. VI No. 8, December 1919), 29-32.

would have also been a factor in her neglect – the so-called ‘Men of 1914’ were all born in the 1880s.[456]

Contemporary feminist critics have been increasingly examining the works commonly excluded from a male dominated literary canon, giving voice to those women writers who have been silenced by our collective configurations of the past. In the light of these recent reappraisals, I suggest the interest Sinclair’s work excites today can be read not just in relation to the significance of her writing, but also in relation to the various areas of intellectual activity revealed in her broader pursuits and the way that these varied intellectual interests contributed the content and form of her works and the way in which she was actively engaged in the cause of women’s suffrage. Sinclair’s significance as a woman of wide intellectual and cultural scope makes her work all the more deserving of attention and re-examination. As Andrew J. Kunka and Michele K. Troy have noted,

> [Literary] history has generally found her [Sinclair] not-quite-modernist-enough for a place on the other side of the pearly gates with the likes of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Ford Madox Ford, and Virginia Woolf, […] the case can be made that her contributions to the formation and dissemination of literary modernism rank with theirs.[457]

The long neglect of Sinclair’s work from the 1920s onwards was largely due to the feeling that her work had become passé (a situation compounded by her disappearance from the public sphere due to her ill health). It was not until the revival of interest in neglected women writers during the 1980s when Virago, a noted feminist publishing company, began

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[456] The ‘Men of 1914’ was a phrase coined by Wyndham Lewis in his autobiographical *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937) – it was used to denote James Joyce (born 1882), T. S. Eliot (born 1888), Ezra Pound (born 1885) and Wyndham Lewis himself (born 1882).

[457] Kunka and Troy, ‘Introduction’ in *May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1-18 (p. 2).

republishing her books in their 'Modern Classics' series that readers were again able to discover what a fascinating and fine writer she could be. This neglect can only in part be related to the challenges provided by the 'interdisciplinarity' character of her writing, as her non-fictional work had been out of print for a long period. However, for the novelist and critic Walter Allen, writing in 1964 when even her fiction was largely forgotten, Sinclair is important because she was 'among the earliest English novelists to have been aware of the work of Freud'. Allen relates this as being a crucial aspect of what are now regarded as Sinclair's best-known novels, *Mary Olivier* (1919) and *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (1922), while also noting that she was a 'student of psychology and philosophy'. [458] In other words she is important as a writer of fiction but we can not wholly understand her unless we also understand that she had a deep engagement with ideas which exist beyond the scope of purely aesthetical concerns. It can be said, therefore, that her work has attracted attention and respect precisely because she was more than just a novelist and story writer. However, the onset of Parkinson's disease in the 1920s, and the resultant withdrawal from public life, caused her reputation to suffer. By the time a new generation had emerged following the Second World War, Sinclair had died and her work no longer seemed to have the contemporary significance of those writers who had risen in the interim, such as W. H. Auden, George Orwell, and Evelyn Waugh whose experience of life had been shaped wholly in the twentieth century. Paul March-Russell states that, among the beneficiaries of Sinclair's Will were Ezra Pound, H.D., and Richard Aldington, all

[458] Walter Allen, *Tradition and Dream: The English and American Novel from the Twenties to Our Time* (London: Phoenix House, 1964), p. 15.

of whom were 'slightly embarrassed' as they had 'all but forgotten her.'[459] There were younger writers and critics, however, who had not forgotten May Sinclair's best work. The publisher, editor, and poet, John Lehmann (1907-1987), was one such writer, and he included *Mary Olivier: A Life* in his 'Holiday Library' in 1949 - a series of modern reprints of important works first published in the previous thirty years. The blurb, probably written by Lehmann, claiming that the novel had 'made a profound impression upon novel readers thirty years ago [ie. in 1919, when it was first published]'. He goes on to suggest that the book was important because it presented 'the gradual, painful advance of modern woman towards her birthright of equality'.[460] In other words, he saw her work as being significant in the context of the onward march of feminism, at least as it was interpreted in the mid-twentieth century.

Sinclair's varied interests, rather than being a weakness in her work, make her fiction a valuable record of a negotiation between the writer and the emerging energies of modernity; energies that could not be adequately understood in respect to the aesthetic revolution that influenced literary forms most associated with modernism and mark a clean break from the immediate past. This narrative of modernism's clean break with the past, in any case, as Schaffer has argued, is not 'a modernist story at all, but a good old-fashioned yarn in which brave heroes finally triumph over the prudish public.'[461] Aestheticism had already ushered in new perspectives into literature, and whilst Sinclair's

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[459] Paul March-Russell, 'Introduction', *Uncanny Stories* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), pp. 7-21 (p. 7)

[460] [John Lehmann], May Sinclair, *Mary Olivier: A Life* (London: John Lehmann, 1949), blurb on front flap of the dust jacket.

[461] Schaffer, 2000, p. 250.

relationship with aestheticism as a movement is complicated, due in no small part to her preoccupations with psychology and impressionism, she clearly straddles the transition between aestheticism and modernism. Her work should be understood in relation to new ways of looking at the world that were not connected with the more obvious elements of modernity such as cinema, the motor car, or the aeroplane, but to new freedoms established in response to women's suffrage and the opening up of the world to alternative ways of living at odds with notions of tradition, from esoteric religious practices or to vegetarianism. Bowler and Drewery note that Sinclair 'combines psychology and philosophy (and biology, physics, mathematics and mysticism) in her non-fiction texts so as to make each discipline inform the other.'[462] Not only is Sinclair an interdisciplinary author, writing fiction as well as non-fiction, but even in her non-fiction she is able to engage with very varied areas of knowledge, and this fusion of disparate elements became a necessary part of her intellectual composition. Such a combination of different elements, however, can arouse scepticism from specialists within each separate field, and it should be maintained that Sinclair's approach was, first and foremost, a creative one, and that her contribution to each of these areas was of less importance as expressions of abstract thought than they were a means to develop a means of interpreting human experience primarily conceived in the imagination and expressed most fully in fiction. For Sinclair, as for Remy de Gourmont, it was necessary to find ways in which it would be possible to understand 'the multiple relations which unite the varied elements of nature.'[463] As Bowler and Drewery state, 'there is [… ] a close similarity between the styles of her fictional and non-fictional writing; discernible for example in the clear dialogue between her two works

[462] Bowler and Drewery, 'Introduction: May Sinclair's Interdisciplinarity', (2018), pp. 1-17 (p. 7).
[463] Remy de Gourmont, 1922, p. ix, as quoted in the introduction by William Aspenwall Bradley.

on philosophical idealism and her volume of short fiction entitled *Uncanny Stories* […] .'[464] They go on to link Sinclair's philosophic writings with her major novels in their account of the 'indisciplinarity' of her work, but it is also necessary to examine the relationship between her short fiction and her theories more closely. This offers an opportunity to understand aspects of Sinclair's vision that are not explored as deeply in her longer fiction, particularly as these shorter forms allowed her to develop her response to the varied occult tendencies that were among the characteristics of the age. I argue it is in these stories that we should look for some of the most profound understanding of Sinclair's comprehension of the cross-currents of ideas that can be lost in the fragmentation of her vision into various disciplines of intellectual activity, and if there is a synthesis to be found, it is to be found in her imaginative work.

**A Vision**

The short fiction featured in *Uncanny Stories* (1923) are testimony to Sinclair's particular vision of the nature of the world.[465] But what is this vision? After the shock and destruction of the First World War, with its mechanised slaughter, there was a moment when the traditional ghost story of the Victorian age could be transformed into a means of expressing fictionalised case histories of psychological illness, as the European generation, after going through such a traumatic experience, was haunted by so much loss. The desire to respond to this sense of being haunted was in part linked to the spread of the theories of

[464] Bowler and Drewery (2018), pp. 7-8.
[465] There is also an earlier supernatural story, 'The Intercessor' (1911), which should be linked to those printed in *Uncanny Stories*. Although it was not originally published in that collection, Paul March-Russell includes it in his reprinted edition of *Uncanny Stories* in 2006.

Freud.[466] It is again important to stress the relevance of Freud's influential essay 'The Uncanny' being published in 1919 when European society was just beginning to come to terms with the consequences of the war on the mental health not just of individuals but in terms of cultural impact.[467] Claire Drewery comments on the 'discernible shift' from purely supernatural readings of unexplained experience, moving from those that explored the inner life of the individual or their state of feeling in relation to psychology, in a chapter devoted to 'The Modernist Uncanny Tradition: Mysticism, Metaphysics and the Psychological' in her study *Modernist Short Fiction by Women* (2011). She locates this transformation at a point when 'the Victorian fascination with the occult gave way in the early twentieth century to an interest in the newly-developing science of psychoanalysis'.[468] Interest in the occult continued to develop through the early years of the twentieth century, sharing an overlap with the emerging science of psychoanalysis in a way analogous to the manner in which aestheticism and modernism also overlapped. Both the occult and psychoanalysis were concerned with what lay beneath the surface or what was hidden in human consciousness. As Hugh Haughton suggests, 'Psychoanalysis began as a would-be science of the enigma.'[469]

Sinclair herself was on friendly terms with W. B. Yeats, a leading member of The Hermetic Society of The Golden Dawn who continued to be interested in the occult, as his book *A Vision* (1925, revised 1937) makes clear. John Bramble's study *Modernism and the*

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[466] Paul March-Russell suggests that Sinclair was able to 'incorporate new layers of sophistication [into her fiction] through her gradual awareness of Freud […].' March-Russell, *Uncanny Stories* (Wordsworth, 2006), p. 14.
[467] The standard translation into English is by James and Alix Strachey published in 1955.
[468] Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal Tradition in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), p. 67.
[469] Haughton, 'Introduction', *Freud*, 2003, p. vii.

*Occult* (2015) reconfigures the relationship between modernism and the occult to reveal the extent to which the occult continued to play a part in the development of avant-garde aesthetics. It is an exercise that Roger Griffin has identified as a critical method by which modernism can be explored in terms of 'the reaction against perceived spiritual decline, physiological and psychological degeneration, and moral decadence'.[470] An interest in the occult can be seen not solely to be a part of nineteenth-century decadence, but to be a component of the desire to escape from nihilism and construct something that is new around which a new faith or social belief might be found, which carries through to modernism's utopian attempts to engage with the new opportunities and visions of the twentieth century for the purposes of making a better society. Typically, this has been interpreted in terms of material advancement – such as redesigning cities on the lines of improving the conditions of the people - but there was also a search for spiritual independence from the institutions of conventional religion, in part explaining the success of Theosophy and its attraction of a number of writers and artists, becoming one of the various manifestations of the occult that existed in major European cities from the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century as a reaction against scientific rationalism. Those who sought enlightenment away from conventional religious practice included, as Deborah Tyler-Bennett indicates in an essay on Djuna Barnes, noteworthy individuals such as

> Aleister Crowley (under all his many aliases), Rudolph Steiner, Raymond Duncan, George Gurdjieff, Khrishnamurti, Madame Blavatsky, and disciples participating in societies such as various theosophical groups, groups worshipping images taken

[470] Roger Griffin, 'Series Editor's Preface', in John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. xi –xii.

> from Ancient Egyptian ritual, and magic groups such as the Order of the Golden Dawn'.[471]

In May Sinclair's *A Defence of Idealism* she noted the same tendency:

> There is not one of the mystic's claims that is not under serious consideration at the present day […]. The things he calls spiritual and the things other people call psychic are too closely platted together to be easily disentangled. What is more, the belief in the supernatural, even Magic itself, has never died out of human history. Mysticism itself, in some form or other, has never died.[472]

Sinclair identifies the way in which mysticism can be seen as part of the modern attempt to understand what is hidden, and also as part of a far older tradition that has survived various shifts in the historical process. Modern mysticism can be seen to be linked to New Age philosophy and a desire to preserve the pagan spirituality of the past, to find an outlet for the traditions derived from the world of folklore and non-standard belief. Such a view gives significance to the mystical tradition because it can be seen in relation to the latest developments in science as a means of examining what is obscure, and the development of anthropology as a means for understanding human society is another aspect of this tendency.[473] Mysticism provides the basis for a merging between objective and scientific approaches to the unknown, and the purely subjective and imaginative response to that which cannot be explained in any other way. The incomplete nature of these investigations parallels Vernon Lee's research into aesthetics and in coming to the conclusion that empathy was essential in the formation of theories about beauty and ugliness, and her

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[471] Deborah Tyler-Bennett, ' 'Thick Within Our Hair': Djuna Barnes's Gothic Lovers', in Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, eds., *Gothic Modernisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 95-110 (p. 101).
[472] Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 251.
[473] Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* (First Edition: 1890; Second Edition: 1900; Third Edition: 1906-1915) is the most celebrated attempt to investigate these aspects of human society. A one volume abridgment was published in 1922.

attempts to 'examine and classify every prehistoric kitchen midden of the human mind' in the process.[474]

## The Psychological and Symbolic Narrative

Paul March-Russell notes, following the conclusions of Julia Briggs's classic study of the genre, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (1977), that the works of E. T. A. Hoffman, Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, and Henry James foreshadowed this tendency of blurring the boundaries between the psychological narrative and the traditional ghost story by writing stories which leave the reader unsure whether the supernatural experience described can be understood in relation to objective reality, or whether the cause is some struggling mental state of the protagonist. These works 'equivocate between natural and supernatural explanations […]' and can be read as descriptions of psychological disorder rather than as straightforward accounts of encounters with ghostly presences.[475] Certainly Sinclair's volume of stories fits into such a conception – and we should remember that it was Vernon Lee who pioneered this type of narrative in the late nineteenth century rather than Henry James (see Chapter One). Sinclair's interest in psychoanalysis, which was established before the First World War, gives her work in this field an extra dimension of interest, partly because it recalls Freud's fascination with creative writing.[476] Sinclair's awareness was informed by the

