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Mystery of Life

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Edith Wharton tirelessly searched for the meaning of life not only in her many stories but in her own life as well. An intellectual woman who diligently kept up on the newest scientific developments, she was keenly interested in the mysteries of life, such as the tricks played by destiny, a curious coincident, strange forebodings and supernatural phenomena. Over some time, she eventually became an architect of her own fortune, spending many tiring years in pursuit of her destiny. She went on to write various kinds of ghost stories for the sake of her own personal investigation into these unscientific phenomena.

It is safe to say that the origin of her curiosity about the field is based on her childhood experiences. As Wharton says "the teller of supernatural tales should be known frightened in the telling" (11), she was not only simply tortured with groundless fear but also even scared of darkness in nighttime when she was a child. The author of *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, R. W. B. Lewis, tells us that "after the attack of typhoid fever in Germany when she was eight," "Edith was possessed of a terror of certain nameless horrors" (24) and "she could not sleep at night unless a light was on and a nursemaid in the room with her" (25). In addition, Wharton says "my long and weary illness had made my parents unduly anxious about my health" (47) in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934), and moreover, "she suffered for extended periods from eating disorders, hysteria, migraines, claustrophobia, and asthma" (Erich xi). It is clear that she was seized with a variety of physical sufferings as well as psychological trouble. As a child, she, therefore, could not dream of a rosy future even though she was actually trying to chase her cherished dream as a writer. Despite her privileged life as a member of a wealthy family in New York, mentally, she spent many painful years. This stirred her interest in mystery of life, unaccountable incidents or popular superstitions and fuels her inquiries through her ghost stories.

While Wharton thinks "a good subject — must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience" (Writing 24) in general, she also says that "if it sends a cold shiver down one's spine, it has done its job and done it well" (11) in ghost stories. It means that the ghost story is free from moral messages, beautiful dreams or a unity of the story which we tend to think necessary in the novel. The distinction between the novel and the short story, or the ghost story, was clear in Wharton's thought. She considers "the test of the novel is that its people should be *alive*" (Writing 36), whereas "the greatest short stories owe their vitality entirely to the dramatic rendering of a situation" (Writing

36–7). As she also comments, "the short story, rather than the novel, might be called the direct descendant of the old epic or ballad" (Writing 37). She freely considers a variety of miraculous topics in her ghost stories.

In ghost stories, writers need readers who are capable of feeling ghostly influence apart from whether they believe in the existence of ghosts or not. It is important to note the difference between the two:

> To "believe," in that sense, is a conscious act of the intellect, and it is in the warm darkness of the prenatal fluid far below our conscious reason that the faculty dwells with which we apprehend the ghosts we may not be endowed with the gift of seeing. (7)

As the capability of feeling ghosts is not acquired by learning, it is given by nature to the people who can feel ghosts. Although all of us have five senses — sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, we tend to need the last or the lowest sense, touch, whenever we feel ghosts, what is more, instincts or intuition. In addition, the sensibility of people to ghosts and the strength of the power are widely different depending on the individual.

As Wharton says "the faculty required for their enjoyment has become almost atrophied in modern man" (8), it is also necessary to consider the ability of "imagination" to enjoy ghost stories. We can not completely deny the tendency because it is certain that modern science uncovers many uncertainties year by year, drawing attention to these areas. But as the world quickly changes, there is still plenty of room for improvement of the ability of "imagination." It is definitely obvious that the transformation from the old to the new would be the same in the civilized future world. It goes without saying that even if we wish to be gods, it is impossible to be so as human beings who try to reveal the truth of this planet. We can not find evidence to understand the mystery of our everyday life. We, hence, would like to stress that there is the raison d'etre of the ghost story, and furthermore, we have no chance to lose the ability of "imagination." Though Wharton regards "two world-wide enemies of the imagination" as "the wireless and the cinema," what would she think of the appearance of "the television and the internet"? If she were still alive, she would think that it is beyond possibility to improve our ability of imagination.

As she aptly stated, "the more one thinks the question over, the more one perceives the impossibility of defining the effect of the supernatural" (10). Even now the situation is the same, we may be aware of our ability or intuition to understand matters of the supernatural. Though we can not prove our instincts or revelations scientifically, there are many superstitious people in this civilized world even if they think that the supernatural is absurd.

