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“You just stood there and watched”

The Transformative Power of a Woman’s Withholding in Edith Wharton’s Sanctuary

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Abstract

Edith Wharton’s Sanctuary was long dismissed for want of a convincing plot and heroine, but the novella has been shown to reward focused inquiry. It may be read, among other things, as a revealing, early example of Wharton’s uses of secrets and silences to portray women’s lives. Withholding would become a central feature of her writing, and the topic of women, one of her enduring artistic interests. This article examines Sanctuary’s fictional and textual secrets, as well as the roles of silences with reference to the numerous instances of vigil-keeping in the novella. It finds Wharton exploring acts of withholding by a woman and imbuing them with a significant power to transform others, so subverting the historical silences and silencing of women.

Keywords

Edith Wharton, Sanctuary, women, secrets and silences, vigil-keeping

Edith Wharton’s substantial body of work attests to an abiding interest in the lived experiences of women. She may have held ambivalent views about the New Woman and her descendants, but time and again Wharton examined through her fiction women’s responses to the social, political, and economic opportunities afforded, and constraints imposed on, them. This consistency of theme is matched by a constancy in approach. Throughout her writing career, secrets and their accompanying silences formed part of Wharton’s portrayals of women. Her heroines are women of all ages, drawn from diverse backgrounds, and negotiating distinct socio-geographical settings at different periods, but they are connected by how secrecy underpins key moments in their stories, and by the act of withholding and the power of what they withhold.
The prominence of withholding through secrets and/or silences in Wharton's writing has not gone unnoticed. Hermione Lee states in her biography of Wharton that “[r]eserve and concealment are everywhere in her fiction,” and that “[m]any of these cover-ups have to do with children” (11). Diane Chambers examines Wharton’s use of narrative structures and themes to demonstrate the silencing of women by men who are compelled to control the story (23–24, 153–54), while in Elizabeth Alsop’s view reticence, such as that of The House of Mirth’s (1905) Lily Bart, might signify a form of resistance (85). These critical reactions illustrate various permutations of withholding in Wharton’s fiction. In the decades following the 1968 unsealing of her archive in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, many commented on the selectiveness that also governs her autobiographical writing. Shari Benstock remarks memorably on A Backward Glance’s (1934) “lapses, silences, and gaps . . . revealing of a life that consistently wrote a fiction of itself” (42). Judith Fryer similarly views it as Wharton’s “last public performance: choosing actors, set, language, she can call us back to witness the presentation of a final, perfected version of her life” (166). Wharton drew on secrets and silences to tell a curated story about herself, much as she did in her writing about the fictional characters that she invented.

Wharton’s interest in women’s secrets and silences is evident as early as 1903 with the publication of her novella Sanctuary. Here I examine the transformative power of withholding, wielded by a woman, by considering Sanctuary’s fictional and textual secrets and the silences that they engender, but first I offer a brief synopsis of the text and aspects of its critical reception.

**Wharton’s Sanctuary**

Sanctuary tells the tale of Kate Orme Peyton. In the novella’s opening pages, Kate discovers that her betrothed, Denis Peyton, is the unlawful recipient of his recently deceased stepbrother’s fortune, and that there is no evidence of this injustice. The brother’s wife has drowned herself, along with their child. An appalled Kate verges on rejecting Denis, but then curiously resolves to marry him after all, in order to “expiate and redeem” his future child from an “inheritance of secret weakness, a vice of the moral fibre,” by offering herself as “a refuge from its consequences” (35). Widowed only a few years into her marriage, she continues to nurture Dick Peyton with “love and a lifelong vigilance” against the “tendencies” that had marred his father’s character (43). Dick grows up to become a young architect, trained at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, who is
“genuinely indifferent to money,” but Kate fails to temper his growing desire for professional success that is fed by his affection for ambitious Clemence Verney (42). Here his own moral temptation, connected to yet another death, presents itself. Fellow Beaux-Arts alumnus Paul Darrow bequeaths Dick his competition plans for a new museum of sculpture in New York City, with the express permission to submit them as Dick’s own. Recognizing the superiority of his friend’s designs, Dick faces the moral dilemma that Kate has foreseen all along.²

Sanctuary’s architectural theme possibly was inspired by the historical occasion of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago that led to what Laura Rattray defines as “a headline year for American architecture”; the layout of the Exposition expressed and promoted architectural principles instilled at the École des Beaux-Arts and epitomized classical planning and composition on a monumental scale (125). By 1902, New York’s cityscape would represent a battleground for adherents to such traditional styles and proponents of modernist design, while Wharton’s architectural interests were channeled into the planning, building, and decoration of her elegant Lenox home, The Mount (Macheski 189–90). Sanctuary was published the following year.