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[474] Lee, 1912, pp. viii-ix.
[475] Paul March-Russell, 'Introduction', May Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), p. 11.
[476] At the beginning of the script of a talk on the subject of 'The Creative Writer and Daydreaming' (1907), Freud says, 'We laymen have always been greatly intrigued to know where the creative writer, that strange personality, find his subjects – which is much the same question as a certain cardinal once put to [Ludovico] Ariosto – and how he contrives to enthral us with them, to arouse in us emotions of which we might not even have thought ourselves capable.' Freud, 2003, p. 25.

psychological insight derived from what she knew about the most recent investigations into unconscious and the importance of dreams in uncovering the mysteries of the human psyche. At another level it could be argued that Sinclair's reason for searching for meaning in supernatural experience was that it was concerned with what exists beyond the limits of physical decay and death.[477]

It is worth returning to James's *The Turn of the Screw* as it represents an early manifestation of the transformation undergone by ghost fiction from being part of a Victorian supernatural tradition to becoming a key text in the burgeoning developments of modernist psychological fiction. In this context it is revealing to look at the ways in which Virginia Woolf wrote about James's story and to contrast it with May Sinclair's own review. Woolf discussed the story in an essay 'Henry James's Ghost Stories' (1921), in which she suggested that:

> The stories in which Henry James uses the supernatural effectively are, then, those where some quality in a character or in a situation can only be given its fullest meaning by being cut free from facts. Its progress in the unseen world must be closely related to what goes on in this. We must be made to feel that the apparition fits the crisis of passion or of conscience which sent it forth so exactly that the ghost story, besides its virtues as a ghost story, has the additional charm of being also symbolical.[478]

What Woolf finds symbolic, in the sense of standing for something that is not literally in the text but exists in the ideas that are behind it, can be related to the potential of the stories to be read in an open-ended way, enabling the reader to find a text rich in metaphor and

[477] Paul March-Russell suggests that the deaths of her brothers 'consolidated Mary's [May was a pseudonym adopted in 1891] own sense of life as shadowy and haunted by forces that might not only be unknowable but also sinister, a feeling that she garnered from the work of Charlotte and Emily Brontë.' Paul March-Russell, 'Introduction', May Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), p. 9.
[478] Virginia Woolf, ''Henry James's Ghost Stories', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Volume III: 1919-1924, edited by Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1988), pp. 319-326 (p. 324).

capable of multiple interpretations. *The Turn of the Screw* can be said to extend the range of the realist narrative, although this is not, of course, the only way in which stories may be read as being 'symbolical'. They may also be read as symbolic in relation to the interpretations of the workings of the mind made through psychoanalysis, as each story can be read as a case history with the supernatural element acting in tandem with the psychological. Freud himself noted that there were a 'class of dreams that have never been dreamt at all – dreams created by imaginative writers and ascribed to invented characters in the course of a story.'[479] Here he is discussing the kinds of dreams imagined by the creative writer; the kinds of dreams that the characters have during the narrative, but he might equally have been discussing the nature of the imaginative text which is the product of a kind of dream created in the conscious mind of the author which may yet give expression to perceptions that belong in the unconscious mind of the characters, interacting with their perception of the external world and the influence of memory and desire.

In a like manner, Woolf's reading of James's best ghost stories, especially *The Turn of the Screw*, can be read as her investigation of a prototype for the modernist 'stream of consciousness' prose narrative. As such it becomes, with its stress on breaking free from 'facts' and giving expression to what remains hidden or unseen, the recording of the way the mind responds when it is understood in terms of subjectivity rather than objectivity –

[479] Freud as quoted by Hugh Haughton in the introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Uncanny*, *Freud*, 2003, p. viii.

an the expression of the fantastic.[480] In regards to Woolf's reading of the ghost story, it is the way in which the James is able to maintain a relationship between the hidden supernatural and the visible world – the world that is understood as exterior - that gives it the opportunity to engage the reader by making meanings through a 'symbolical' method, which proves significant in giving expression to the uncertainty and doubt of modern life. It may be that an understanding of Woolf's symbolical method can be taken as a way in which new life can be breathed into the supernatural elements of Victorian ghost stories by allowing the text to be a means of expressing ideas, or images, that can have symbolic meaning. The French symbolist critic Remy de Gourmont believed that ideas and images were essentially the same, writing 'the idea is merely a worn-out image'.[481] However, the extent to which this symbolism can be linked to psychological presentation and the new science of psychoanalysis cannot be clearly stated. Instead, as Woolf suggests, these modern 'ghosts have their origin within us. They are present whenever the significant overflows our powers of expressing it; whenever the ordinary appears ringed by the strange.'[482] The 'significant' in this case is equated with the supernatural and the 'ordinary ringed by the strange' is a definition of the uncanny. Writers of the ghostly sisterhood make use of the 'significant' to give creative energy to their understanding of what it is to be female in a patriarchal world.

[480] In her influential essay 'Modern Fiction' from *The Common Reader* (originally 'Modern Novels', *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 April 1919), Woolf famously dismisses the work of some of the leading writers of the Edwardian period (H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy) as the work of 'materialists', saying that they are 'concerned not with the spirit but with the body' (p. 158). This is important as it stresses the importance of the soul and the spirit rather than the material facts of existence. Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1925-1928* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), pp. 157-165.
[481] Remy de Gourmont, 'The Dissociation of Ideas', *Decadence and Other Essays on The Culture of Ideas* (London: Grant Richards, 1922), p. 3.
[482] Woolf, 'Henry James's Ghost Stories', p. 324.

In contrast Sinclair's review of 'The Turn of the Screw' still saw it within the tradition of the supernatural tale, remarking that it was 'the most perfect and the most convincing ghost story I ever read',[483] also noting 'that the ghost-lover is on the lookout for his own special thrill. Which is, or may be, independent of any belief in the supernatural'.[484] Whilst this was an assessment of the skill with which James uses the formula of the traditional ghost story, as well as an appreciation of the way *The Turn of the Screw* cleverly avoids the necessity of a belief in the supernatural, yet it cannot be assumed that Sinclair was satisfied with a purely psychological interpretation of the unknown. Her most recent biographer Suzanne Raitt states that:

> She had always been interested in apparitions (she told H. G. Wells that she had seen a ghost as a child), and she was intrigued by the idea of a fourth dimension, of an immaterial world in which the dead moved and had their being and which the living could rarely see.[485]

Sinclair's interest in the ghost story as a narrative is not limited to the interior of the individual's mind, but rather the possibility of giving expression to a hidden world beyond the world of material appearances, to the idea of a 'fourth dimension'. This can be related to the 'stream of consciousness' in that, as an expression regarding the process by which the mind responds to immediate stimulation and is liable to move back and forth between the present and the past, it attempts to convey all that the mind engages with as part of the whole experience felt by the individual at any particular moment. A memory of the past can co-exist with the action of the present moment, but the mind may wonder about the future

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[483] May Sinclair, 'Dreams, Ghosts and Fairies', *Bookman*, Special Christmas Number, December 1923, 142-149, (114). Quoted in Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women* (Basingstoke: Ashgate, 2011), p. 68.
[484] Quoted in David Seed, ''Psychical' Cases: Transformations of the Supernatural in Virginia Woolf and May Sinclair', in Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, eds., *Gothic Modernisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 44-61 (p. 54).
[485] Raitt, *May Sinclair*, p. 129.

and simultaneously consider a number of potential future actions and experiences. Richard Bleiler, in an essay on Sinclair's supernatural fiction, notes that when H. P. Lovecraft wrote about *Uncanny Stories* in his influential essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (1925-27), he stressed that the stories were part of an occult tradition.[486] However, Lovecraft still found that the stories contained more evidence of the psychological method rather than an actual belief in mystical powers – 'a cosmos utterly unreal'.[487] Bleiler goes on to draw attention to a review by Leigh Wilson of Suzanne Raitt's biography. Importantly, Wilson wonders why scholars had neglected to take an interest in Sinclair's supernatural tales and comes to the conclusion that, in Bleiler's words, her 'interest in the mystical and occult are often overlooked because they fail to fit our categories of Sinclair as a writer motivated by "intellect and reason" – the qualities associated with much canonical modernist writing – rather than "faith and feeling"'.[488] Arguably, the contrast that Wilson makes here is between qualities often conventionally equated with the male against those conventionally supposed to be equated with the female. If we accept such a privileging of certain qualities at the expense of others, then it can be claimed that Sinclair's creative work has been obscured in order to place emphasis on her contribution to the literature of her time, particularly her championing of male modernists. By focusing on the elements of canonical modernism that are associated with a male focus on the mind as an instrument of analysis rather than of impression and intuition, Sinclair's work on consciousness is marginalized as

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[486] Richard Bleiler, 'May Sinclair's Supernatural Fiction', in Andrew J. Kunka and Michele K. Troy, eds., *May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 123-138 (p. 123-124).
[487] H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Dover, 1973), p. 82, as quoted in Bleiler (2006), p. 124.
[488] Bleiler, 2006, pp. 124-125. Leigh Wilson, 'The Thinking Woman's Burden' (a review of Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*), *Women: A Cultural Review*, Volume 13, Number 2 (2002), pp. 223-6 (p. 225).

a chiefly feminine perspective.[489] What Sinclair offers instead in her critical and poetical works is a focus on what Jane Dowson refers to as 'the clarity of immediate perception'.[490] The aim of the key works of literature of her time, like *Mrs Dalloway*, Dowson suggests, is towards getting ever closer to the world through a perception that is wholly subjective and distrusts the validity of claims to objectivity. The works of Sinclair imply that her understanding of the mind is as an instrument of perception rather than of intellect, giving expression to what she understood as being a particularly feminine consciousness.[491]

As David Seed states, Sinclair placed importance on 'the perceiving self over the given data of reality'.[492] She was a member of the Medico-Psychological Clinic from 1913, joined the Society for Psychical Research in 1914, and her collection *The Judgment of Eve and Other Stories* (1914) is dedicated to the staff of the Medico-Psychological Clinic.[493] The study of psychology and the study of the paranormal were, at this time, combined without a

[489] Philippa Martindale suggests, in relation to a letter sent to Sinclair by Evelyn Underhill, the mystical writer, after reading *The Three Brontës* (1912), that 'Underhill recognizes Sinclair's unveiling of the sisters' lives and is absorbed by its feminist subtext. That is to say, *The Three Brontës* offers a narrative that expresses a consciousness that both Sinclair and Underhill share. By offering an alternative discourse from the one hitherto applied to the Brontës by patriarchal readings, it carries "conviction" and is given "life"', as Underhill records. Philippa Martindale, 'The "Genius of Enfranchised Womanhood": Suffrage and *The Three Brontës*', in Kunka and Troy, eds., *May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 179-196 (p. 185).
[490] Jane Dowson, '*The Dark Night*: "The Novel into Some Other Form", in Kunka and Troy, eds., *May Sinclair*, pp. 139-157 (p. 140).
[491] The modernist theorist, T. E. Hulme, is of relevance here as one who was a practitioner of the new poetry of imagism, which Sinclair was to champion, and who emphasised a traditionally masculine view of the relationship between the subjective and objective. He took from the writings of Henri Bergson the notion that there is a difference between the 'intellect' and 'intuition', and negatively suggested that if the artist were to rely on intuition alone they would be 'back within an object by a kind of sympathy and breaking down [of] the barrier that space puts between him and his model'. T. E. Hulme, *Speculations*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge, 1960), p. 144. Quoted in Peter Jones, ed., *Imagist Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 29.
[492] David Seed, ''Psychical' Cases: Transformations of the Supernatural in Virginia Woolf and May Sinclair', in Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, eds., *Gothic Modernisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 44.
[493] For a detailed discussion of Sinclair's involvement with the Medico-Psychological Clinic see, Chapter One, Philippa Martindale, '*The ceasing from the sorrow of divided life: May Sinclair's Women, Texts and Contexts (1910-1923),* Durham Theses, Durham University, http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3691/ [accessed: 09/03/2020], pp. 17-34.

clear scientific distinction.[494] For Sinclair they were related in that she sought for evidence of something beyond materialism. Seed has argued that Sinclair's interest in the supernatural was not something that was simply an attempt to creatively explore the unconscious, which had been suggested by Theophilus E. M. Boll in his biographical study, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist* (1973), but rather a subject of serious concern which required investigation and analysis: 'Sinclair stresses the limitations of current psychological knowledge in order to retain at least the possibility of the paranormal. There is certainly no suggestion [...] that such phenomena are unworthy of rigorous investigation.'[495] What Seed is suggesting here is that there is a relationship between Sinclair's serious-minded non-fiction and her supernatural fiction, and that earlier critics such as Boll had failed to highlight her originality. Conventional criticism was reluctant to take her supernatural fiction as seriously as they had her major fictions, like *Mary Olivier* and *Harriet Frean*. In fact, in *A Defence of Idealism* (1917), Sinclair goes further to demonstrate that she takes these matters entirely seriously and does not rule out the possibility of factual evidence of psychic activity being established, and expresses the view that the supernatural was a 'region of the utmost uncertainty and danger'.[496] This is not the statement of one who merely regards the supernatural as a medium of fictive play and imagination, but as a realm which might touch upon profound experiences that have consequences in material existence. Her language might be seen to be a cautious and scientific, yet by suggesting that

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[494] George M. Johnson has demonstrated that 'psychical research and the promotion of new psychological theories went hand in hand in the pages of the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* which combined detailed reports on cases of mediumship, thought transference and related subjects with some of the earliest publications in English of articles by Janet and Freud.' George M. Johnson, ' "The Spirit of the Age": Virginia Woolf's Response to Second Wave Psychology', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Volume 40, Number 2 (1994), 139-164 (140-146).
[495] Seed (2001), p. 52.
[496] Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 283.

there is danger in exploring the supernatural she is making it clear that she entertains a sense of the potential presence of hidden powers.