First, we would like to survey the tendency of the variation of the subject matter of Wharton's ghost stories depending on her age. Secondly, we will focus on the theme of her last story or "death" that is leaded to desperate loneliness based on silence which Wharton stresses, that is, one of the most important elements of the ghost story. Thirdly, we will compare the messages of her ghost stories to

other novels to examine the similarities of her ideas. Finally, we will find the purpose of her writings or the significance of her ghost stories.

I

The requirement of ghost stories, broadly speaking, is a setting in a secluded place in the isolated countryside far from big cities. Also, the story takes place in either late autumn or winter, especially in the dead of freezing winter, not spring or summer. Thirdly, the time of ghostly happenings is from the silence of the gloomy twilight to midnight, not in the bright of day. Only the one who feels the ghost is the most mysterious. In this point, Wharton explains that "ghosts, to make themselves manifest, require two conditions abhorrent to the modern mind: silence and continuity" (9). She repeatedly emphasizes "what the ghost really needs is not echoing passages and hidden doors behind tapestry, but only continuity and silence" (9). We must note the two factors of "continuity and silence" and check her ghost stories from the beginning.

Wharton wrote "The Lady's Maid's Bell" in 1904 when she was 42. Hartley who was hired as Mrs. Brympton's maid sees the ghost of Emma Saxon who was the late Mrs. Brympton's maid of 20 years. The close relationship between Emma and Mrs. Brympton bound her to Mrs. Brympton by ties of affection. In this story, the strong devotion to Mrs. Brympton is the key to the ties the characters of Emma and Hartley together. Emma informs Hartley of Mrs. Brympton's condition though Hartley does not understand the correct meaning of it. She is left puzzled about the behavior of the ghost, Emma.

Hartley arrived at the house on a "dull October day" at twilight; "the daylight was almost gone" (13). When she enters the house, she meets Emma who still lives in the room which she used to use near Hartley's room. Here, Hartley sees Emma, hears the loud sound of her room's bell which nobody else heard and feels certain that Emma is in her room at midnight. In other words, Hartley uses her own sight, hearing and touch to get to know Emma. The ghost, Emma, repeatedly appears in the same place in her room and guides Hartley to the place where the only friend of Mrs. Brympton, Mr. Ranford, lives. Hartley, however, does not understand the real meaning behind Emma's gestures. As time passes, Emma leads Mrs. Brympton to the spirit world. Although the death is sad, the two, Emma and Mrs. Brympton, would be eternally happy in heaven.

Ten years after, "The Triumph of Night" appeared in 1914 when the First World War began. The traveler George Faxon happens to meet Frank Rainer who is a nephew of a local celebrity John Lavington. Mr. Lavington schemes to get possession of his nephew's immense estate. Because Faxon has the power to foresee the future, he knows Rainer's serious physical condition in spite of Rainer's bright hospitable reception. Only two similarities are present between the two, Faxon and Rainer: a pure mind and the same young generation. Nobody knows the real dignity of the person Mr. Lavington except Faxon, due to his good reputation. From the beginning, Faxon, however, feels something

strange about Mr. Lavington as if he cloaks his evil intentions with his friendly behavior.

On a shivering snowy night, Faxon arrives at the big house, which is owned by Mr. Lavington and is located in isolated place, following Rainer's directions. Faxon sees the impressive eyed ghost of Mr. Lavington not only in his study but also in his dining room. The ghost of Mr. Lavington always sits in the same position, next to Mr. Lavington and with ominous eyes watches Faxon. He is terrified by the horror. Faxon can not bear the ghost's glare so he finally flees the house into the terribly cold winter night.

Later, Faxon understands the meaning of the ghost, whose likeness was the intimate dark figure of Mr. Lavington. He intends to kill his nephew Rainer in order to get Rainer's property to save his own economic collapse. Despite the fact that Faxon has no intention to take part in the evil, he fatefully becomes involved in the dastardly plan as a witness of Rainer's will. Furthermore, when Faxon runs away from the house, Rainer has to stay outside in the freezing night to search for Faxon. The story is set in the cold dead of a blizzard.