Initial responses to Wharton’s early-career novella were mixed. The Athenaeum’s reader doubts the strength of Dick’s convictions, suspecting that “founded on what we know of the young man’s character, . . . he may hereafter have repented of this sacrifice,” yet notes that the “author’s style has unusual vigour and distinction” (Tuttleton et al. 69). The Independent is unpersuaded by Kate’s portrayal because contrary to what Wharton suggests, women’s “very obtuseness is a sort of healing power. They do not condone what is wrong about them, because they do not know and cannot imagine it” (Tuttleton et al. 70). In contrast, the reviewer for Munsey’s Magazine finds that Wharton’s “deftness in characterization remains unchanged,” but that “the incident upon which the development of story depends is its one weak point. . . . Kate Orme’s reasons for marrying Denis Peyton came perilously near absurdity” (Tuttleton et al. 76; reviewer’s emphases).

Scholarship dating to the latter decades of the twentieth century echoed early concerns regarding Sanctuary’s plot and Kate’s characterization, but also drew attention to the novella’s position within Wharton’s broader body of work, often to its disadvantage. Louis Auchincloss attributes the novella firmly to an early experimental phase of Wharton’s career, an “absurd but charming little tale” that speaks of male literary influences (10–11). Cynthia Griffin Wolff relegates it to a footnote in A Feast of Words: “Not to mince words, Sanctuary is a really bad little novel. . . . It was not a great commercial failure and did not noticeably impair her reputation, but it was forgotten immediately by its author, and it will
be mercifully forgotten here” (422). Elizabeth Ammons concedes *Sanctuary’s* importance as part of “the story of Wharton’s early reconnoitering as a novelist,” but would not describe it as a “good book” (20). She finds Kate’s motivation “ludicrous”; this was “feminine self-sacrifice gone berserk” (21).

*Sanctuary* has, however, attracted research attention that actively sought to rehabilitate its status as a text that is worthy of note, or offered new readings supporting this perception. Naturally, the novella’s commentary on women has drawn attention. Angela Salas examines it in light of French and American nineteenth-century understandings of parenthood that placed responsibility for the moral education of children firmly on the shoulders of mothers (*Uses* 17, 36; “Ghostly” 124–26), and Janet Beer recognizes its “innovative treatment of the question of the moral work of women” (99). Rose Lessy considers the text as a demonstration of Wharton’s attention to “the proto-feminist possibility of asserting a felicitous influence on the subject through the shaping of the environment” (72). Other studies include comparative investigations by Emily Orlando (“Irreverent”) and Lisa Tyler, demonstrating how *Sanctuary* may be read alongside works by Larsen and Hemingway that address matters of race and mental illness respectively, while Jared Stark explores what the text reveals about contemporary responses to suicide.

In addition to the diverse and rich lines of inquiry already invited by Wharton’s novella, *Sanctuary* also lends itself to an examination of her early uses of withholding through secrets and silences, especially as it concerns women. The workings of secrets are entwined with silences and silencing. It seems evident that secrets rely on the silence of the secret owner or those who keep their own deeds secret, and sometimes also on that of others, namely secret sharers or those who gain knowledge of a secret. Notably, then, it is a woman’s suicide—a wordless, unspeaking, and unspeakable yet resounding, expression of despair—in *Sanctuary* that awakens Kate to the secret of Denis’s moral failings. Despite their inherent relationship in the text, I consider the treatment of secrets and silences separately to establish how they each contribute to the novella’s portrayal of withholding.