## Mysticism

Among Sinclair's circle of friends was a woman with whom she shared a deep mutual respect, Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), the Christian mystical writer. In particular, Sinclair owed much to Underhill's influential study *Mysticism* (1911), in which Underhill was concerned with exploring spiritual consciousness and wrote that to 'be a mystic is simply to participate here and now in that real and eternal life'.[497] It is clear what is meant by 'real' refers to the values of spiritual existence, differing from the usual understanding of the term which is often taken to denote objective material reality. Sinclair was also interested in locating this spiritual 'real' as equates with her understanding of the absolute, as her pursuit for the 'real' was based on a different set of values than to simply record objective materiality. Hence Sinclair's praise for Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* series of novels as 'getting closer to reality than any of our novelists who are trying so desperately to get close'.[498]

In *A Defence of Idealism*, Sinclair sought to find a synthesis of new age thinking with the tradition of German philosophy found in the work of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel. As Alice Theobald has suggested, 'having critiqued the work of contemporary thinkers such as William James and Bertrand Russell, Sinclair likewise concluded *A Defence* with a

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[497] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1911), p. 447.
[498] May Sinclair, 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson', *The Egoist*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (April, 1918), 57-59 (58).

consideration of "Reality here and now"'.[499] It is apparent that Sinclair's conception of reality is based around the individual's intuitive sense of experience, which links the development of her thought to the ideas Henri Bergson was also exploring at this time. Theobald continues, 'the appraisal thus assumes an immediacy and implicitly personal imperative. We are directed, at last, to realise that "Reality" for ourselves.' As Sinclair expresses it, life is made up of instances where 'things we have seen all our lives […] change to us in an instant of time, and show the secret and imperishable life they harbour'.[500] This last point echoes much of the importance given to the concept of epiphany in modernist literature,[501] and this sense of revelatory moments accords with Underhill's definition of the mystical experience: 'Mysticism, like revelation, is final and personal. It is not merely a beautiful and suggestive diagram of experience, but is of the very stuff of life'.[502] Sinclair's summation  her ideas in *A Defence* is also linked with a belief that some totality of ultimate meaning that remains hidden can yet be revealed through moments in time, as demonstrated in the activity of artistic creation: 'No reasoning allows or accounts for these moments. But lovers and poets and painters and musicians and mystics and heroes know

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[499] Alice Theobald, 'Plunging into Reality: Evelyn Underhill, May Sinclair and Adventures in Practical Mysticism', May Sinclair Society, March 2016, https://maysinclairsociety.com/evelyn-underhill-may-sinclair/ [accessed 20.6.19]. Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism* (1917), p. 338.

[500] Sinclair quoted in Alice Theobald, 'Plunging into Reality: Evelyn Underhill, May Sinclair and Adventures in Practical Mysticism', May Sinclair Society, March 2016, https://maysinclairsociety.com/evelyn-underhill-may-sinclair/ [accessed 20.6.19]. Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism* (1917), p. 339.

[501] The term 'epiphany' has been used in relation to the writings of James Joyce who referred to the idea in the first draft of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, published with the title *Stephen Hero*, as '… The soul of the commonest object seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.' James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spencer, rev. ed. John J. Slocum (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 218. Terence Brown, in his introduction to *Dubliners* (1992), suggests that this meant that 'because it is in the givenness of the real, in time and place, that psychological, social, cultural and moral realities will reveal themselves'. Terence Brown, Introduction, James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. xxxv.

[502] Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 98.

them: moments when eternal Beauty is seized travelling through time; […] Reality gives itself to our very sight and touch.'[503]

**Imagism**

Sinclair's concept of reality is associated with a higher notion of reality equivalent to an ideal, the everyday realism often considered when the realistic is discussed in art or literature is thus contrasted with a kind of heightened or occult 'super-reality' that views the world with clarity, and the individual finds themselves perfectly adapted to the feeling of a moment-by-moment existence. In an article she wrote on the Imagist poetry of F. S. Flint, Sinclair gives some indication of what she understood by this use of 'reality'. This championing of Imagism was first published in *The Egoist* in 1915 in reply to criticism from the poet Harold Monro who defended traditional notions of the poetic.[504] Sinclair notes that the beauty she finds in this new experimental poetry had a 'magic' that was a condition of writing without rhetorical intention or symbolism.[505] The fact that she could use the word 'magic' is worth stressing, as if she were looking for some quality beyond objective reality was yet to be expressed in everyday things, and the image presented is in itself enough on its own to suggest an experience. In the second note on Imagism, once again published in *The Egoist*, Sinclair stated that 'in no case is the image a symbol of reality (the object); it is reality (the object) itself. You cannot distinguish between the thing and its

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[503] Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism* (1917), p. 339.
[504] Harold Monro, 'The Imagists Discussed', *The Egoist*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (May 1st, 1915), 77-80.
[505] Sinclair, 'Two Notes', *The Egoist*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (June 1st, 1915), 88-89.

image'. [506] This implies an almost mystical feeling being housed in the object, and yet, Sinclair also sought after a mode of expression that was more 'direct'. As Raitt suggests:

> Imagist techniques and vocabularies (in 1913 F. S. Flint had described imagism as 'direct treatment of the "thing" ') slowly began to shape Sinclair's own methods and self-descriptions, even as she simultaneously began to use psychoanalytic models as the basic structures for her plots and her narrative techniques.[507]

This comment refers most clearly to Sinclair's major works of fiction, such as *The Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922), but it can also be read in relation to her supernatural writing that was concerned with a more direct exploration of an ever evolving understanding of psychology. Luke Thurston suggests that the 'ghost story, for Sinclair, [...] resonates above all with a moment of writerly *transition*, of the breakthrough to a new field of aesthetic possibilities and risks.'[508] He places the emphasis on the moment of '*transition*' as the undefined point in a movement between two identifiable states of being.[509] This moment is one that is understood as a bridge or link between two worlds, and its usage coincides with a moment when the culture of the Victorian period was giving way to new influences, such as the ideas of Sigmund Freud and the practice of psychoanalysis. These emerging sciences saw the universe as less solid and helped to erode many of the materialist assumptions that had dominated the outwardly self-confident and self-reliant middle to late nineteenth century, periods when science was seen as a method for dominating and controlling the environment. As Hugh Haughton states, Freud came to see the consciousness as something other than an instrument of pure reason, suggesting that

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[506] May Sinclair, 'Two Notes', *The Egoist*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (June 1st, 1915), 88.
[507] Raitt (2001), pp. 195-96.
[508] Luke Thurston, *Literary ghosts from the Victorians to Modernism: The Haunting Interval* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 125. [Italics in the original]
[509] The term 'transition' is important in the discussion of literary modernism as it suggests the fluidity of aesthetics at a point in which they were still evolving, and *transition* is also the title of a highly influential magazine which ran from 1927 until 1939.

Freud saw 'the human mind itself as a virtuosic generator of riddles and dreams designed to elude conscious interpretation.'[510] When D. H. Lawrence wrote 'You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character', he was drawing attention to the way in which contemporary thought was challenging older forms of understanding about the nature of human individuality.[511] Lawrence continued: 'There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states'.[512] The mention of allotropy here is revealing, stressing the multiplicity of the self and suggesting, by implication, the importance of an inner consciousness and the area of what is hidden as being key in understanding human complexity. It can be argued that Sinclair's supernatural fiction deals with similar states of being and bears witness to the concept of 'human beings as strangers not only to each other, but also to themselves'.[513]

**Sinclair and The Brontës: Female Consciousness and Ultimate Vision**

While Sinclair was working to combine modernist literary techniques with a new awareness of the workings of the human mind provided by psychoanalysis, she was also engaging in finding means of expression that would articulate her sense of being a woman. One of her particular concerns was, as Paul March-Russell has suggested, to 'promote the idea of female consciousness'.[514] Among her predecessors she followed were the Brontë sisters, examples of writers who had attempted to write from feminine perspectives. Sinclair's book *The Three Brontës* (1912), together with the introductions she wrote to

[510] Freud, 2003, p. x.
[511] D. H. Lawrence, letter written defence of his novel *The Rainbow* (1915). G. H. Zytaruk and J. T. Boulton, eds., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, Volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 183.
[512] Lawrence, *Letters*, 2, p. 183.
[513] March-Russell, *Uncanny Stories* (2006), p. 13.
[514] March-Russell, *Uncanny Stories* (2006), p. 10.

works of the Brontë sisters for the Everyman series of reprints published by J. M. Dent (1908-10), demonstrate the ways in which she was haunted by them and sought to engage with their lives as women. In *The Three Brontës*, Sinclair makes it clear that her first reading of Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* came from an interest in death and the graves of the dead, inspired by a Haworth Parsonage illustration adorning the title page of the volume she discovered in her father's library, showing a 'grim, plain house standing obliquely to a churchyard packed with tombstones, tombstones upright and flat, and slanting at all angles.' Sinclair goes on to emphasise that, 'Tombstones always fascinated me in those days, because I was mortally afraid of them; and I opened that book and read it through.'[515] This imaginative response also stresses the Victorian obsession with death in an age when rates of mortality were very high, expressing the potent power of the tomb as a symbol of that which it is too disturbing to face, the actual, physical, material decay of the body, with the tomb itself perhaps seen as an intermediary between the deceased person and the living, a medium existing for expressing the continued presence of the dead in life. Jane Silvey states, 'as certain characters in May Sinclair's stories are haunted or possessed by various forms of phantoms or spirits, so her imagination became possessed by the power of the Brontë Myth at an early and impressionable age.'[516] This existed at a profound imaginative level for Sinclair, predating her interest in psychology and psychoanalysis, with which it can be related, and it is apparent that she regarded modern mysticism as having the potential to be a means of communication with the dead.

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[515] Sinclair, *The Three Brontës* (London: Hutchinson, 1912) pp. 237-38.
[516] Jane Silvey, 'May Sinclair and the Brontës: "Virgin Priestesses of Art"', Kunka and Troy, eds., *May Sinclair*, pp. 161-177 (p. 163).

Philippa Martindale has suggested that Sinclair believed Emily Brontë was a mystic because she possessed what Sinclair termed an 'ultimate vision'.[517] This tells us about Sinclair's perceptions of what a mystic writer should be, as much as giving an insight into Emily Brontë's particular kind of imaginative world. It is significant Jean de Bosschère, the illustrator of *Uncanny Stories*' first edition, noticed that Sinclair was 'a poet, and the poet of pity' and that an important aspect of her work was the description of 'divine moments of perfect vision'.[518] The stress on moments that are imbued with insight demonstrates the way Sinclair's sympathetic contemporaries understood her modernism to be concerned with the purity associated with fragments of time that provide epiphanies of revelation. De Bosschère also suggested, 'There is only one world and one reality, and that is the image we make of it imaginatively,' which underlines the importance he placed on Sinclair's ability to fuse the imaginative and the real, pointing out that 'Only the world that is in ourselves is known to us'.[519] This breaks the known world down to what each individual can perceive, harkening back to Walter Pater and the aesthetic movement while also looking forward towards the sense that the modern world can only be experienced as fragments, each of which contain the potential for the 'ultimate vision' which Sinclair found in relation to Emily Brontë; a vision that points towards the absolute or some measure that is beyond the limited rationalism of the nineteenth century, relating to Sinclair's championing of the 'Idealism' outlined in *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) and *The New Idealism* (1922). It is of

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[517] Martindale,Durham theses, Durham University, 2003 http://etheses.dur.ac.uk, p. 228.
[518] Jean de Bosschère, 'Charity and Grace in the Work of May Sinclair', *The Egoist*, September 1918, 109-111 (110). The article is a review of two novels, *The Combined Maze* (London: Hutchinson, 1913) and *Tasker Jevons: The Real Story* (London: Hutchinson, 1916).
[519] De Bosschère, 1918, p. 109.

importance that Vernon Lee was concerned with seeing whilst being aware that the act of 'seeing' is in fact only part of the process of interpretation, whereas, for Sinclair, seeing has become visionary, implying an ability to see beyond the material based on the individual's experience. Sinclair writes, in relation to F. S. Flint's development as a poet towards the '"unrhymed cadence"' found in the collection *Otherworld* (1920): 'a writer who breaks with tradition is not bound to prove that his form is absolutely the best at all times and for all writers; it is enough if he can show that at the present time it is the best for him'.[520] Sinclair's notion of 'ultimate vision' is not that of a vision that approximates to some generally conceived means of observation, but to the particular vision afforded to an individual. This is important because it places her view of experience in the realm of the modernists, who were themselves concerned with giving expression to particular viewpoints and were suspicious of omnipotent narrative voices.

In a letter to John Hugh Smith in 1925, Edith Wharton refers to Sinclair as the epitome of the kind of writer she clearly distrusts because of the latter's association with modernism: 'I was not trying to follow the new methods [in writing her novel *The Mother's Recompense* published in April 1925], as May Sinclair so pantingly & anxiously does; [...].'[521] By bringing May Sinclair into her argument, Wharton was clearly trying to draw a

[520] May Sinclair, 'The Poems of F. S. Flint', *English Review*, January 1921, 6-18, as quoted in Jane Dowson, 'The Dark Night' (2006), p. 140.