At first, Faxon does not realize the corrosive power of the hidden depravity of Mr. Lavington and he ends up participating in the Lavington's terrible tactics which lead to Rainer's death. Faxon ends up running away from the U.S. to abroad to recover from the terrible experience. Six months after the incident, he learns about Rainer's death from an old newspaper. Though he feels the sting of remorse, it is too late. Even though it might be in the stars, it is too harsh a reality for him to accept that he is responsible for Rainer's death.

Wharton was appalled by the brutal carnage of the well-educated in civilized Europe during the First World War. She participated on her own in a variety of antiwar campaigns by supporting poor children and the elderly. Her enthusiasm to save innocent people involved in the war was remarkable. She did the said activities no less than a journalist's activities as a writer.

After the war, in 1925, Wharton created a fanatically bigoted and wretched hero Sylvester Brand in the story "Bewitched." She described conservative people who still believe in popular superstitions. Specifically, she dealt with the idea of the cursed family, a witch legend that said all women belonging to one family would die. So to speak, the village people were the descendants of the witch-hunting or witch trial district.

At first, Sylvester Brand appeared as just one of lookers-on. But, little by little, Mrs. Rutledge reveals his fated genealogy and varied tragedies based on the historical background of the forlorn province. Three men, Deacon Hibben, Orrin Bosworth and Brand, asked for advice from Mrs. Rutledge on the queer behavior of her husband Saul Rutledge. She revealed that her husband was bewitched by the late Ora Brand, his former lover who died a year ago, the elder daughter of Brand, and that Saul Rutledge was just about to die because of their frequent meeting.

As "the snow was still falling thickly" (163), the season is "in the dead of winter." Set in the desolated countryside, "I never knew a place as seemed as far from humanity" (164). Furthermore,

the Rutledge house had been completely neglected just like Mr. and Mrs. Rutledge. She was "a woman of cold manners and solitary character" (163) and very mysterious. "Her age might have been anywhere from thirty-five to sixty" (165). On the other hand, Bosworth thought that Mr. Rutledge had transformed "from the straight muscular fellow he had been a year before into the haggard wretch" (170) and 'he looked like a drowned man fished out from under the ice— "self-drowned"' (169). The three men were surprised to see Mr. Rutledge who looked like an emaciated ghost. At first, they could not believe the story of Mrs. Rutledge but they could not ignore the fact by looking at the appearance of Mr. Rutledge.

Since the three really wanted to get some proof of the ghost, Mr. and Mrs. Rutledge and the three planned to gather at the old shack on Lamer's pond again tomorrow evening to see where Mr. Rutledge regularly met the ghost of Ora. On their way home from the Rutledge house, when Deacon Hibben and Bosworth droped into the place to check it out, they happened to find footprints of the ghost in the snow. On top of that, they witnessed the accident when Brand shot his younger daughter Vanessa at the shack in the same place where the ghost Ora frequently appeared. Though Wharton obscurely depicted the scene, the contrast between the white snow and the black shack in the dusk is clear and the sound of shooting is sharp in the quiet place. Given this background, Deacon Hibben and Bosworth immediately understood the Brand's catastrophic incident. If Brand processes the situation philosophically despite his surprised to see the ghostly behavior of his daughter, the accident might have been prevented. Unfortunately, Brand was left in confusion after the story of Mr. and Mrs. Rutledge. Brand's life fell suddenly into the pits of hell after the loss of his wife, his elder daughter in the previous year and to make matters worse, the recent accidental loss of his younger daughter. It should be clear that no words would suffice to express his tragedy.

All of a sudden, Bosworth recalled the terrible background of Brand: "North Ashmore woman who was burned had the name of Brand" (178). As the legend goes, descendants of witches can not survive in this world from generation to generation as human beings. Brand lost all relatives, his wife and two daughters, Ora and Vanessa by turn. He has been left behind to survive alone though life has become a living hell.