**Secrets**

Sissela Bok writes that a “path, a riddle, a jewel, an oath—anything can be secret so long as it is kept intentionally hidden, set apart in the mind of its keeper as requiring concealment” (5). Matei Calinescu builds on Bok’s ideas by defining secrecy as “conscious concealment of meaning,” as “information deliberately
set aside, withheld or disguised” and thus outside the “circuit of social/personal communication” (“Secrecy” 443). He identifies various ways in which intentional concealment or secrecy manifests in literature. These include, first, that narrative structure essentially comprises the sequential, intentional concealment and/or disclosure of information and, second, that a narrative may give its reader access to the fictional secrets of fictional characters (448). One way in which Wharton’s fictional secrets—that is, secrets woven into plot—may be examined, is in terms of the characters that they involve and their life histories that overlap with a text’s narrative structure. In addition to its disclosure to the reader, a secret’s life history potentially involves its protection, discovery, exploitation, and/or confession by characters within the narrative.

Arthur Peyton’s married life, the fact that he has a wife and child, is a secret that precedes the action of the novella, but it wholly directs the first part of the narrative. It occurs offstage, as fictional secrets often do in Wharton’s writing, and like many of her secrets, exerts a significant and enduring influence on women characters. Kate is aware, “from the silences and evasions amid which she moved, that a woman had turned up—a woman who was of course ‘dreadful,’ and whose dreadfulness appeared to include a sort of shadowy claim upon Arthur” (8). The existence and details of the secret are revealed simultaneously to the reader and to Kate when the woman kills herself and Denis admits that he had shared Arthur’s secret: he had known prior to her suicide that the woman’s claim was more than shadowy because Arthur had confessed his marriage on his deathbed. By admitting the truth, Denis reveals himself as a liar who has exploited the secret nature of his brother’s marriage to inherit his fortune, yet he fails to grasp the transgressive nature of his actions, so that Kate’s efforts to make him understand leave her feeling “like a trainer with a lash above some bewildered animal” (21).

Denis’s moral corruption is a second fictional secret that is effectively folded into that of Arthur’s marriage in terms of how it is revealed to the reader and to Kate, and also in how it affects the future trajectory of Kate’s life. For her, the price of becoming a secret sharer is immense. Albeit willingly, she renounces her freedom and offers her life as reparation for Denis’s misdeeds. In a moment of desperation, she understands that by trying “to deflect the natural course of events, she had sacrificed her personal happiness to a fantastic ideal of duty, and it was her punishment to be left alone with her failure, outside the normal current of human strivings and regrets” (80–81). This is emphasized by the substantial gap between the two parts of the novella, separating Kate’s decision to marry Denis and the introduction to her architect son whose integrity is about to be challenged. The account of the intervening period, privileging Kate’s
perspective, pauses briefly over the Peyton marriage before charting Dick’s upbringing and professional development. Kate’s life as a woman, especially unconnected to her husband and son, receives scant attention.

Kate does not disclose Denis’s moral corruption to Dick in an effort to protect her son. This is not stated explicitly, but it is implied by the focus of her mothering—she “had brought him up in a wholesome scorn of material rewards” (42)—and by her concern over the temptation that Paul’s offer poses Dick. In addition to concealing his father’s secrets, she withholds from him knowledge of two interventions on her part. The first inadvertently jeopardizes his moral probity, while the second attempts to salvage it. Shortly before his death, Kate reveals to Paul that Clemence has set Dick’s victory in the design competition as her “price” for marrying him (53–54). This interference must be the reason for Paul’s extraordinary offer, but Kate never owns her involvement in the matter. Instead, in order to orchestrate a break between the young woman and her son, she reveals the “opportunity” to Clemence (74–75). In trusting that Clemence’s support for the scheme would sufficiently disgust her son to reject any thought of submitting Paul’s designs as his own, she lets “the issue pass out of her hold” (77). These manipulations demonstrate the lengths to which she will go to protect Dick’s integrity, even lowering her own moral standard, and encourage consideration of the line between maternal protectiveness and what Lee identified as “maternal possessiveness” (170). They foreground the lasting influence of her husband’s shortcomings on her behavior, and the undue burden of secrets on women in comparison to men, an idea that recurs in novels like *The House of Mirth*, *The Reef* (1912), and *Summer* (1917).