[521] Edith Wharton, Letter to John Hugh Smith, May 25th, 1925, in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, edited by R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (London: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 480. According to the editors of the Wharton letters, 'Mrs. Wharton managed twice not to meet May Sinclair, despite pressing invitations, during the London social whirl of December 1908; and on a later occasion [quoted above] alluded to May Sinclair's recent novel as "pantingly didactic."' (p. 9). In fact, Wharton doesn't claim this in the extract included in the letters, but instead defends her own novel from comparison with the modernist novel as demonstrated by Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, which had been reviewed alongside her *The Mother's Recompense* in an unspecified newspaper, with the reviewer's assertion that Wharton's was 'an old-fashioned novel' (p. 480), and there is no suggestion that she finds the manner of Sinclair's work 'didactic'.

line between her notion of what a writer should aim to undertake and those whom she felt were challenging such notions, with this defence of her own fictional methods revealing that she regards Sinclair's name as a by-word for experimentalism for experimentalism's sake. This is a deliberately unsympathetic and unfair criticism, as Sinclair had reasons for her interest in modernist aesthetics, but also reveals the tensions that existed between those who identified themselves with traditional methods and those who were seen to be exponents of modernism. This is, in many ways, a false opposition as there was rather more that they had in common than this tart comment implies, but it does point to the extent to which individual vision was supremely important to these writers. Sinclair found it necessary to openly identify with the technical innovations of the younger generation in the same way she felt it was necessary to engage in radical suffragist politics rather than watch from the margins. However, as I have suggested, the ghostly sisterhood were not a group of writers who signed a manifesto like many modernists did. They were engaged in seeing the world from the perspective of women who were simultaneously part of the modern world and yet with a strong sense of the past, particularly those parts of the past that were part of their personal experience as people who had matured in the late Victorian era and therefore by the twenties could remember the changes which had occurred during a period of forty years. The differences between Wharton and Sinclair can be associated to their responses to modernity but the extent to which both women experienced a profound sense of collective mourning following the First World War binds them together as fellow members of the ghostly sisterhood. Wharton claims that her first reaction was that things would now return to normal (or how things had been in 1914), but in *A Backward Glance* she acknowledges that this was an 'illusion' and that in reality 'Death and mourning

darkened the houses of all my friends, and I mourned with them, and mingled my private grief with the general sorrow.'[522] Such an understanding is what underpins Wharton's later writing quite as much as it does that of May Sinclair.

**Narrative and Fantasy**

In trying to articulate her own unique vision, Sinclair needed to find new ways to express her personal perspectives. Nonetheless, she still operated within the tradition of the feminist ghost story which had developed in the late nineteenth century as much as she pushed the boundaries of what had been done before by Lee and Wharton. Among the forms which she tried was the book-length *vers libre* poem *The Dark Night* (1924), but it was to be the short supernatural tale in prose which gave her the room to move beyond convention and to explore areas of experience which lay outside the established order of patriarchal society. Richard Bleiler suggests that this form was not only 'not unreal to her […]', but important 'because it offered her narrative possibilities that could not be addressed through strictly realistic (that is, mainstream) narratives.'[523] Sinclair was not bound to conventions that would get in the way of the full realisation of her creative thinking, and her *Uncanny Stories* (1923) enacted a fascination in the mystical by presenting narratives that touched upon that which exists beyond the dimensions of the material universe through the construction of a narrative that allows for an element of the fantastic to pervade regardless of the familiar, everyday world. Sinclair's narratology allowed her to entertain speculative possibilities that exist outside of the received body of

[522] Wharton, 1934, p. 362-364.
[523] Bleiler, 2006, p. 135.

knowledge and, far from being didactic, her approach is one that makes use of that which is ambiguous. As David Seed has written, 'Sinclair's evocation of the supernatural combined a Freudian awareness of psychic displacement with a Jamesian projection of ghosts as representing states of mind.'[524] This constitutes her 'ultimate vision' – a vision that allows for, among other psychic phenomena, the possibility of telepathy. Suzanne Raitt records that, during the 1920s, 'Sinclair regularly attended spiritualist sessions run by Catherine Dawson Scott' and attempted to summon 'her brother Frank – dead in India in 1889'.[525] Scott was a spiritualist who wrote a book about her experiences titled *From Four who are Dead* (1926), which bore an introduction by Sinclair. Commenting on these sessions in a letter to Scott, Sinclair wrote: 'I was very anxious to get proof of [spirits'] presence, something that cd'n't be explained away as yr. or my subconsciousness.'[526]

## *Uncanny Stories* (1923): The Search for the Absolute in the Context of Modernity

Sinclair's collection of supernatural stories appeared as a volume entitled *Uncanny Stories*, published by Hutchinson in the United Kingdom and by Macmillan in New York in 1923. Sinclair's volume included a nouvelle, 'The Flaw in the Crystal', and six short stories: 'Where their Fire is Not Quenched', 'The Token', 'The Nature of the Evidence', 'If the Dead Knew', 'The Victim', and 'The Finding of the Absolute'. In the discussion that follows I will

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[524] Seed, 2001, p. 54.

[525] Raitt, 2001, p. 134.

[526] Raitt, 2001, p. 134. Interest in spiritualism was common in Great Britain in the period following the First World War. One of its champions was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of the super-rational detective Sherlock Holmes, who was to become the model for the science of deduction later adopted by police forces throughout the world. Owen Dudley Edwards states that, 'The 1920s were dominated for him by a world crusade to evangelize for spiritualism, resulting in most of his last books, including *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist* (1921), *The History of Spiritualism* (1926), and *Pheneas Speaks: Direct Spirit Communications in the Family Circle* (1927)', ('Doyle, Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan (1859–1930)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2013 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32887, accessed 3 October 2019]).

focus on the short fiction and in particular the three stories that best exemplify Sinclair's use of the supernatural story as a genre with which to articulate the range of her ideas: 'The Finding of the Absolute', 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched', and 'The Victim'.

'The Finding of the Absolute' – which was positioned as the last of the stories in the *Uncanny Stories* (1923) volume - is the piece that most holds the themes of the book together, and as such is, conversely, best discussed first. As Bleiler suggests, it was probably specifically written to provide some conclusion for the ideas developed in the collection, and in it we find a dramatic presentation of some of her deepest concerns.[527] Sinclair's collection, read together as a single book, is an attempt to find forms of expression to illustrate her philosophical ideas and, therefore, the search for the absolute is crucial to any understanding of her thought. In this respect of trying to pin down that which represents the final criterion by which we may base interpretations she perhaps resembles Lee, who had wanted to find some universal laws of aesthetic understanding. In 'The Finding of the Absolute', Sinclair suggests that some sort of an absolute can be imagined and, as Bleiler states, it is a story that 'is mystical and visionary'.[528] These are elusive terms, and we find that Sinclair is constantly writing about states of consciousness that are on the margins of accepted forms of knowledge. It is of fundamental importance for Sinclair that she deals with the imagination, as it is only by understanding the imagination's capacity to enlarge experience that Sinclair's short fiction can make its appeal on the reader. Claire Drewery

[527] Richard Bleiler writes: '"The Finding of the Absolute" had no original periodical production and was first published in – and perhaps written exclusively for – *Uncanny Stories*. It is an appropriate conclusion to the volume, bringing full circle the ideas and themes introduced at the beginning of the collection.' Bleiler, 2006, p. 132.
[528] Bleiler, 2006, p. 131.

suggests that Sinclair's interests in border-states of mind and body in her short fiction is related to:

> a continual aesthetic tension between the spiritual form of consciousness frequently associated with the modernist epiphany – in Sinclair's writing represented as spiritual and pure – and physical, corporeal sexuality, which, conversely, she depicts as repellent, distorted and grotesque.[529]

This is part of Sinclair's wider concern with idealism and mysticism, as well as her need to offer alternatives to materialism, which she considers an extension of the patriarchal world and mysticism, meanwhile, has a female power to tap into other forces and reveal a vision which challenges conventional assumptions. For Drewery, it is the border area between different states of being which is responsible for creating the tension that Sinclair exploits in her supernatural fiction, located between the objective and the subjective; between what can be imagined in the text through the imagination and the reality of the physical exterior world. This borderland operates as an enactment of Sinclair's 'aesthetic of sublimation', which is derived from Freud's notion of the function of the libido in the creative processes, because it allows for a transcending of the body. In Freud's formulation, the body, with its material desires and functions, is opposed to the intellectual activity of the mind, making art a way of sublimating the problem of physical erotic needs. [530] The mind wants to disassociate from that which it finds disturbing and to locate some form of intellectual or spiritual vision with which to best regulate aspects of existence which are most challenging. Sinclair's supernatural fiction speaks to a generation who had suffered from the horrors of the First World War and left profoundly shocked at the destruction and loss

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[529] Drewery, 'Transcending Boundaries; Transcending Bodies: Sublimation and the Abject Corpus in *Uncanny Stories* and *Tales Told by Simpson*, Bowler and Drewery, 2018, pp. 213-231 (p. 213).

[530] For more on Sinclair and sublimation see Faye Pickrem, 'Disembodying Desire: Ontological Fantasy, Libidinal Anxiety and the Erotics of Renunciation in May Sinclair', Bowler and Drewery, 2018, pp. 119-138.

of life caused at a point in time when it otherwise appeared that European culture was safe and secure in its materialism. In this context, the body was subjected to mutilation and extinction when confronted by the mechanical methods of modern warfare, and these circumstances gave rise to a desire to transcend human limitations, leading to a great interest in finding comfort for those who had suffered loss.

This desire to transcend human frailty is most clearly demonstrated in 'The Finding of the Absolute' by the way in which the resolution of the issues raised by the story lead not to a solution within the time frame of a natural human life, but to one instead located in an afterlife where the body has ceased to have material substance. Whilst this might be read in light of Sinclair's personal ambivalence regarding her body, it also reflects wider concerns with materiality. In a manifesto by Wyndham Lewis, published in the Vorticist magazine *Blast* in 1914, is the assertion that: 'THE ACTUAL HUMAN BODY BECOMES OF LESS IMPORTANCE EVERY DAY. It now, literally, EXISTS much less'.[531] In the context of Vorticism, the modernist literary and artistic movement led by Wyndham Lewis, this is an expression that reflects an interest in abstraction of form – an assertive statement of defiance against the disorder of chaotic humanity. We know that Sinclair was associated with the group of writers were responsible for launching the Vorticist movement and that she shared their desire to break free from Victorianism – Wyndham Lewis had blasted the years 1837 to 1901 in a manifesto published in *Blast*.[532] However, as Raitt suggests, 'Sinclair's attraction to the aesthetic theories of the Vorticists is somewhat paradoxical.'[533]

[531] Wyndham Lewis, *BLAST*, No. 1, June 1914. [Capitals used in the original text].
[532] See Raitt, 2001, pp. 192-193.
[533] Raitt, 2001, p. 168.

In an earlier novel, *The Tree of Heaven* (1917), which prefigures 'The Finding of the Absolute' in its depiction of characters drawn from the London-based modernist avant-garde known to Sinclair, she writes from the outside looking at the world of the modernists objectively. She stresses the role of the novelist with a more traditional moral point of view, questioning the price to be paid by the individual for adhering to contemporary art politics. This is presented in relation to the various conflicts between rival factions and the publicity stunts being undertaken by the emerging generation of avant-garde writers and artists to shock conventional bourgeois values.

Similarly, 'The Finding of the Absolute' is a story that is closely linked to Sinclair's interest in contemporary modernist literature. In this case, an interest in the character of Paul Jefferson, who is introduced as 'the Imagist poet' (p. 161). The use of this term indicates the assumption that the readers of the story would know something about modernist poetry, as well as suggesting that he is a public figure known to be part of an avant-garde. Mr Spalding is convinced he is associated with popular notions about poets and artists are of a dubious moral character – 'he had no morals; he drank, he drugged; in Mr Spalding's decent phrase, he did everything he shouldn't do.'[534] At the time that Sinclair was working on the story we know that she was also writing about the Imagist poets. As Laurel Forster has pointed out, 'part of Sinclair's article on the poems of H.D. appears in manuscript form in the same workbook as a draft section of "The Finding of the Absolute, [...]".'[535] This suggests that her closest friends among the Imagists, Ezra Pound, Richard

[534] 'The Finding of the Absolute', May Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories*, 2006, p. 161.
[535] Laurel Forster, ' "Imagism … Is a State of Soul": May Sinclair's Imagist Writing and *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*', Kunda and Troy, 2006, pp. 99-122 (p. 112).

