



# Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton

Kathy A. Fedorko

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Edith Wharton's contradictory views of women and men-her attitudes toward the feminine and the masculine—reflect a complicated interweaving of family and social environment, historical time, and individual psychology. Studies of Wharton have exhibited the same kind of contradiction, with some seeing her as disparaging men and the masculine and others depicting her as disparaging women and the feminine. The use of Gothic elements in her fiction provided Wharton—often considered the consummate realist—with a way to dramatize the conflict between feminine and masculine selves as she experienced them and to evolve and alternative to the dualism.

Using feminist archetypal theory and theory of the female Gothic, Fedorko shows how Wharton, in sixteen short stories and six major novels written during four distinct periods of her life, adopts and adapts Gothic elements as a way to explore the nature of feminine and masculine ways of knowing and being and to dramatize the tension between them. A distinction in her use of the form is that she has women and men engage in a process of individuation during which they confront the abyss, the threatening and disorienting feminine/maternal. Wharton deconstructs traditional Gothic villains and victims by encouraging the reader to identity with those characters who are willing to assimilate this confrontation with the feminine/maternal into their sense of themselves as women and men. In the novels with Gothic texts Wharton draws multiply parallels between male and female protagonists, indicating the commonalities between women and men and the potential for a female self. Eventually, in her last completed novel and her last short story, Wharton imagines human beings who are comfortable with both gender selves.



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