There is, however, also power in having access to a secret. Denis Peyton’s secrets are disgraceful in themselves, but being both a secret sharer and a secret keeper or someone who actively withholds information, offers Kate what she perceives as a meaningful life. Having decided to marry Denis, she feels “that lift of the heart that made one of the saints declare that joy was the inmost core of sorrow . . . a surge of liberating faith in life, the old *credo quia absurdum* that is the secret cry of all supreme endeavour” (36). The power of the secret lies not in this case in the “fascination of betrayal” and consequent control over others that was identified by Wharton’s contemporary, sociologist Georg Simmel, but in what he saw as the role of secrets in individuation (334–35). Carl Jung remarks similarly that “the individual on his lonely path needs a secret which for various reasons he may not or cannot reveal. Such a secret reinforces him in the isolation of his individual aims” (376). Kate’s path is undeniably solitary, but she also craves this self-imposed quest. Her “intimacy with her son” is “the
one need of her life” and to nurture it she has “with infinite tact and discretion, but with equal persistency, clung to every step of his growth, dissembling herself, adapting herself, rejuvenating herself in the passionate effort to be always within reach, but never in the way” (40). This description underscores the meaning that Denis’s secrets indirectly afford Kate’s life. It also contextualizes her reaction to Clemence’s perceived influence over her son and her unworthy attempt to separate them.

What Gloria Erlich characterizes as a “fight for control” between Kate and Clemence over Dick’s soul (112–13) is complicated by the undertones of incest in Kate and Dick’s relationship—a “romantic friendship” that does not go unnoticed by “critics of her own sex” (40)—that are heightened whenever Clemence is discussed. When he announces his engagement to Clemence, Dick “had her [Kate] on his breast now, and his kisses were in her hair” (81), and later, when he has given up Clemence, “he put his arm about her [Kate], boyishly, and drew her toward one of the hard seats between the tables; and there on the bare floor, he knelt before her, and hid his face in her lap. She sat motionless, feeling the dear warmth of his head against her knees, letting her hands stray in faint caresses through his hair” (92). Incest is not a fictional secret written into Sanctuary’s plot, but the novella’s incestuous undertones resemble a third kind of secret that Calinescu identifies in literature, namely narrative revelations made in a way that engages a reader beyond simply reading to discover what happens next and that involves rereading (“Secrecy” 448–49). He describes rereading for the textual secret as follows: “I think that rereading for the secret—rereading for what a text conceals, holds away, means obliquely or allegorically, hints at but refuses to name, or names falsely, misleadingly, and tantalizingly—has its ultimate reward not in the discovery of a certain truth but in the quality of attention it achieves. . . . The major revelation produced by rereading for the secret is simply (but also mysteriously) the value of attention, of intense concentration, of focused ingenuity, of total absorption” (Rereading 272). In Sanctuary, Wharton’s subtle exploration of incest—a taboo that often still remains shrouded in secrecy—announces to the rereader her enduring interest in a theme that became most evident after the 1968 discovery of the “unpublishable” erotic fragment “Beatrice Palmato,” and that she revisits repeatedly through her writing (White 40).

The novella also gestures toward Wharton’s fascination with erotic triangles that intersect with the theme of incest. Viewed through Kate’s eyes, Clemence possesses “the charming haze of youth,” but “might emerge from this morning mist as a dry and metallic old woman” (48), an assessment that foregrounds
Kate’s unspoken rivalry with the younger woman for the affections of her son, as well as the generational differences that underpin their distinct worldviews. Kate’s sheltered upbringing that resolutely overlooked “the ugly side of things” (8) had produced a very different kind of woman from Clemence, who is “patently of the ‘new school’” (45), thinks ambition “so splendid,” and covets a man’s ability to “go crashing through obstacles, straight up to the thing one is after” (50). Clemence’s “talk is like a fresh breeze” that clears Dick’s head (83), emphasizing the novelty of her thinking, and he admires her “grip on values” in particular (84). Her values are those of business and commerce, exemplified by an unsentimental agreement to give herself in return for his success. Their deal foreshadows Wharton’s subsequent satires of the marriage market, but is also notable for how it refashions Clemence herself into a potential symbol of victory, “the drums and wreaths and acclamations” (50) that she openly desires. Clemence may have a less laser-like focus on her own public image than The Custom of the Country’s Undine Spragg, whose narcissism (and its contemporary cultural influence) recently was considered by Orlando, but like Undine, she objectifies herself by promising to marry Dick if he wins the design competition (“New Narcissism” 735; Sterling 11). Kate, though, wishes to see her son’s ambition curbed, rather than further incentivized (50). Measuring achievement in terms of the “inward approval” (50) that Clemence dismisses, she stands with “Milton’s archangels” who are unlikely to have had “much success in active business” (84).