Aldington, and H.D., may have been in mind when writing the 'The Finding of the Absolute', and it is difficult not to see that, set apart from the serious discussion of ideas in the story, there is also a bit of playful humour at their expense. It may have also been the case that the story reflects on that friendship from a distance, as Raitt indicates 'Sinclair's relationship with the next generation was markedly cooler by the 1920s than it had been at the height of her involvement [...] in the years before the First World War.'[536]

If we consider that Sinclair was writing at a time in which she believed she might soon become a victim of the so-called Spanish 'flu outbreak of 1918, we might be able to read 'The Finding of the Absolute' as doubly concerned with her interest in ensuring the legacy of Imagism as well as her own sense of mortality. Sinclair's last will and testament was dated 11th November 1918, the day of the armistice, and it demonstrated her continued interest in Pound, Aldington, and H.D., by leaving them the sum of £50 each plus minor gifts and books from her library.[537] This conjunction of anxiety about death, the end of hostilities after four years of violence, and a concern with supporting the important founders of literary modernism, would indicate the key areas on Sinclair's during this period. Modernist aesthetics were developing out of the structures of feeling that were evolving in the early twentieth century to become dominant, and these structures were related to a changing understanding of human consciousness. Sinclair was attracted to H.D.'s work because it displayed a 'novelty of [...] form',[538] a form she began to see, as

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[536] Raitt, 2001, p. 259.
[537] Raitt, pp. 265-266.
[538] Sinclair, 'Two Notes. I. On H.D. II On Imagism', *The Egoist*, Vol. 2 No. 6 (June 1915), 88-89 (p. 89). It was not just a question of the older being influenced by the younger writer, as Diana Wallace notes that H.D. recalled that she had read Sinclair's *The Divine Fire* before she left America for London in 1911 in her memoir *End to Torment:*

Laurel Forster puts it, as ‘a force from within, which combines personality and appreciation of reality to produce a “strange new beauty” in written form’.[539] Sinclair was attentive to these new forms of beauty.

Sigmund Freud suggested in ‘The Uncanny’ that form and subject are linked: ‘when aesthetics is not merely the theory of beauty but the qualities of feeling.’[540] He argues that the aesthetic can be understood not just in relation to the concept of what is beautiful, which we might associate with the work of Vernon Lee, but also with that part of consciousness concerned with feeling.[541] While Sinclair was mainly concerned with exploring different states of consciousness, Lee’s ideas on aesthetics were concerned with establishing rules by which the concept of beauty could be understood. These ideas assumed that beauty could be objectively identified, although, as she further developed her thought, she also became interested in the physical reaction of the individual when confronted by such beauty, which cannot be wholly separated from the consciousness associated with the physical reaction. As she suggested in relation to the painter John Singer Sargent, Lee’s concept of seeing was based on the knowledge that the thing seen is profoundly influenced by the emotions and the intellect. Freud was concerned with the unconsciousness’s effect on an individual’s response to the world, and his notion of the

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*A Memoir of Ezra Pound* (1979). Diana Wallace, ‘“A Sort of Genius”: Love, Art, and Classicism in May Sinclair’s *The Divine Fire*’, in Kunka and Troy, eds., 2006, pp. 49-64 (p. 49).

[539] Laurel Forster, ‘"Imagism ... Is a State of Soul": May Sinclair's Imagist Writing and *Life and Death of Harriet Frean*., Kunda and Troy, 2006, p. 109. Forster is referring to a particular Sinclair’s essay, ‘The Poems of H.D.’, published in *The Fortnightly Review* (March, 1927), 329-345 (345).

[540] Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ (1919), quoted in Jamie Ruers, ‘Dolls, Dead Bodies and Doubles’ in Ivan Ward, ed., *The Uncanny: A Centenary* (London: Freud Museum, 2019), pp. 39-44 (p. 39).

[541] According to Peter Gunn, Vernon Lee ‘Latterly […] read much of the works of Freud, whom she described as a ‘modern obscurantist’; but in another place, most significantly, as ‘her *bête noire*’.’ She felt his work was leading direction that led away from a theory of beauty towards something that was hidden inside each individual. Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 226.

uncanny in literature is something that is more than what is observed objectively because it deals in that which cannot be understood from the outside, instead lying in the province of the senses and the subconscious of the reader. The uncanny is not wholly something the writer of supernatural fiction can knowingly produce, because it owes a certain amount to the perspective of the reader who, in effect, creates their own sense of the uncanny. In spite of this, there are ways in which writers can engineer such states of mind. These were ideas that Freud had long been resolving in his mind, and as early as 1907 he noted:

> We laymen have always been intensely curious to know [...] from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable.[542]

The way in which the uncanny is evoked in 'The Finding of the Absolute' is through the realisation of a parallel world. Although this world is 'Heaven' – or, as Paul Jefferson phrases it, '"one of the best heavens, a heaven reserved exclusively for the very finest spirits" ' (p. 165), it works in the text as a hidden world which has many of the characteristics of terrestrial life, creating a sense of a continuation of the earthly life, but one where the entanglements of life are brought into the open and seen with supernatural clarity. There is a resemblance in Jefferson's concept of heaven to similar characteristics in H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905), with its earthly voluntary order of an elite Samurai he believed could provide the world with stable rule. Philippa Martindale suggests that Sinclair was 'intrigued by the idea of a 'fourth dimension'' and that evidence for this

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[542] Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', *The Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 9 (1906-1908): Jensen's 'Gradiva' and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1971), pp. 143-153 (p. 143).

fascination can be found in her working notebooks.[543] The effect of Sinclair's fiction is to make this other world familiar through the realism of her description, all while being a depiction of 'an immense grey space':

> His first thought was [on being dead]: Well, here I am again. I've not been wiped out. His next, that he hadn't died at all. He had gone to sleep and was now dreaming. He was not in the least agitated, nor even surprised. (p. 163)

It is clear that bodies exist in this alternative world – even if they are 'tenuous, whitish' and seem to tread water (p. 164) - so people can be physically recognised, talking in their ordinary way with their thought processes essentially unchanged by the process of transference to another dimension.[544] What does shift is the understanding of the mind as it is forced to come to terms with a conception of the afterlife. This 'eternal world' is 'queer at first', but its logic soon becomes comprehensible. Instead of being a place where conventional morality is rewarded, it is revealed – at least in the words of Jefferson, with a hint of complacent egoism in his tone of voice suggesting his approval for the situation in which he has found himself – to be a place which is 'utterly plastic to our imagination and our will' (pp. 164, 167).[545] There is a blurring of the boundaries between life and death, and vision is linked to imagination and will. This would appear to be an aesthete's paradise, as the imagination is presented as being of essential importance. This blurring between what can be imagined and reality is similar to what Richard Aldington had noted about his

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[543] Martindale, 2003, http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3691/, p. 257.

[544] An observation by Raymond Williams reveals that it is not only in supernatural fiction in the 1920s that the materialist tendency in fiction is marginalised. Writing of what he calls the 'extreme reaction' of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), he notes that 'all the furniture, and even the physical bodies, have gone out of the window, and we are left with voices and feelings, voices in the air […]'. Raymond Williams, 1961, p, 279. In Sinclair's supernatural writing, materialism is marginalised by being seen as only part of a concept of reality, the 'true' meaning of which can only be grasped once material life has been transcended.

[545] The way in which the story is a pretext for the discussion of ideas recalls the theatre of George Bernard Shaw, where the drama is constructed from characters who represent different ideological viewpoints.

generation of artists, namely that 'their philosophy, or rather their views, of art are also their views of life.'[546] For Sinclair, her philosophy, which encompasses her views of life, appear in relation to death and provide some context by which the absolute can be known. It is only by dying, her story seems to say, that a true assessment of the meaning of life can be understood. As Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace have argued, Freud's 'The Uncanny' was begun in response to the 'reading of a Gothic text, E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman", which in turn shares the modernist anxiety about the unstable ego'. It can be said, Smith and Wallace suggest, that 'For modernists, as for Freud, fiction becomes the lie which tells the truth.'[547] This reading emphasises the assertion by Rebecca Soares, Lizzie Harris McCormick, and Jennifer Mitchell that 'the connection between psychoanalysis and the fantastic in the early decades of the twentieth century cannot be denied.'[548] They point out that in the years immediately following the publication of Freud's essay he was invited, on three occasions, to edit occult journals.

Memory plays a significant role in the alternative heaven imagined by Sinclair in 'The Finding of the Absolute,' as Jefferson suggests 'our imaginations are controlled by our memories' and that, 'Everything you create here will probably be a replica of something on earth you remember' (167). This might seem rather limited from the perspective of someone like Sinclair who espoused radical causes, but it reveals the extent to which her point of departure was based on conventional representations. Her emphasis on the role of

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[546] Richard Aldington, 'Anti-Hellenism: A Note on Some Modern Art', in *The Egoist*, Volume 1, no. 2 (January 15th 1914), 35-37 (35), as quoted in Matt Foley, *Haunting Modernisms: Ghostly Aesthetics, Mourning, and Spectral Resistance Fantasies in Literary Modernism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 47.
[547] Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, 'Introduction: Gothic Modernisms: History, Culture and Aesthetics', in Smith and Wallace, 2001, p. 4.
[548] McCormick, Mitchell and Soares, eds., 2020, p. xxxi.

memory also reminds us that her concept of vision is, to some extent, determined by the active role of memory. While the notion that new forms of beauty can be created by the new artist is acknowledged, Jefferson pedantically claims that instruction is needed before the imagination can be let loose, suggesting that any new forms of beauty would need to be made by himself or J. M. W. Turner or Michael Angelo (sic.).[549] Turner and Michelangelo, of course, are now part of eternity, and as such they are still active in this version of heaven as artists. The inclusion of Jefferson in this list is significantly ignored by Spalding, who obviously is affronted by Jefferson's perceived arrogance, so instead he seeks guidance about the permanence of the things that can be made on his behalf by Turner and Michelangelo. The idea of permanence here carries the implication of that which will last forever, and there is in this search for permanence the implication that it is related to the absolute, which Spalding sees in terms of his interpretation of Kantian principles. That the aesthetic values of heaven must be dictated by just three artists (an ironic Holy Trinity) also suggests that this afterlife is one where there is the kind of repetition Freud located in the uncanny. Spalding regards Kant as his inspiration and guide, and it should not be overlooked that the story is titled 'The Finding of the Absolute', implying that the ending of the story is the end of Spalding's quest. If the quest is completed with the discovery of the absolute, then Sinclair suggests that the absolute can be defined in terms of the fusion of the ideas that Spalding has explored in relation to his study of philosophy: 'He passed from God's immanent to his transcendent life, into the Absolute' (176). This is imagined as being able to pass into 'cubic time', a concept which represents a simultaneous awareness of the past, the present, and the future:

[549] This insistence that any vision of new beauty is conditioned by the past echoes the utopian future imagined in William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1891).

> He was aware of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the Franco-Prussian war, the establishment of the French Republic, the Boer war, the death of Queen Victoria, the accession of and death of King Edward VII, the accession of King George V, the Great War, the Russian and German Revolutions, the rise of the Irish Republic, the Indian Republic, the British Revolution, the British Republic, the conquest of Japan by America, and the federation of the United States of Europe and America, all going on at once. (174-175).

This abstraction of human history, regarding the notion of cubic time, recalls the attempt of modernist artists to present a multitude of views of an object within a single image as in Cubism, presented here as viewing all history at one moment of time and space. This conception, in which multiple perspectives are seen from one viewpoint, is one Sinclair developed in her philosophical writings, and in *The New Idealism* she makes the case for a consciousness that is capable of conceiving of the past, present, and future as one ultimate ideal – her definition of the titular 'Absolute'. This perspective blurs the distinctions that are made by reference to linear time, when events occur in successive moments in a sequence, and in Sinclair's philosophy of time these moments are linked together by consciousness, which alone is capable of transcending the isolated moments. The form of supernatural fiction, with its capacity for the fantastic, allows for consciousness to be fore-grounded because the genre is not bound by the conventions of time and space and can by means of the imagination transcend any notional borders – and even move between life and death. This allows the writer to examine human existence as if it were part of some larger set of ideas which exist beyond the knowledge of humanity, echoing the nature of Greek myths which dramatise the relationship between man and the gods. Sinclair's interest in science is constructed around the desire to find meaning in areas of experience that are outside the limits of the body and may be described as spiritual in character. However, as Matt Foley states, in relation to Woolf, 'the modernist aesthetic of interiority,

one of its more renowned forms being stream of consciousness, often represents a slippage from materialism to solipsism.'[550] In Foley's reading, Sinclair's idea of consciousness as the only means by which the world can be understood only leads to a narrow viewpoint based on the individual. This suggests that there is a tension in her supernatural fiction in which she tries to remain truthful to the central concept of the consciousness whilst simultaneously constructing valid imaginative spaces in which the limitations of the individual are transcended.

In this vision of infinite human time conventional morality has little significance, and it is in this context Spalding discovers that 'Elizabeth's adultery, which had once appeared so monstrous, so overpowering an event, was revealed as slender and insignificant' (175). Spalding is freed from his pettiness as a human being, liberated by the realisation that time can be understood as a 'state of consciousness' (170) which is individual and self-willed, and that the consciousness of all time can equate to the Absolute in which he can feel 'one tremendous rapture' that includes 'the spirits of Elizabeth and Paul Jefferson' (176). In this reading of the story, Elizabeth and Jefferson are seen to be lovers who have transcended physical desire to the extent that they have attained the Absolute through love – something outside of themselves.

**Repetition and Time in 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched'**

Sinclair is also concerned with the idea of the absolute in the story 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched' (first published in the *English Review* in October 1922). Here we find

[550] Matt Foley, *Haunting Modernisms: Ghostly Aesthetics, Mourning, and Spectral Resistance Fantasies in Literary Modernism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 118.

another text that blurs the distinctions between the living and the dead, contemplating an afterlife and love in relation to death. Unlike in 'The Finding of the Absolute', where the text ends with a transcendent image of the possibility of the merging of the self with the universal, 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched' instead tells the story of lovers who are trapped in an endless cycle of repetition. Time is again an important feature in this story, and the way in which the mind responds to immediate experience is seen to be conditioned by different understandings of time.