We are left feeling terrible with no words and little understanding not only because of the opaque and irrational tragedy of Brand but also because the writer gives no explanation and message. Wharton says nothing about the subject matter, nor does she comment on human existence or the trials of life such as the cursed life of Sylvester Brand. Mr. and Mrs. Rutledge are described as unique personalities: He is not a human being but a skeleton or a ghost and she looks like a wax doll with a marble face. Though Vanessa's death was the irrecoverable loss for Brand, it was as if a great weight had been removed from the shoulders of the couple, Mr. and Mrs. Rutledge. Wharton tells of the irony of circumstances, one's traditional doom, and the suffering and sorrow of superstitious people living in a remote district. In other words, nobody knows the meaning or the significance of life. It is reasonable

to suppose that Wharton would reach this kind of conviction after the First World War.

As we have examined three ghost stories in chronological order, we can safely say that Wharton creates them based on the social background. As we look at the change of the relationship between the ghost and the hero or heroine, it is easily to understand the curiosity of Wharton depending on the age or the period. The bond between the two in the first story is affection, in the second one, it is a pure heart or innocence. In contrast with the former two, the third is somewhat a complicated story based on the historic background of the superstitious people of the freezing hamlet. After Wharton saw the stupidities of civilized people during the First World War, she created an absurd world. Brand killed his younger daughter accidentally, making the murderer also a victim. The tragedy's origin is rooted in the dark history of witching hunting. The women of Brand's ancestry were plagued by this superstitious legend. In addition, the relationship between Mr. Rutledge and his wife, Mr. Rutledge and Brand's daughter Ora, Mr. Rutledge and Brand, Brand and Ora, and Brand and his younger daughter Vanessa, are so complicated that it is hard to understand who the victim is. In this way, Wharton's interest is deeply influenced by the period or the social situation.

II

In Wharton's declining years, several ghost stories described the themes of "the sorrow of aging" or "the fear of death." "The Looking Glass," written in 1933 when Wharton was 71 dealt with the former. Mrs. Clingsland could not fix her eyes on her aged reality in the mirror. That is, she did not accept her natural decline in beauty duet aging. Having help from a ghost, Mrs. Attlee changes the old beautiful memory of Mrs. Clingsland into present hope.

When Wharton was 75, she wrote "All Souls" that tackled the themes of physical depression and the fear of death. At the time, she could not say "I am ready for death" and was overwhelmed with fear of her own coming death. The theme of the story "All Souls" is the fear of loneliness, solitude or isolation that leads to the death of the disabled elderly woman. Wharton thinks about the matter thoroughly in the story as if it is her own issue.

Sara Clayburn was an elderly but intellectual and independent widow who lives in a remote country house with a few family servants. Though "it was five or six miles from Norrington, the nearest town," her large house "Whitegates was a pleasant hospitable-looking house" (277). "Whitegates suggests the cemetery" (White xxiv). Wharton described the house to be modern and convenient, and the heroin Mrs. Clayburn to not be an old-fashioned superstitious woman but a sensible practical person. Only two times at the beginning and the end of the story, she met the ghost or the witch near her house as a stranger, who leads her to the terrible event. The first time was on All Souls Eve, and the second was the same day just a year later.

On the last day of October, All Souls Eve, Mrs. Clayburn happened to slip on a frozen puddle

and broke her ankle. She was incapable of moving freely and stayed in the house by herself during a snowstorm from the evening of Saturday to Monday morning, for some reason or other, without any servants. Unfortunately, the electricity was cut off and the telephone did not work. Mrs. Clayburn tried to find her servants even though she was injured but she found nobody in her large cold house. Unattended and disabled, Mrs. Clayburn had been left alone in the fearful situation and had to withstand a horribly silent world on her own for long hours. She was finally rescued by her servants but nobody could believe her dreadful story and passed it off as a delusion of her injury.

Here, the meaning of the "loneliness," solitude or isolation is clearly defined.

> "First, loneliness results from deficiencies in a person's social relationships. Second, loneliness is a subject experience; it is not synonymous with objective social isolation. People can be alone without being lonely, or lonely in a crowd. Third, the experience of loneliness is unpleasant and distressing." (Peplau 3)

Mrs. Clayburn had to endure "the fear of loneliness" in the freezing residence by herself for about thirty-six hours although nobody understood her personal experience. If the terrible loneliness during the snowing silent night in the frozen estate continued, she would not be able to survive. Her situation not only satisfies the three said requirements of loneliness but also, leads to the death of increasing fearful conditions such as no electricity, no means of communication and her injury.