The struggle that ensues over Dick and his future between a mature, principled woman, and one who is vivacious and unapologetically aspiring, is captured in filmic terms when Clemence rises “with her wandering laugh, and stood flushed and sparkling above Mrs Peyton, who continued to gaze at her gravely” (50). Wharton invites her readers to ask which of the two women will succeed in imprinting her views on Dick, even as she prepares them for a larger body of work that repeatedly scrutinizes the male character. She portrays a steady intensification in Kate and Clemence’s rivalry through a series of increasingly public encounters. They meet first at a tea held in Clemence’s honor at Dick’s office (39–40), then at a morning concert at a friend’s house where the music room “thronged with acquaintances” (68), and finally at the New York opera (88). Kate’s response to Clemence shifts from curiosity and wishing to grasp “the residuum of character beneath Miss Verney’s shifting surface” (45), to an uneasiness that causes her to shiver as she considers the exposure of Dick’s “frail scruples” to Clemence’s “rustling airs” (69), to “anger at the girl’s bright air of unconcern” (88) and “a feeling of humiliation and defeat”
(89). Like the younger woman, Kate disguises their secret rivalry through performative behavior at the opera. She continues to engage with others by “talking, smiling, holding out her hand to newcomers, in a studied mimicry of life,” but her rising anxiety over Dick’s moral quandary culminates in a dreamlike vision of Clemence and herself, “face to face and alone, enclosed in their mortal enmity” (88).

Clemence is an early manifestation of the seducers that continue to disrupt ambivalent or atypical parent-child relationships in Wharton’s writing, such as The Reef’s Sophy Viner, Summer’s Lucius Harney, and The Mother’s Recompense’s (1925) Chris Fenno. Sanctuary’s Paul becomes another. His disruption is primarily moral, but the language used to describe his friendship with Dick also plays on the erotic. Paul’s talents as a designer “at once attracted” Dick; “Dick was unstinted in his admiration”; their “intimacy” takes the form of “midnight colloquies in Darrow’s lodgings” (44). After his death, Kate recognizes Paul as “the one person who had loved Dick as she loved him,” and his bequest as “the last touching expression of an inarticulate fidelity: the utterance of a love that at last had found its formula” (60–61). Yet she finds “herself almost hating” him for being “the unconscious instrument of her son’s temptation” (65). Paul, like Clemence, disturbs Kate’s work to ensure Dick’s moral irreproachability, an enterprise that she knows hinges not on “a sudden stroke of heroism,” but requires her “ever-renewed and indefatigable effort” (65–66) that has resulted in their singular, often silent, parent-child relationship.

Silences

Wharton’s vocabulary in Sanctuary speaks of a curiosity about nonspeech acts themselves, and also about what is not articulated. “Silence,” “silent,” “silencing,” “quiet,” “quietly,” and “mute” occur at least forty times in this brief narrative, infused with various forms of silence. A mother-son relationship that does not require speech, thematic silences that intentionally resist certain topics (Kurzon 1677), near-ritualistic behavior that is inherently mute, and rhetorical silences, indicated by ellipses and other examples of punctuation, all occur in the novella. Wharton even nods directly—and perhaps a little wryly, considering her fastidiousness over punctation (e.g., Girling 71; Towheed 35)—toward the written notation of silences when Denis’s mother, waiting for Kate to grasp a point, is described as resting for “a moment on this period, as an experienced
climber pauses to be overtaken by a less agile companion” (26). Lastly, she portrays environments or settings that are practically soundless.

The narrative begins with an assertion that certain things are best left unsaid to a young woman, that certain thematic silences are desirable. Kate’s father and Denis’s mother are both of the opinion “that young girls should not be admitted to any open discussion of life” (8). What they have in mind primarily are matters of sex, class, and money, especially when these unite to form an infelicitous liaison between two people. Their “protective” silences concerning the indelicate pasts of various family members that involve exactly such affairs are soon undermined by the drowning of Arthur’s wife and child near the Peyton estate. Through Kate, Wharton interrogates the notion of shielding women from life’s “horrors” (26) and imagines how they might respond when they eventually discover, as they ordinarily do, what has been kept secret from them. She casts a critical eye over socially imposed silences that effectively infantilize and disempower women, but she seems even more interested in the effects of the silences that women themselves choose to maintain.