The story opens grounded in the present moment as Harriott Leigh goes to meet her lover, George Waring, but by the third paragraph some time slippage has entered the text:

> Years afterwards, when she thought of George Waring she smelt the sweet, hot, wine-scent of the elder flowers. Years afterwards, when she smelt elder flowers she saw George Waring, with his beautiful, gentle face, like a poet's or a musician's, his black-blue eyes, and sleek, olive-brown hair. He was a naval lieutenant. (27)

Here we are transported into the future and the past is revisited through sentimental memory. The story enacts the way in which the consciousness can distort a moment of time when it is related to memory, particularly in the juxtaposition that is made between the glorification of the lover's artistic features with the knowledge that he is a naval officer – we learn that, soon after, Harriott's father has forbidden the marriage, and George is killed when his ship goes down in the Mediterranean. The lovers' brief interlude - 'It lasted five minutes, and five more' (28) - is continued in the present tense and in conventional terms, but they part as Harriott tries to convince herself that waiting will be rewarded. She contemplates her own death when she hears that his ship has sunk with the crew, but the text cuts abruptly to a short sentence, 'Five years passed', passing ironic comment on her

assertion that his death would mean that she would be unable to go on without him. Harriott's response to these life altering experiences is seen as passive as she conforms to the values of her father, sublimating her own erotic needs and submitting to patriarchal values.

This brief opening is followed by another liaison, this time with a young poet, Stephen Philpotts. Sinclair's sense of irony is established in this section when, as Harriott waits to meet Philpotts, she anticipates what is to come – from the present moment she imagines the future: 'She knew what he was going to say. And she knew what she would answer' (28). She imagines that she can be faithful to the memory of her former lover and justifies her new lover with the comforting notion that 'she loved him with another part of herself' (28). Whilst her love for George Waring in the opening section was seen in the afterglow of some future moment, here the future is warmly imagined, only to be devastatingly cut short when Philpotts tells her of his intention to marry another woman. Once again, she sacrifices her own feelings by playing a conventional role: 'She knew. She had known just now, the moment before he told her. She sat there, stone-cold and stiff, listening to his raptures; listening to her own voice saying she was glad. (29)'. The text again cuts to a simple statement, this time that 'Ten years passed', and Harriott again accommodates herself passively to her fate.

These two sections, which deal with conventionally appropriate romances in which consummation is denied, are followed by a longer section in which Harriott has an affair with a married man, Oscar Wade. Is his name supposed to make the reader think of a

heterosexual Oscar Wilde?[551] Perhaps this part of the text resonates with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), in that it deals with the corruption of the flesh that is hidden from the world and symbolically represents the emptiness of the relationship. Wade is quite different from Harriott's previous lovers:

> He was a man of about forty, broad and tall, lean-flanked and short-necked, his straight, handsome features showing small and even in the big square face and in the flush that swamped it. The close-clipped, reddish-brown moustache bristled forwards from the pushed-out upper lip. His small, flat eyes shone, reddish-brown, eager and animal. (30)

We are told that she 'liked to think of him when he was not there' (30) because his physical presence was so at odds with her ideal, yet at the same time she cannot live without his presence in her life. Harriott looks for, 'some mystic, heavenly rapture, always beginning to come, that never came' (31). Although she is prepared to let this unconventional relationship develop, she gains little pleasure from it, except for a few days when they spend time in a hotel in Paris. Soon afterwards the passion fades, the relationship continues in its old form, but when Oscar's wife seems likely to die – leaving them the possibility of marriage – they both feel relief when she recovers, as marriage would have been something 'they dreaded and yet would not have the courage to refuse' (33). Eventually they decide to end the affair, with the bitter recrimination from Harriott that the kind of love she experienced with Oscar lacked what she most sought: 'Everything that's high and noble in it you dragged down to that, till there's nothing left for us but that. *That's* what you made of love' (34)[Italics in original]. Laconically the reader is told that, 'Twenty years passed' (34),

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[551] Sinclair included Violet Hunt (1862-1942) in her social circle and in Hunt's memoir *The Flurried Years* (1926), it is claimed that Hunt was romantically pursued by Oscar Wilde when she was a young woman. Violet Hunt, *The Flurried Years* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1926), p.168.

suggesting that the aggregation of years in Harriott's life were years without anything else to measure their passing.

In due course, Oscar dies and Harriott is now a lay helper at a church in London, where, in her conscious mind, she imagines that she is not the person who had an affair with a married man and holidayed with him in Paris: 'Her memories, if she had allowed herself to remember, would have clashed disagreeably with the reputation for sanctity which she had now acquired' (35). This attitude extends as far as being unable to make a full confession on her deathbed, intentionally excluding it. This introduces the concept that consciousness is not merely a passive tool by which experience is recorded, but that it is an active concept that attempts to interpret data and construct narrative, even false narratives. The supernatural element of the story comes to the fore when, after death, Harriott's consciousness lives on: 'Her mind had no past and no future, no sharp-edged, coherent memories, and no idea of anything to be done next' (37). As much of her life had been constructed around memory or anticipation of the future, and this new state of being, in which the exterior world is a continuous present, is disorientating. Harriott still inhabits places that appear to be the real places she was familiar with in life, but when seeking comfort from a priest in a church she is suddenly confronted instead by the ghost of Oscar, from which she flees and finds herself in the rue de Rivoli in Paris, near the hotel in which she had stayed with him during the early stages of their affair. The details are realistically imagined and she recovers 'a certain limited section of coherent memory' (37), and yet the world that she sees is clearly one that exists within her own consciousness.  This is revealed when she runs from the door of the room where she and Oscar had spent their

days in Paris, and the corridor and the door are described in sinister terms, as being: 'depraved', 'soiled', 'warped' (39). Harriott is aware that:

> The strange quality of her state was this, that it had no time. She remembered dimly that there had once been a thing called time; but she had forgotten altogether what it was like. She was aware of things happening and about to happen; she fixed them by the place they occupied, and measured their duration by the space she went through. (39)

The narrative has been divided into clearly identified periods of time during Harriott's lifetime, but in death time becomes muddled as if in a dream. She becomes obsessed with the idea that she can go back in time and get back to the period before she was with Oscar in the Paris hotel. She tries desperately to recover her innocence by returning to scenes in her younger life, but is still unable to escape from Oscar's ghost. The scenes of her meetings with Stephen Philpotts and George Waring are revisited, but on each occasion Oscar invades her treasured memories, replacing her lost lovers with his presence and declaring: "'I am in all your memories'" (43). These include her earliest childhood memories, as if she is haunted not by Oscar, but by her suppressed libido. Oscar understands the situation in which they find themselves, claiming that: 'You think the past affects the future. Has it never struck you that the future may affect the past?' (44). His presence seems to be a manifestation of his will, locked in an eternal struggle with hers. In this vision they are trapped in Hell: 'We shall be one flesh and one spirit, one sin repeated for ever, and ever; spirit loathing flesh, flesh loathing spirit; you and I loathing each other' (44). This recalls Freud's statement that 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.'[552] 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched' is an

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[552] Quoted in Forbes Morlock, 'Ghost Writing', Ivan Ward, ed., *The Uncanny: A Centenary* (London: Freud Museum, 2019), p. 11.

atmospheric and haunting story that remains true to what Virginia Woolf thought should be the measure of the successful ghost story, a capacity to reveal what March-Russell describes as presenting 'human beings as strangers not only to each other but also to themselves',[553] which Sinclair depicts from the perspective of eternity through use of the fantastic and comment with irony on human relationships.

### 'The Victim': Limits of Human Understanding

'The Victim' - initially published in the first issue of T. S. Eliot's critical journal, *The Criterion*, where it appeared immediately following the first printing of his poem 'The Waste Land'[554] - is a story that also engages with the hinterland between life and death. As we have seen, Sinclair had been a supporter of the Imagist poets and Eliot's early poetry. In this context the story might seem to be a little surprising, but one can see that Sinclair's use of the supernatural links her work with one of the other writers that interested Eliot, Charles Williams (1886-1945), the author of a series of metaphysical novels – *War in Heaven* (1930), *The Place of the Lion* (1931), *Descent into Hell* (1937), and *All Hallows' Eve* (1945). These works were ways of demonstrating Williams's theology, and the last two mentioned here were published by Eliot at Faber and Faber. Williams wrote the introduction to a selection of the letters of Evelyn Underhill published in 1943, so we can trace a link between Williams's novels and Sinclair's supernatural fiction through the way in which both authors were indebted to Underhill's influence.[555]

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[553] Paul March-Russell, in Sinclair, 2006, p. 13.
[554] *The Criterion*, Vol. I, no. 1 (October 1922), 65-88.
[555] See Grevel Lindop, *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2015).

'The Victim' is an ironic tale about the limits of understanding in which a chauffeur, Steven Acroyd, employed by the landowner, Mr Greathead, commits what he believes to be the perfect murder. The setting is the Yorkshire moors and the story owes something to the influence of Emily Brontë in the harsh landscape surrounding Eastthwaite Lodge, as well as the story's violent depictions. The character of Acroyd is introduced with the assurance that 'everybody hated him except Mr Greathead, his master, and Dorsy Oldishaw, his sweetheart' (141). Acroyd is presented as a proud, moody, and difficult man, and although he has a job with Darlington Motor Works, Acroyd takes on the duties of a domestic servant so that he can pursue his love for Dorsy. Mistakenly thinking that Greathead has come between Dorsy and himself over an incident in the local pub, attacking Dorsy's cousin after he had attempted to kiss her, Acroyd decides to kill Greathead. He plans the murder out meticulously, thinking up a suitable alibi and a means of disposing the body in some pits that are commonly believed to be bottomless. The story is set against the backdrop of the First World War, and one of the reasons Acroyd suggests that might explain Greathead's sudden disappearance is likened to the effect of shellshock, explaining that some soldiers are said to lose their memory and that, perhaps, this has befallen the old landowner. Although the point is not openly developed, this hints at Sinclair's concerns regarding identity and time –consciousness exists only in moments, and it is the act of remembering that provides the link between consciousness and existence. Memory plays an important role in Sinclair's understanding of experience, providing a means to interpret the whole with some level of perspective, but memory is also selective and can be misleading. The victim in the title of the story appears at first to be Greathead, but as the narrative develops it becomes increasingly clear that Acroyd is also a victim. There is an apparent allusion to

Macbeth, as Acroyd begins to obsess about a mark on the dairy floor where he believes there is a drop of Greathead's blood, and he soon find that, by sheer force of will, if he behaves as though Greathead is still alive, he can keep control, having the effect that 'by refusing to let his mind dwell on the murder he came to forget it' (150). Memory seems, then, to be under the control of the mind.

Acroyd is able to shape a new reality for himself, but just when he seems to have avoided the consequences of his actions he encounters Greathead's 'phantasm'. At first this might imply the story is going to be one about the haunting of someone with a hidden secret as an expression of suppressed guilt, the denouement, however, undercuts much of what has been told in the story when it reveals Acroyd's masculine reticence and fearfulness has isolated him to such an extent that he does not realise Dorsy's feelings towards him have changed. Rather than being afraid of him, she has decided to take care of him, recognising the strength of his passion – 'I knaw tha's sick and starved for want of me' (153). Equally surprising is the realisation that she too has seen the ghost of Mr Greathead, who she declares to be: 'a kind ghawst. Whatever 'e is 'e doan't mean thee no 'arm. T'owd gentleman navver did when he was alive' (154). Acroyd challenges her, saying that he knew that Greathead had tried to put her off him, which she responds to by saying that Acroyd doesn't know what happened. The story closes when Acroyd is confronted by Greathead's ghost in the study. In this scene, Greathead subverts the conventions of the Gothic tale by suggesting that Acroyd's view of the situation is 'purely relative to your limited perceptions' (157). He states that everything that Acroyd imagines is in fact wrong, that he has not come back to haunt him in revenge for the crime of murder, and that he is not a

ghost. Instead, Greathead reveals that he is alive and has transferred from 'a state which had become unbearable to a state more delightful than you can imagine' (156). Greathead now exists in a state freed from bodily necessities, claiming that rather than killing him, Acroyd has merely been the agent for the redistribution of matter – going on to say he was in financial difficulties, making him glad to have been given a way out. In this new state, Greathead is liberated from the body and can live a life of intellect – he even claims he is speaking to Acroyd's intelligence, as if that were a separate entity. The '*real* crime' [italics in the original] was in wrongly hating Greathead for 'something I hadn't done' (158). Indeed, hate is seen as the evil in the story, for it was the hate that Dorsy saw in Acroyd's eyes that frightened her into avoiding him, and although Greathead had advised her to remain with him, Acroyd had misunderstood and had filled his heart with hatred for his employer. As Len Hatfield writes, the message of the story is an argument for

> an idealistic metaphysics that insists on the eternal value of love and its opposition to hate. We also discern the author's support of a Platonic cosmology, in which the events and values of this life are regarded as transitory and often nearly valueless when placed in their transcendental context.[556]

As with the other stories in this collection, in Sinclair presents what is normally described as 'life' as only part of a greater conception of reality. The term 'reality' itself is being questioned, because if only part is habitually taken to represent the whole, and the whole includes some part that is supernatural, then what is 'reality' by which all experience is measured? As David Seed suggests in relation to *Uncanny Stories* as a whole, 'realism functions in these stories as a set of inadequate representational conventions which can

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[556] Len Hatfield, 'May Sinclair', *Supernatural Fiction Writers: Fantasy and Horror*, ed. by E. F. Bleiler, (New York: Scribner's, 1985), pp. 513-519 (p. 518).

then be disturbed by the paranormal.'[557] Yet Sinclair has to rely on the methods of realism in order to convince the reader of the validity of her fictive world in an attempt to convey something that exists outside conventional understanding, using recognisable portrayals of the everyday to provide reference points. At the same time, she is trying to get beyond traditional narrative methods to convey a more absolute way of seeing things unimpeded by matter, through which the artist is able to create form with complete freedom.