A deeper look beneath the surface of the loneliness, solitude or isolation is needed:

> A lack of expressive outlook is one of the toughest parts of isolation. With anger, you can get mad as someone and yell. With sadness, you can cry. But isolation feels like being a room with no doors or windows—a place with no way out." (Kubler-Ross Grief 83)

Moreover, as "in isolation, hope disappears, despair rules, and you can no longer glimpse a life beyond the invisible walls that imprison you" (Kubler-Ross Grief 83). It finally leads to the death in the case of Mrs. Clayburn. This might be the Wharton's true terror or a deep cry from the bottom of her soul.

In this story, the base of loneliness lies in the silent world where Mrs. Clayburn was afflicted with absolute stillness. Silence can be further examined. When Mrs. Clayburn woke up before dawn, she was irritated that "the long black hours moved more and more slowly" (280). In the morning, not only was she without help but she also noticed that heavy snow disabled the electricity, heat, and telephone. Mrs. Clayburn "looked about her and listened. Silence. A deep nocturnal silence in that day-lit house, in which five people were presumably coming and going about their work. It was certainly strange..." (283) Mrs. Clayburn did not see anyone in sight but "a quiet steady snow," "muffling the outer world in layers on layers of thick white velvet, and intensifying the silence within" (283). She feared the noiseless world, because "it (silence) makes her anxious" (Picard 32). The terror of Mrs. Clayburn rapidly grew because "silence is not visible, and yet its existence is clearly apparent" (Picard 2). Mrs. Clayburn thinks "silence—more silence! It seemed to be piling itself up like the snow on the roof and in the gutters. Silence. How many people that she knew had any idea what silence was—and how loud

it sounded when you really listened to it?" (283) In the freezing season, "silence is visible: the snow is silence become visible" (Picard 106). In addition, as "grief and silence also belong together" (Picard 59), "her sense of loneliness grew more acute." And "she sank down on the nearest chair, struggling against her fears" (284).

Since "in the night the elemental force in silence sometimes becomes all-powerful" (Picard 37), "more and more the cold unanswering silence of the house weighed down on Mrs. Clayburn" (286). She continued to struggle in the absolute silence or "inexorable and hostile silence" (286) because "the autonomous being in things is strengthened in silence" (Picard 4). "In silence there is —— the power of darkness and terror, that which can erupt from the underground of silence, the power of death and evil" (Picard 36) as well.

> And as she descended, the silence descended with her — heavier, denser, more absolute. She seemed to feel its steps just behind her, softly keeping time with hers. It had a quality she had never been beyond, but an impenetrable substance made out of the world-wide cessation of all life and all movement. (286)

As "all silence has a meaning" (Rich 308), Mrs. Clayburn's fear of silence had reached the utmost limit. Since it is apparent that "all negative emotions (come) from fear" (Kubler-Ross LL 138), Mrs. Clayburn lost all means of escape. "The deep silence accompanied her; she still felt it moving watchfully at her side, as though she were its prisoner and it might throw itself upon her if she attempted to escape" (289). Over time, Mrs. Clayburn grew desperate with "the fear that she might lie there alone and untended till she died of cold, and of the terror of her solitude" (291) because "it (solitude) consumes and diminishes the individual" (Picard 53).

Mrs. Clayburn was freed from her isolation on Monday morning when her servants entered her home. Nobody believed her terrible story even though her injury actually had becomes worse. She had gotten so confused that she tried "to understand and give meaning to something that seems to have none" (Kubler-Ross Grief 83). The ultimate conclusion of Mrs. Clayburn is that "she never returned to investigate it" (299) after she met the ghost or the witch at the second time. That is to say, "it is fear itself that brings us so much unhappiness in life, not the things we fear" (Kubler-Ross LL 141). No matter how she tries to efface the terrible experience from her memory, it is impossible for her. Because of her fear filled experience, she chose to stay in New York for the rest of her life. What is shown in this story is that we have to understand the limits of our physical or mental strength. We need the support of many people in our everyday life, that is, we can not survive by ourselves. It is definitely clear that this story is a typical example of Wharton's message that ghost stories should contain the most important two elements of "continuity and silence."