Kate never speaks about her self-appointed mission to save Dick from moral degeneracy, but it is when he gains access to Paul’s designs and his morality is at its most vulnerable, that silence emerges as a vital ingredient of the narrative. Paul’s bequest letter renders Kate “speechless”; she wordlessly drops it and hides her face in her hands (59). This nonspeech act signals the start of a protracted thematic silence between Kate and Dick wherein neither ever raises the possibility of Dick accepting Paul’s offer—Kate behaves as if Paul’s designs will be entered under his own name, separately from Dick’s own drawings (62)—but she rightly fears that the possibility of acting on his friend’s suggestion has occurred to her son; “had she not once before seen the same thought moving behind . . . [his father’s eyes]?” (63). Kate’s clandestine efforts to manipulate Clemence speak of her ambivalence over her son’s ability to withstand the moral temptation before him, yet she chooses not to press the matter with him directly, realizing that her love now “must know how to hold its hand and keep its counsel, how to attend upon its object as an invisible influence rather than as an active interference” (64). Taken together, Kate’s actions demonstrate the complexity of this mother-son relationship, as well as her awareness of the potential influence of her silence on Dick. Indeed, when she learns regretfully of his engagement to Clemence, she is aware of the “cruelty of her silence” that is “darkening” his moment (82–83).

Roughly a decade after Sanctuary’s publication, Wharton would write about another mother and son whose sensitivity toward each other’s silences is an
important indicator of their connection. *The Reef*’s Anna Leath considers her bond with her stepson as follows: “Owen, from the first, had been almost ‘old enough to understand’: certainly *did* understand now, in a tacit way that yet perpetually spoke to her. This sense of his understanding was the deepest element in their feeling for each other. There were so many things between them that were never spoken of, or even indirectly alluded to, yet that, even in their occasional discussions and differences formed the unadduced arguments making for final agreement . . .” (102; Wharton’s ellipsis). Kate is similarly poised to interpret Dick’s silences. She decides that if he neglects to mention Paul’s bequest to her again, her fears would be “justified” (66). Subsequently she feels the import of exactly such an omission, knowing that “to such intimacy as theirs, no indications were trivial” (67). She is “as certain as if he had spoken, that . . . he was weighing the possibility of using Paul’s drawings” (68). Finally, she admits to Clemence that she judges his feelings on the matter “from his not speaking,” and Clemence astutely counters that Dick’s behavior is directed by Kate’s “knowing what he thinks—and his knowing that you [Kate] know” (76).

Dick’s reading of his mother’s silences is borne out in the closing pages of *Sanctuary*, along with the transformative influence of her withholding, but this is preceded by a portrayal of environmental silence that shows Wharton employing an absence of background noise that heightens the sense of tension and uncertainty in the narrative. Returning from the opera, she impulsively visits Dick’s place of work. The building is described as looming “silent and dark” (89) and Kate, ascending via the stairwell, as “fluttering and rustling up through the darkness, like a nightbird hovering among rafters” (90). Outside her son’s office, she leans against the wall, “her breath coming short, the silence throbbing in her ears” (90). She listens carefully by putting her ear to the door and “straining for a sound” (90–91). It is so quiet that when she calls Dick’s name, her “whisper sounded loudly through the silence”; she calls again and with “each call the hush seemed to deepen: it closed in on her, mysterious and impenetrable” (91). She walks “noiselessly across the carpet” and finally finds her son in the workroom (91). The darkness outside his office and the intensity of the muffled silence inside it contrasts with “the mounting brightness of recognition” in his gaze and his exclamation, “You’ve come—you’ve come—” (92).