The final development of the story is constructed around Acroyd's fear that he won't be able to marry Dorsy because he will always have to hide from her some element of his life, as she doesn't know about the murder he has committed. This anxiety is proven to be unfounded because, according to Greathead, 'she knew all the time' (159). This revelation indicates that the story is a drama about individual knowledge and the limitation of knowing anything beyond one's narrow consciousness. Paul March-Russell describes the 'The Victim' as:

> a fine distillation of Sinclair's literary method [… ] offering the reader a genuinely grisly murder, a vicarious thrill in the best tradition of the supernatural tale […] a deflation of the endings to Gothic melodrama and an opening out to the moral dilemmas that constitute the Modernist narratives of writers such as Henry James, E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf.[558]

However, March-Russell fails to take into account the extent to which Sinclair was pursuing the ideas which she had developed in her non-fiction, in ways in which James, Forster, and Woolf were not. They were not seriously exploring mysticism as Sinclair was; as something different from their fictional narratives, and there is no equivalent in their published works

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[557] Seed, 2001, p. 58.
[558] March-Russell, 2006, p. 21.

as *A Defence of Idealism*. The happy conclusion to this story undermines the reader's expectations and confirms that the story's theme is that of ignorance. The method of narration is close to reproducing the effect of those modernist narratives that exploit what Matt Foley refers to as the 'concerns of the high modernisms of the 1920s and 30s, particularly the preferences for unreliable narrative point of view and the "modern" subjectivising of temporality and ethics'.[559] It is as if Sinclair is constantly gesturing towards a more complete interpretation of human existence through the suggestion that the objectively real world of material appearances is only a fragment of a greater whole that has yet to be understood, and this is the message that all the tales in the *Uncanny Stories* volume seem to imply.

**Concluding Remarks**

Sinclair uses the form of supernatural fiction to explore what Glen Cavaliero has termed a 'shared reality,' a term which suggests the notion that space can be a domain which is inhabited simultaneously by the past, present and future:

> Its proffered "shared reality" extends beyond what is normally accepted as believable: in order to recognize its "truth" we have to envisage a limitation in the "not true" that confers on its identity as fiction; we have, that is to say, to modify our own concepts of what is natural.[560]

The very nature of the fictional world which Sinclair creates is a challenge to narratives that accept a form of the imitation of reality as the whole of reality. Instead, she posits 'life' continually on the threshold of some 'Ultimate Reality', which is an idea that she had

[559] Matt Foley, 'Haunted Images, Deadness, and Impossible Mourning', in Foley, *Haunting Modernisms*, 2017, p. 77, note 15.
[560] Glen Cavaliero, *The Supernatural and English Fiction: from The Castle of Otranto to Hawksmoor* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1995), p. 13.

developed in *A Defence of Idealism* in 1917. For Sinclair, a mystical view of life encompasses the revelation an apparently common reality can be transcended and a secret, hidden reality discovered. This 'occult' reality is seen to be beyond the narrow scope of bodily human existence, and when it is made apparent it has the effect of transforming the conception of day-to-day life. This reflects Sinclair's interest in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who had put forward the notion that the universe was unknowable. However, in her supernatural fiction, Sinclair is also indebted to the work of G. W. F. Hegel, reasoning that the imaginative narrative could provide a means of argument that allowed for the demonstrating of a new synthesis, one which might fall short of providing a complete understanding, but at an imaginative level makes a gesture towards the possibility of such an understanding. As Nicholas Royle has claimed, Freud 'leads us to see that what is 'in' or 'inside' is perhaps not separable from what is 'outside''[561] The objective and subjective are not reliable distinctions and, as Freud suggested, 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced'.[562] May Sinclair attempted, through the power of the imagination, to forge a deeper understanding of lived experience, and the tales in *Uncanny Stories* (1923) actualise the intellectual ideas that she had developed in her non-fiction. Her mystical notion is that interior and exterior worlds become known through the consciousness in moments of epiphany, and these perspectives are determined by her female need to find a form of expression which goes beyond the patriarchal world to present more satisfying perceptions of reality.

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[561] Nicholas Royle, 'The Uncanny in Literature', Ivan Ward, ed., *The Uncanny: A Centenary'* (London: Freud Museum, 2019), pp. 17-21 (p.17).
[562] Freud, 'The Uncanny', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919)*, pp. 217-256 (p. 243).

# Conclusion

Perhaps you will say to me: "Are you sure that your legend is true?" How does it matter what the reality outside of myself may be, if it has helped me to live, and to feel that I am, and what I am?
- Charles Baudelaire.[563]

In 'Windows', one of his prose poems, Charles Baudelaire imagines the life of a neighbour based on glimpses of a woman seen through a closed window. He narrates to himself her story and feels an emotional identification with the figure based on the myth he has constructed. It does not matter to him whether his story is the real story of this person, but only that it has led him to have sympathetic feelings for another, and from this he implies he has gained a greater sense of the truth of his existence. This greater truth, if it can be said to exist at all, is the product of the author's insightful imagination and their observation. Such a formula is more than just a speculation about specific circumstances. It is taking a particular instance and reading into the situation the writer's thinking, their emotions, and their memories (the past haunting the present) to make something new, something which is not merely a double of what has been seen. In this sense, Baudelaire's poem is a prototype of the kind of supernatural fiction written by Vernon Lee, Edith Wharton, and May Sinclair, who, as has been debated in this study, have through their imaginations, tried to answer questions about the nature of existence and identity. But Baudelaire's perspective does not allow the woman to have a voice, instead amplifying the importance of the author's male gaze. The supernatural tale, as it took shape in the stories written by women between the 1880s and the 1930s, appealed to women because it

[563] Charles Baudelaire, *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose-writings*, translated by Norman Cameron (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1950), p. 147.

located an understanding of human consciousness in a complex sense of reality that was different from the material reality of patriarchal society, fictional 'reality' articulated bearing more than what was seen by the eye alone. Freud's publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900 posits that the psychic life of the individual has the capacity to turn, in Hugh Haughton's apt phrase, 'everyone's dreams into esoteric texts, the unacknowledged poetic masterpieces of everyday life.'[564] The very wording here deliberately recalls both Shelley's famous romantic claim that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of mankind, and the title of Baudelaire's seminal text of modernity, 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863). Haughton brings attention to the prophetic way in which Freud's work as a whole has had wide ranging repercussions for our understanding of cultural-production.

In this thesis I have argued that Freud's works opened ways for new approaches to interpret and understand aesthetics - not just the self-conscious aesthetics of the artist, but those that influence all individuals. His investigations are not primarily concerned with art, but with general concepts of what individuals understand by beauty. While Freud's role as a psychoanalyst was developed for a better understanding, and to provide treatments for mental illnesses, the implications of his research reveal a concern for creative art. Freud famously alluded to Hamlet in declaring that writers of fiction were 'apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream.'[565] This statement has been used to justify the application of Freudian ideas to fictional texts, but what I want to stress here is the extent to which literature was able to

[564] Hugh Haughton, 'Introduction', Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. x.
[565] Quoted from *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Haughton, 'Introduction', Freud, *The Uncanny*, 2003, p. viii.

record the psychological doubles made manifest by instances of human experience to go beyond the limits of realism. For instance, one the cases Freud wrote about was not based on personal knowledge of a patient, but on the reading of a literary text by Daniel Paul Schreber (1842-1911), a successful German judge who produced an account of his condition in *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* in 1903.[566] Schreber gave evidence of a profound, visionary view of the world in which gender norms were subverted and a mystical interpretation of human society was articulated. The fact that Schreber believed that he was becoming a woman and at the same time as he became aware of the presence of phantasms highlights the sarcastic association made by Karl Miller that 'the feminist ghost story' responded to the misogynistic notion that 'women imagine things'.[567]

Freud was interested in evidence taken from a host of sources that he realised could provide insight into the workings of the mind, and whilst some aspects of Freud's conclusions are no longer of scientific importance, his influence on our understanding of the working of the mind has been a major influence on art and thought. Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny' (1919) is, surprisingly, the most important of his studies which touch upon aesthetics.[568] This may reflect a reluctance to engage with an area of knowledge in which he felt he was not sufficiently qualified to discuss, as he mentions in the opening paragraph of the essay:

> Only rarely does the psychoanalyst feel impelled to engage in aesthetic investigations, even when aesthetics is not restricted to the theory of beauty, but

[566] See Rosemary Dinnage's introduction to Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2000).
[567] Miller, 1987 [Online version, unpaginated].
[568] Hugh Haughton claims that 'The Uncanny' has come back to haunt subsequent commentary on literature, film, photography and art ever since.' Haughton, Freud, 2003, p. lv.

> described as relating to the qualities of our feeling. He works in other strata of the psyche and has little to do with the emotional impulses that provide the usual subject matter of aesthetics, impulses that are restrained, inhibited in their aims and dependent on numerous attendant circumstances. Yet now and then it happens that he has to take an interest in a particular area of aesthetics, and then it is usually a marginal one that has been neglected in the specialist literature.[569]

Freud identifies the uncanny as being one of these marginal areas which the specialists - literary scholars of the day - have largely neglected, but it is not simply that he has alighted upon an area where the criticism is scarce. Freud believed his approach of the uncanny results from a strong sense he was 'impelled' to do so, suggesting that there is something about this particular area of literary performance that requires the psychoanalyst to make an intervention. It is the need to account for something that he has experienced in literary texts that is not easy to define, a figurative borderland between what might be described as what simultaneously frightens the reader and takes them into a realm where things happen which cannot be logically explained, such as inanimate objects seemingly coming to life (animism). He acknowledges that this kind of experience is, in Nicholas Royle's words, capable of being 'dangerous, destabilizing, engulfing', going on to say that 'It can disturb our sense of who we are, of what ''life'' is, of what words are.'[570] We can see that the uncanny can be elusive and has characteristics common with the search for the hidden and repressed elements in the human mind discovered by psychoanalysis. As Haughton states, 'psychoanalysis after the First World War increasingly conjures up a Gothic closet, an uncanny double, at the heart of modernity.'[571] There is some parallel between the uncanny discovered in relation to the literary text and those evasive elements of experience that

[569] Freud, 2003, p. 123.
[570] Royle, 2019, p. 18.
[571] Freud, 2003, p. xlii.

defy simple explanations. These gaps are often filled with a sense of being haunted by something, and it is of course significant that the most important collections of short fiction by members of the 'ghostly sisterhood' discussed in this thesis were titled *Hauntings* (1890), *Uncanny Stories* (1923), and *Ghosts* (1937) – titles which alone imply this theme of being haunted by something that is felt to be present even if not seen.

One of the observations which Freud makes in his essay is that aesthetics is commonly restricted to analysis about what is beautiful, and those occasions when aesthetic discussions are not limited to the beautiful then they are usually concerned with what he terms 'qualities of our feeling'.[572] Freud is demonstrating his knowledge of the type of investigations into aesthetics that were being undertaken by Theodor Lipps and Karl Groos. As I have shown, Vernon Lee was working on similar theories, and the study which she wrote in collaboration with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, 'Beauty and Ugliness' - first been published in 1897 and subsequently reprinted with other material in *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (1912) - is testimony to her contribution to these ongoing debates. Lee's approach, revealed in 'The Psychology of An Art Writer' (1903) and 'Gallery Diaries' (1905) - which had been published in the French journal of psychology *Revue Philosophique* - demonstrates a practical method based on observations of a particular individual's responses rather than a scientific method based on a sample group. Lee was responding to the limitations placed upon her by that element in her character of individualism that led her to be a creative writer, as well as an authority on aesthetics. This was both her strength and her weakness. It meant that, as Dylan Kenny

[572] Freud, 2003, p. 123.

has suggested, 'Lee saw that any aesthetic theory had to give an account of the interface between the body and the world, but that such an account could not exhaust the experience of art.'[573] It was her open-mindedness to the complexities of experience that saved Lee from falling into the kind of theoretical view of the science of aesthetics belonging to the period, with a belief that experiments in the laboratory could uncover essential truths about the ways an individual responds to works of art and how they develop notions of what constitutes the elements of beauty. Lee was aware that any true understanding of aesthetics could not be limited just to abstract concepts of beauty, but needed to account for an understanding of its opposite, ugliness. She is responding to the concern that Freud expressed, that aesthetics needed to be investigated by accounting for more than just an appreciation of beauty. Following the suggestion of Lipps, it is empathy that is at the heart of Lee's interpretation, corresponding with Freud's belief that aesthetic knowledge should engage with subject matter that is not judged simply by beauty, but by providing an account of the role played by feeling in reactions to aesthetic experiences.

Benjamin Morgan states that empathy is a problematic concept as its meaning has shifted from what it meant in the nineteenth century:

> *Empathy* was originally a term denoting an unconscious physiological reaction to an object that involved either ego projection into it or mimicry of it. But in the first half of the twentieth century, *empathy* lost its bodily connotations and came to signify a psychological process similar to what would have been called *sympathy* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This shift usefully indexes a broader transition from understanding aesthetic form as corporeal or physiological to understanding it as intellectual or cognitive.[574]

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[573] Dylan Kenny, 'The Real Self', Vernon Lee, *The Psychology of An Art Writer* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018), p. 18.
[574] Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Material Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 220.