We can openly say that the terror in Wharton's childhood lead to her fear of death in her seventies. Or, it might said that she still could not get over the bitter experiences such as her fear of the dark,

or her baseless horror of the various kinds of diseases that she had in her teens. Though she did not always live in solitude, it is likely that she was not free of loneliness in her own self especially as her precious friends passed away year after year. As her weakened body and lonely soul mix with her fear of her death, she gives all her energy to the story as if this was real her own personal confession.

"All Souls," the last story Wharton ever wrote, was completed about six months before her death in 1937. As she was fatigued mentally as well as physically, she was not in good health at the time. The relationship between Walter Berry who was invaluable to her and Wharton lasted for 45 years from 1883 to 1929 when he died. He was really a precious friend to Wharton. "He found me when my mind and soul were hungry and thirsty, and he fed them till our last hour together" (*Backward* 119). At the time, "she still mourned the loss of Walter Berry, now dead for ten years. Within a six-month period in 1933 death had claimed her trusted and beloved servants, Elise Duvlenck and Catherine Gross" (Erich 169). As she confesses, "I've been incurably lonely *inside*" (Erich 170). The situation of Mrs. Clayburn was quite similar to Wharton's life. Lewis' comment on the connection between her life and the stories proves this: Not only "the question of the relation between the life and the work —— has an engrossing complexity in Edith Wharton's case" (xiv), but also "her deepest feelings were reserved for her work; it was there, in her novels and stories" (xiv) in her later years. Wharton contemplated her own passing through her last story, having few interests outside her own death.

As Erich also comments "Edith Wharton's final view was —— on one level, serenity forged from her positive joy in existence and satisfaction with her own attainments, and on another, more primitive level, terror of entering alone and uncomforted into the unknown" (170). It seems reasonable to suppose that she deeply dreaded her own death.

Ⅲ

In her ghost stories, Wharton depicts not only the absurdity of our life and the ironic tragedies of fate but also she portrays a wide variety of mysteries in our everyday life. In Wharton's first best-selling novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905), 29-year-old unmarried heroine Lily Bart full of beauty and charm is looking for her ideal marriage partner belonging to Old New York or the higher class. After being rejected from a mostly immoral and corrupt society, she had to work with her hands. One day, when she was at the lowest point of her fortunes, she accidentally took too much medicine which lead to her death. Though on the surface, her life looks like a tragedy, she has the strength to face her hardship to find a fulfilling life. From the standpoint of morality, she escaped from a vicious society, not having to accept the proposals of immoral men and could become a person of great nobility in the spiritual world through her struggles. Also, she found faint hope in seeing a familiar baby. It is highly probable that the defeated Lily is called to heaven on account of her pure mind.

In *The Reef* (1912), Anna Leath denied the proposal of her first love, George Darrow, against the

expectation of the readers. That is to say, she gave up on her rosy future to maintain her human dignity. Over time, she decided to obey her inner maternal voice, although she was miserable on the surface. As a result, none of the four main characters found happiness by the end of the story.

In *The Age of Innocence* (1920) which received the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for literature, the hero of the story, Newland Archer, went to Paris from New York to see his former lover, Ellen Olenska, after his wife's death. After looking her up, he chooses not to meet her though nothing stands in his way. Though it was his last chance to meet her, he does not dare to see her. Wharton's main characters may look unhappy but they behave as dignified people. Through this, Wharton emphasizes morality in her novels more than in her short stories.

In Wharton's medium-length story, *The Bolted Door* (1910), Hubert Granice, a struggling playwright, suffered many rejections on account of his work. He felt gloomy about the future and wanted to die. He, however, could not shoot himself and, instead, confessed to killing his cousin ten years ago. Although he wanted the death penalty, doctors and lawyers believed his confession to be a revelation of insanity because there was no flaw in his alibi. Unfortunately, nobody could accept his story which was too perfect, too pat. He had to give up his death under the law. Although one reporter knew the truth that he was the real murderer, the reporter decided to say nothing to anyone else. In this way, Granice ironically lost his last chance to go to the other world.