Dick confesses that he has understood that Kate “knew everything” concerning the temptation of Paul’s bequest, although she “never made a sign” (93). He has imagined discussing the matter with her: “. . . I got tired of trying to explain things to you, of trying to bring you round to my way of thinking. You wouldn’t go away and you wouldn’t come any nearer—you just stood there and
watched everything that I was doing” (93). Stark suggests that Kate can only act upon her son by withdrawing herself (17), but these lines imply that while she tempers her influence, she is not entirely absent. Critically, Dick explains that had Kate broken her silence his integrity would have failed: “If you'd said a word—if you'd tried to influence me—the spell would have been broken. But just because the actual you kept apart and didn't meddle or pry, the other, the you in my heart, seemed to get a tighter hold on me” (93). The notion that she achieves this through some kind of sorcery, by weaving a spell, chimes with the earlier image of Kate's rustling like a bird through the darkness. It exists in conversation with fantastical images of winged women, goddesses, sorceresses, and shamans in various ancient and more recent cultural contexts, that elicited “remarkably similar discourses about the unpredictable powers of aerial women, who could be generous or withholding, empowering or destructive” (Young 3). Significantly, Kate's influence over Dick means victory over her rival, Clemence; but once he has admitted having given up the competition “and a lot more” (92), Wharton withholds Kate's reaction. Dick's direct speech dominates the remainder of the narrative so that Kate's final silence becomes a gap for Wharton's readers to fill. It is they who decide whether Kate is likely to congratulate herself, or to feel disquiet over future pressures on her son's “frail scruples.” Perhaps she contemplates, as the reviewer for The Athenaeum did, whether her son might not still change his mind, especially if he should discover that while she has not tried to influence him directly, she did briefly relinquish her own integrity in an attempt to shape his decision behind the scenes.

Flawed as Kate's mothering reveals itself to be, it seems important that a man who finds himself at a moral crossroads is guided by a woman's silence, for which her proclivity for keeping solitary vigils paves the way. Wharton employs this as a central and consistent feature of Kate's characterization. To vigil or keep a vigil is from the Latin *vigilia* or wakefulness, and moments of significance in Dick's life see Kate holding herself apart, yet fixed on her son and his concerns. When he tends to a gravely ill Paul, she is “left to a vigil in melancholy contrast to that of the previous evening” when, “enclosed in the narrow limits of her maternal interests,” she had ruminated over Dick's professional and personal affairs (57). Recovering her “wider sympathy,” she now understands “how she had come to sacrifice everything to the one passion of ambition for her boy . . . .” Wharton's ellipsis a rhetorical silence that accentuates Kate's introspection (57). Following Jean Blackall, it also may be an expression of “that which a character is unwilling to express” (145), such as doubt or even regret. The cursory reference to another vigil only the day before reinforces Kate's focus on
Dick, underlined by the irony that as she keeps a vigil for Paul, she considers her habitual preoccupation with her son.

On two further, separate occasions in the narrative Kate stays awake to mourn, deliberate, and/or bear witness to the moral temptations of her husband and adult son, recognizes the presence of evil in the world, and determines her reaction to it. Her first vigil in the text is characterized as “that travail of the soul of which the deeper life is born” and involves “a great moral loneliness—an isolation more complete, more impenetrable, than that in which the discovery of Denis’ act had plunged her” (33). Through free indirect speech, Wharton demonstrates how Kate’s silent isolation overlays a vociferous interior struggle with the options laid out in front of her. A series of rhetorical questions—“Was she to hold herself responsible? Were not thousands of children born with some such unsuspected taint? . . . Ah, but if here was one that she could save?”—leads her to the moment where she resolves to submit to the “sacrificial instinct of her sex” (35–36; Wharton’s ellipsis). The precariousness of her quest is apparent when, many years later, she lies awake, listening to Dick “pacing the floor overhead”; “she held her breath, listening to the recurring beat of his foot, which seemed that of an imprisoned spirit revolving wearily in the cage of the same thought” (63). She understands that “a crisis in her son’s life had been reached” and convinces herself “during those hours of anxious calculation” that being an “invisible influence” is the only answer (63–64). Kate knowingly silences herself, but Wharton’s free indirect speech again reveals an interior monologue peppered with questions and uncertainty. These seem well-founded when she discovers that Dick has started to use Paul’s designs. Alone again, it is “easier to continue her vigil by the drawing-room fire than to carry up to the darkness and silence of her own room” what she has learned (80). Enveloped by a “mortal loneliness,” Kate grieves for her “fantastic ideal of duty” (80–81). Reminiscent of a Dorothea Brooke or Isabel Archer, Kate Orme Peyton scrutinizes life, by herself and in the dead of night, but does so repeatedly, bearing out the novella genre’s suitability for what Beer describes as “a compression of the external event alongside an expansion of internal reflection” (107).