This shift as has been posited in this study is in fact prefigured in Lee's own thinking about empathy and her aesthetic concerns are attempts to intellectualise her intuitions so that they should work towards some final understanding much as Sinclair's philosophical speculations are attempts to find the absolute. She was aware that her own experience was inclined to be based on a mental feeling, whereas Anstruther-Thomson's was based on the body's reaction. During the period of their collaboration, Lee could observe Anstruther-Thomson's responses and make use of this experience as providing an experimental basis for her investigations. However, Lee gradually came to take the view that her aesthetic experience was conditioned by the self, and in this way she felt that 'visual beauty and ugliness were now real for me, because my attention had to latch onto the form of which they are qualities', avoiding the clutter of secondary responses getting in the way and impairing an intuitive pleasure.[575] As has been highlighted in the discussion in this study, the individual's state of consciousness and interpretation of their perceptions lies at the heart of the rendering of experience dramatised in the fiction of the ghostly sisterhood. Kirsty Martin in considering Lee's understanding of empathy observes, that her perspective is related to what she calls 'rhythms of sympathy', highlighting a slippage between the nineteenth-century understanding of empathy and a more modern conception of the word as an expression of showing sympathy. Martin claims that Lee's vision was that, 'sympathy is, intricately, a condition of our embodiment'.[576] Understanding, as Lee saw it, required an element of attraction towards an object and the imperfect experience of the self as a body

[575] Lee, *The Psychology of an Art Writer* (2018), p. 44.
[576] Martin, 2013, p. 31.

in relation to that which is beautiful, serving an almost mystical fascination for what Kenny describes as 'the mysterious workings of art.'[577]

As we have seen there is a relationship between Lee's interest in the past as history and her concern with aesthetics which develops alongside her notion of the recovery of that which is lost and that this finds its clearest expression in her supernatural tales. In the Preface to *Beauty and Ugliness*, Lee suggests that the process of investigation into aesthetics is like the work of the archaeologist who is engaged with uncovering what is hidden:

> In a certain obscure region of the soul, we two have noticed odd, enigmatic, half-hidden vestiges, which might be (and might also not be!) walls, terraces, and road-ways [...].[578]

Lee places the investigations that were carried out with Anstruher-Thomson within a developing process of mapping those discoveries that may prove valuable to future investigators. In this research it is as if the discovery of what is objectively beautiful leads to digging into the past, and is ultimately concerned less with what exists materially outside the consciousness and is more and more an expression of the modern self that has become lost or is unsure of its own self and exists through the consciousness as it encounters the perceptions derived from external stimulus.

The importance of the supernatural short fiction of Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair is that, as I have shown in each chapter of this thesis, it maps out, through imaginative engagement, the ideas or images that they had explored in their non-fictional work. Their

[577] Kenny, 2018, p. 18.
[578] Lee, 1912, p. viii.

use of the fictional form achieved what was not possible in any other medium because the freedom to express states of being required and element of fantasy and could not have been possible in other modes, crossing boundaries of consciousness to suggest new a new synthesis of knowledge and understanding. They reveal what was hidden and attempt to account for the elusive nature of the psychic life of the self. That these writers were female makes them important witnesses of the complex nature of reality described by May Sinclair as the 'things we have seen all our lives [which] change to us in an instant of time, and show the secret and imperishable life they harbour'.[579] This kind of reality goes beyond the 'absolute realism' attributed by Arnold Bennett to the works of Anton Chekhov, envisaging a material world being transformed by something within the individual.[580] These writers successfully enacted what Freud describes in the *Uncanny*, leading the reader to new perspectives by 'promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it.'[581] These stories take the reader through the awakening of the aesthetic sense into a further dimension from which it is possible to explore reality with renewed perspectives. Wharton set out to write ghost stories which create the uncanny through a present haunted by the past, the narratives she creates taking us into worlds where everything becomes uncertain and the material loses its solidity; where individuals are forced to confront revelations about the nature of their realities. This is the essence of the supernatural fiction created by women's writing during a time of transition, between the certainties of the past and the new century with new values, experiences, and ways of seeing. As Catherine Maxwell suggests in relation to Lee, the radical impact of the ghostly sisterhood was that in their tales

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[579] May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 339.
[580] Arnold Bennett, *Books and Persons*: *Being Comments on a Past Epoch, 1908-1911* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1917), as quoted in John Lucas, *Arnold Bennett: A Study of His Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 98.
[581] Freud, 2003, p. 157.

> the supernatural does not merely double with the psychological, but it also exceeds it. [they turn to] the supernatural because she uses it to accredit female creativity and power – unacknowledged energies which demand their registration in representational fields which deny their existence. Thus these female energies appear as revolutionary, as elusive disruptive forces breaking through the established order.[582]

These female energies, as has been argued, are associated with the female presences found in Lee's haunted fictions, where women from the past are presented as still having the power to influence the present. The ghostly can be seen to represent the unquiet hearts of these dead women, relentlessly seeking ways to break free from the chains of history and to destabilise the present; a present haunted by the unachieved potential of what might have been. The continued presence of these forces in fantastic and supernatural fiction written by the ghostly sisterhood suggests a future where the things that were impossible in their day may yet become possible. Wharton's stories are 'not really otherworldly', suggests Nora Shaalan in a review of the recent *New York Review of Books* edition of *Ghosts*, suggesting instead that they are concerned with 'the fantasy of thinking up other, more just worlds in which women can live.'[583] The development of supernatural fiction by women at the end of the nineteenth century was a rejection of conventional realism, which had become associated with a patriarchal view of the nature of the world. This was particularly the case in respect to naturalism, the dominant form of realism from the 1860s onwards. As Talia Schaffer states, naturalism 'constructed itself as a strong men's revolt against a feminine and dangerously feminizing audience' by not shying away from the frank depiction of the most sordid aspects of modern life.[584] Naturalism was constructed as an

[582] Maxwell, 1997, p. 268.
[583] Nora Shaalan, 'Ghosts of Patriarchy', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 3rd, 2022.
[584] Schaffer, 2000, p. 43.

alternative to aestheticism, and while 'aestheticism can be read as a great rebellion against the realist imperative', Schaffer ably demonstrates that both aestheticism and naturalism sought to express that which was outside the high moral view of society adopted by the Victorians, including John Ruskin. The supernatural fiction of the ghostly sisterhood shared the late nineteenth-century distrust of conventional morality through a portrayal of the world as fragmented into different points of view, stressing the limits of vision. Schaffer goes on to state that aestheticism 'was mainly surrealist rather than realist, supernaturalist rather than naturalist.' Surrealist in the sense of being super-realist, articulating an interpretation of realism that was not restricted to material appearances and which instead found the means to express what lay hidden and might yet have a profound importance in determining the ways in which the world was understood. Because of this emphasis on the way people felt, and the way this was connected with their capacity to appreciate beauty, aestheticism could be seen as a rejection of the sordid actuality of naturalism. It tended to open up ways to escape from the narrow prison of fact and instead developed into fantasy. Again Schaffer is perceptive in noting that, 'This "fantasy" rhetoric can merge into the genre of the nightmarish Gothic, where magical events, unconscious desires, and imaginary sites are all key elements in constructing a female subjectivity.'[585]

The Gothic, to use Schaffer's terminology, is a genre which contains within its broad outlines all sorts of possibilities which transcend materialism. The supernatural element brings into play the capacity to see beyond the material world and investigate what is felt to exist yet cannot be seen. This would seem to imply that the objectivity of the sense of

[585] Schaffer, 2000, pp. 44-50.

sight is destabilised by the sense of touch, but feeling in this context is that which is not literally touched but rather understood through the mental faculty of sensing something hidden. Seeing was, as Lee suggested in 'The Psychology of an Art Writer,' only a part of the experience of aesthetic consciousness, leading to the data she gathered as her ideas developed towards a bridging the 'gap between the subjective study of aesthetics and psychology in general.'[586] What becomes important is what is hidden, and what is hidden relates to the mind. Lee's understanding was based on the relation of seeing as being conditioned by the processes of thought and the interaction of memory and emotion, which led her to making the connection between aesthetics and psychology. The supernatural becomes a means by which the writer can create connections that engage with experience not just in the reality of the present, but realises that the present can be juxtaposed with the past through memory, entering into a dialogue with historicised art works through empathy. This form of fantasy fiction, with its basis in aestheticism, is of the kind mentioned by Jessica DeCoux as typical of trends at the end of the nineteenth century:

> [Fin-de-siècle] fantasy fiction was useful not only for rejecting the materialism of naturalism and realism, and for merging scientific discourses with imaginative ones, but also for encouraging "against-the-grain" readings, inviting the reader to focus attention away from the protagonist and onto a mysterious other, or supplanting traditional protagonists with subversive ones.[587]

We have seen that this problematic protagonist is a feature of Lee's stories in *Hauntings*, with their limited or flawed perspectives and the way in which they are embedded in complex stories focussed on mysterious 'others'. One element which emerges from these

[586] Lee, 2018, p. 23.
[587] Jessica DeCoux, 'Invitation to Dissidence:Fantastic Creatures', in Lizzie Harris McCormick, Jennifer Mitchell, and Rebecca Soares, eds., *The Female Fantastic: Gendering the Supernatural in the 1890s and 1920s* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 183-185 (184).

fictions is the scope the fantastic provides for the exploration of psychology. As Miller writes regarding Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* of 1892:

> [The] female narrator expresses an unwillingness to attend [a] doctor, when 'John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall.' The narrator suffers the cruel kindness of a patronising husband (himself a doctor) and founders in hallucination: and her brief confessions are now prominent in the feminist canon. John warns her against giving way to 'fancy': 'He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies.[588]

This dramatises the importance of fantasy as a form allowing women to break through the conventions realism to give voice to powerful, alternative views engaged with the latest developments in psychoanalysis. Through the supernatural women could lay claim to an interest in the fantastic because it was, as Lizzie Harris McCormick, Jennifer Mitchell, and Rebecca Soares describe, 'an oppositional form.' Women who were campaigning to be accepted as equals with men were often writing against the dominant cultural production from the 1890s through to the 1920s. McCormick, Mitchell and Soares suggest that the writers of the female fantastic defined themselves by adopting the fantastic as a means of expressing their alienation from the 'empire yarns, naturalism, and New Woman novels' of the 1890s as well as modernists of the 1920s. However, as the editors of *The Female Fantastic* point out, 'no historicizing account of literary history can take for granted that the fantastic is always and everywhere subversive'.[589] What distinguished the writers of the ghostly sisterhood was a common purpose in exploring the borderlands between the real, the imaginary, and the ways in which the present was haunted by lost opportunities for women to take full control of their lives.

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[588] Miller, 1987 [online version, unpaginated].
[589] McCormick, Mitchell, and Soares, 2020, pp. xiii-xiv.

We have seen that between the early stories of Lee and of Wharton and the work of Sinclair there was the great divide of the First World War. A feeling that the war had cut the present off from the past swept across the world, giving a tangible explanation to what had been perceived by the *avant garde* in the period immediately preceding it, and this now unbridgeable gap was experienced both as a crisis, as it was in Eliot's *The Waste Land* with its fragmented inheritance, and an opportunity that encouraged the movement to break away from traditional ideas. As we have seen, some writers, such as Wharton, had expected the old life to begin again once the memory of the war had started to dim. The notion of this complex situation of being cut adrift from the past became widespread in the 1920s, with traditionalists and modernists competing to gain control of the future direction of the arts. This was a time which saw the influence of the development of psychoanalysis, DeCoux suggests:

> The rising popularity of Sigmund Freud's work also gave fantastical and monstrous characters new layers of signification: they were, of course, expressions of the untameable unconscious, the intrusions of that which is repressed and ungovernable, and were therefore even more potent embodiments of extra-social liberation. Furthermore, fantastic creatures' simultaneous legibility and illegibility reproduced the psychoanalytic patient's process of decoding the overdetermined symbols populating the unconscious mind. Freud theorized that the *unheimlich*, or "uncanny," as embodied by the fantastic figure, is a personification of our own intrusive repressed thoughts and desires, and like these things it both demands and resists apprehension.[590]

The supernatural fantastic found in Wharton's 'A Bottle of Perrier' and in Sinclair's *Uncanny Stories* embody this sense of the uncanny, where the borderland between past, present, and future becomes unstable. The prevailing culture, whilst remaining largely

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[590] DeCoux, in McCormick, Mitchell, and Soares, 2000, p. 184.

patriarchal, became increasingly subject to those 'elusive disruptive forces breaking through the established order', as Catherine Maxwell claimed of the female supernatural presences in Lee's tales.[591] In the hands of the ghostly sisterhood, the fantastic became a way of recording the interrelations between the material present, the inherited past, and the possible future in a way which was proto-modernist and yet questioned the assumptions which the modernists appeared to make regarding 'making it new', as the new present was still haunted by the past. Lee, Wharton, and Sinclair bore witness to a period of transition, realising that female desires were still being marginalised, and that at best they could haunt the literary canon with their presences until such time that scholars could uncover their hidden narratives. In the course of the discussion contained in this thesis I hope to have demonstrated that the supernatural stories written by Lee, Wharton and Sinclair contributed to a reshaping of the ghost story so that it could become a vehicle for intellectual and feminist concern and in so doing validated the fantasy as a legitimate modern form of fiction which mediated between states of consciousness where the present was haunted by the past.

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[591] Maxwell, 1997, p. 268.

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