Wharton represents the impractical world. For example, the hero, Ethan From, has lived in a small house with his wife and injured lover for the last 24 years in the story *Ethan From* (1911). The three main characters had no way to escape their terrible situation. The lack of money leads to their tragic co-inhabitation as they need to depend on each other to survive together in the freezing area.

In the short story, "The Choice" (1908), Isabel Stilling hated her egotistic husband, Cobham, and turned to a wise, stable lawyer as her lover. In spite of her dearest hope that her husband may die, irony stroke when she rescued her drunken hated husband instead of her lover from the lake on a tragic night near her house when her husband and the lover fell accidentally into the lake together.

In "Roman Fever" (1936), two widowed American women, Mrs. Delphin Slade and Mrs. Horace Ansley, acting as friends reminisced on the Janiculum overlooking the Palatine Hill even though they were actually enemies. Both of them had daughters of marring age, Jenny Slade and Barbara Ansley. Barbara was more attractive than Jenny. When they were young, they fell in love with the same man, Delphin Slade. Because of a nasty trick on Miss Ansley by Miss Slade, he married Miss Slade. After reminiscing for a while, Mrs. Slade grew confident in her victory about their happiness. She, then, realized the shocking reality that her rival's daughter, Barbara, was the daughter of her husband. Wharton's short stories are "the dramatic rendering of a situation" as we see in the former. The endings tend to be more surprising than compared to those of her novels.

In this way, Wharton creates amazing conclusions that go against reader's expectations in her novels, the medium-length stories and the short stories including the ghost stories. Though it may

be puzzling, her purpose lies in the mystery of life and the difficulties in finding life's significance. It is reasonable to suppose that Wharton would consider that the ghost stories offer the perfect stage to show the supreme mystery of our life.

Ⅳ

Edith Wharton's purpose in writing was varied. When she was a child even though she was well provided, she was often alone because she was quite sickly. Wharton regards herself as "a born reader" (*A Backward Glance* 47). She took great pleasure in reading books in her father's library. Naturally, this led to her enjoyment of writing essays, poems, or stories although they lacked strength. As Wharton says, "I cannot remember the time when I did not want to 'make up' stories" (*A Backward Glance* 33). She was fixated on writing from her early childhood to her last days because "writing is a wonderful companion to our loneliness in a world where we stand alone" (Kubler-Ross Grief 83). Writing, gradually, became indispensable for her everyday life. The only exception was after she lost her beloved father when she was 19. She could not write because her grief was extremely profound. She, then, realized that "writing externalizes what is in us." (Kubler-Ross Grief 83). As she also knew that: "You can find your voice in writing in a way that you can't find in other forms of communication. You can also finish your unfinished business" (Kubler-Ross Grief 83). In this way, the writing of stories became her lifelong work.

Unfortunately, she had no chance to publicly improve her writing ability except for only once when her parents published her poems privately for her in 1878 when she was 16. She was born into the upper ranges of society where people tended to regard her writing as a hobby. She did not need to work to get money. For this reason, her first book was not a novel but a book of the architectural field, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) which was a joint work of Wharton and Ogden Codman.

In 1899, her first book, *The Greater Inclination*, was published when Wharton was 37. Her dream had finally come true. She fondly reflected, "at last I had groped my way through to my vocation, and thereafter I never questioned that story-telling was my job" (*Backward* 119). She also says "the Land of Letters was henceforth to be my country, and I gloried in my new citizenship" (*Backward* 119). It is correct to say that writing was not a job but a precious calling to her. That is, writing was her life itself.

We can truthfully say that Wharton did almost everything she could do in her life even though hardships like those during the First World War. She came to the conclusion that she had to resign to her fate, and moreover, she must find the positive to enjoy her everyday life as "the visible world is a daily miracle for those who have eyes and ears" (*Backward* 378).

Upon surveying Wharton's ghost stories, it is manifest that she used her stories to share of life's mysteries and significance. She freely depicted a variety of extreme situations or desperate conditions based on the historical convention or unreasonable superstitions rooted in the rural areas of the ghost

stories.

The most important message of Edith Wharton would be that no matter how we try to investigate the significance of life, we absolutely have no chance to understand the meaning of it. That is why she does not give definite conclusions at the end of her ghost stories as well as other novels.

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