There is one further, remembered night vigil when Dick “in his school days, had been ill of a fever, and she had sat up with him on the decisive night” (87). On that occasion “the silence had been as deep and as terrible”; she had been prepared for the worst, that it “might be his death watch she was keeping” (87). She recalls how “in the silence her soul had fought for her boy, her love had hung over him like wings, her abundant useless hateful life had struggled to force itself into his empty veins” (87–88). The comparison focuses on Kate silently
willing Dick to live and implies also that his current moral battle amounts to a fight for survival, the birdlike imagery directly connecting her vigil over Dick the boy with her arrival at his office, as he holds his own vigil before “signing his pact with evil in the loneliness of the conniving night” (89). In Sanctuary, silence functions not only as a transformative force, but as a space within which matters of life and death, good and evil, are decided.

Conclusion

Reading Wharton’s 1896 “The Valley of Childish Things, and Other Emblems” as offering a series of “moral and spiritual messages,” Carol Singley suggests that the fable of the successful architect was a precursor for Sanctuary (4). This, along with the novella’s parallels with a work like The Reef, its interest in women’s lives, female virtue, marriage, motherhood, and incest, is a reminder of the connectedness of Wharton’s writings. Readers’ responses to Sanctuary have never matched those prompted by her most successful books; yet if the novella reads like an experimental or reconnoitering text, as Auchincloss and Ammons observe, this is also what makes it worthy of critical attention. As William Fiennes puts it, “Sanctuary is a flexing of wings” (x). It shows Wharton, whose collage-like manuscripts speak of her approach to “writing as revision” (Ohler 16), honing her skills, attempting themes that would preoccupy her throughout her professional career, and sketching out characters that would recur in increasingly convincing guises.5 Wharton did not put Sanctuary behind her, as Wolff contends; she revisited it time and again.

Sanctuary also demonstrates Wharton’s uses of secrets and silences to say something about the lives of women, their struggles, and their strategies to carve out a place for themselves in the world. By keeping her husband’s secrets and adopting them as her own, by accepting silence as a space for deliberation, and by choosing not to speak to Dick about his moral predicament, Kate becomes the sanctuary that allows her son to do what is right: “. . . I want you to know that it’s your doing—that if you had let go an instant I should have gone under—and that if I’d gone under I should never have come up again alive” (94). Janis Stout observes that the “proper woman—in the past and still, or at least until very recently—is the quiet one” (11), but in Sanctuary Wharton interrogates and subverts the historically endorsed silences and silencing of women by exploring withholding as pathway to influence, while disparaging those
silences that refuse to recognize the ability of women to engage with social realities and to effect change within the world.

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Notes

1. Many will be familiar with Edith Wharton’s borrowing from John Knox to characterize “emancipated” women as the “monstrous regiment” in A Backward Glance (60).

2. Emily Orlando remarks that Wharton’s fictional architects, including would-be plagiarist Dick Peyton, often imitate the inauspicious characteristics of Ogden Codman Jr. with whom she collaborated to write The Decoration of Houses (1897) (“Architect” 52) and to design the interior of The Mount, the Whartons’ home in Lenox.

3. I recently conducted a detailed examination of Wharton’s uses of secrets and silences to portray women in a number of novels and other writings.

4. Wharton’s treatment of race extends beyond what Jennie Kassanoff calls “the late twentieth century’s semantics of skin” (38), demonstrated in Sanctuary by Kate Orme’s resolution to protect Denis Peyton’s line or “race” (35). As Orlando argues, the novella’s conceptions of race involve “privilege, entitlement, and inheritance” (“Irreverent” 49). At the same time, Wharton repeatedly draws attention to Clemence Verney’s skin tone. She offers no comparable portrait of Kate, but Kate’s alertness to Clemence’s “dusky slenderness, relieved against the bare walls of the office” (49), her “slender brown profile” (69), and her “dark skin” (72) points toward underlying racial anxieties that further complicate the contest between the two women.

5. In her comparison between Sanctuary and The House of Mirth, Dale Bauer discusses Wharton’s repeated consideration of certain moral problems, as well as her replication of female characters, to demonstrate the potential value of studying Wharton’s lesser-known works in relation to those that secured her critical and popular success (29, 31).

Works Cited


