Ghost Stories: Edith Wharton’s The Lady’s Maid’s Bell, And Kerfol, Versus Emily Dickinson’s Poem Number 407

The haunting process, as it has been showcased through the majority of ghost stories, including the ones that have been studied in this course, have a couple common elements that cater to their success. Entrapment and incarceration are two elements that seem necessary for the success of a haunting, and therefore the success of a ghost story. Entrapment and incarceration aid in making an already horrifying situation more horrifying, of highlighting just how scary isolation, in whatever shape it may take, can be. This does not mean, however, that all hauntings are the same, but rather that the process may adhere to a general formula. This formula hinges on elements like entrapment and incarceration, but it does not dictate the way in which they must appear. Looking at Edith Wharton’s The Lady’s Maid’s Bell, and Kerfol, as well as Emily Dickinson’s poem number 407, the varying appearances of entrapment and incarceration, will be highlighted, as well as their effectiveness. The ghost story genre is one that is very successful, so it is no surprise that it would stick to a format that perpetuates that success. All three of the works being looked at in this paper, showcase that succes, as well as validating the fact that in sticking to a specific formula, it in no way means all stories will be the same.

Emily Dickinson’s poem number 407, presents us with a slightly different concept of how entrapment and incarceration work to aid the haunting process. Here we are given a representation that would not be the first one that comes to mind, especially in terms of a ghost story. Within this text we are presented with the idea that, “One need not be a Chamber-to be Hunted- / One need not be a House” (1-2), Dickinson further clarifies by stating that, “The Brain has Corridors-surpassing / Material Place-“ (3-4). Dickinson gives us a haunting that exceeds physical structures and limitations, a haunting that is instead of and by the mind. A haunting that is exclusive to one person, as they are the only one able to be victimized by this kind of experience. In fact, Dickinson goes so far as to claim that this kind of haunting is the worst one, specifically because the host has to confront it entirely by themselves:

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting

External Ghost

Than its interior Confronting-

That Cooler Host (5-8).

Hauntings in general, are scary when dealt with in isolation. But the issue here is that there is no possible way to even attempt to share the haunting experience or draw someone else into it, as it is entirely internal. That is why, according to Dickinson, it is safer to see an external apparition in the dead of night, than it is to confront whatever it may be that is internally haunting one’s mind. External ghosts are in fact safer because you can, at least for some amount of time, escape from them; internal ghosts do not offer that same kindness. The idea of hidden faces, and hidden identities is also present here. The identity of a ghost may be concealed, whether that be intentional or simply stemming from a lack of information, but for someone to

not recognize themselves in such an instance, or to find within them aspects of themselves that they do not like, is an entirely different matter. In that case, there is a question of intent, and therefore a question of agency. We should not so much be afraid of that which we have no control, like that of a ghost, but of ourselves, our own actions, and why we do what we do. Dickinson says in her third stanza that:

Ourself behind ourself, concealed-

Should startle most-

Assassin hid in our Apartment

Be Horror's least (13-16).

The concealed identity of an “assassin”, or even of that of a spectre, poses less of a threat than the lack of ability to recognize one’s own face. The necessity to confront one’s self, and the fear that they will not recognize what they find, posits the idea that in being haunted by the mind, that person is nothing more than a ghost inhabiting an empty vessel. They are, in a sense, haunting themselves. In this case, the body could be considered equivalent to a house, and the mind to a ghost. And just as there is fear in a regular haunting, so too is there one in an internalized haunting. The final stanza of Dickinson’s poem states that:

The Body-borrows a Revolver-

He bolts the Door-

O'erlooking a superior spectre-

Or More- (17-20).

The same way in which one tries to flee from a ghost, by putting distance between them, locking them out, arming oneself, those same tactics are used against the mind. But they are not as effective, because while it may be possible to escape from a ghost that haunts a house, by leaving, one cannot leave their own body or escape their own mind in the same way. This is how the entrapment works, and how one becomes incarcerated within, and a prisoner of, their own mind and body. This is significant because it provides us with clear insight into how entrapment and incarceration work, as it showcases how the mind works – in this case, against itself. If you could not escape from a ghost, one is still inclined to keep trying, as there is an attempt to assert power over such a spectre. But in doing so, and in trying to stand one’s ground or in trying to find a reason, an explanation, one becomes stuck in the very situation they seek to get away from. In the same way that can be seen with a traditional, external haunting, in terms of an internal haunting the same tactics are applied, but as there is no external information to be pulled from (like in the case of Emma Saxon and Alice from Wharton’s The Lady’s Maid’s Bell), or other knowledge to be gained, it proves to be extremely difficult.

The next two examples of how entrapment and incarceration are integral to the haunting process, come from two of Edith Wharton’s short stories, The Lady’s Maid’s Bell and Kerfol. The first of which provides a more traditional rendition of these forms of isolation, by way of

location. From the very beginning we are given a very specific detailing of the house, as it is noted that, “The drive wound through the woods for a mile or two, and came out on a gravel court shut in with thickets of tall black?looking shrubs. There were no lights in the windows, and the house did look a bit gloomy” (2). Furthermore, even Alice’s own quarters are presented as being away from most of the others in the servants’ quarters, as “[her] room opened into a square hall at the end of the passage” (2). Most notably, too, is that she is across from the locked room of Emma Saxon, the ghost that is integral to the story. While initially Alice seems to be fine with her situation at the house, that changes as she (whether intentionally or not) seems to become more aware of her isolated situation. The house is large, with more servants than tenants, and is in the countryside. Alice is unable to form truly strong bonds with any of the other servants, as since the beginning she has been dismissed and ignored in terms of her haunting experiences. Experiences which, reasonably the others believe, but choose willful ignorance so that they do not have to think about it. Mrs. Brympton is the reason she is there, and is the reason Emma visits her, but even she keeps Alice at a distance – she has secrets that Alice has to work at figuring out. Even Mr. Brympton, “never [stays] more than a day or two, cursing the dullness and the solitude, grumbling at everything” (5). We can see on multiple occasions too, that Alice reacts involuntarily at being able to leave the place. Such as when she mentions that, “As soon as I was out of doors my spirits rose…It was not a gloomy house exactly, yet I never entered it but a feeling of gloom came over me” (5) or even when she and Mrs. Brympton go to town to do some shopping and she remarks, “I hadn't known till then how low my spirits had fallen. I set off in high glee, and my first sight of the crowded streets and the cheerful?looking shops quite took me out of myself” (5). The house, and the eerie experiences Alice has been having within its walls, have slowly drawn her in. She has become incarcerated, without being fully aware of the fact.

Furthermore, her direct experiences with Emma are what entrap her, and are what keep her there, as the only real bond she has been able to form has been with Emma, and that is arguably only for the sake of Mrs. Brympton. Alice’s haunting begins from the moment she moves into the house, when she sees Emma and assumes her to be another worker, as well as when the door to Emma’s old bedroom is open, and Alice is told it is always locked. It is later in this story when she states that, “Somehow, the thought of that locked room across the passage began to weigh on me” (5). The literal and figural space that Emma left behind in the house, weighs solely on her shoulders as Mrs. Brympton’s personal maid. A responsibility that we are given more information on, once the bell starts ringing. The most intense scene of the haunting comes from the initial ring of the bell. Alice acknowledges that, “My bell had rung. I sat up, terrified by the unusual sound, which seemed to go on jangling through the darkness” (7), and as she tries to figure out what to do – as she had previously been told the bell would never ring for her, things begin to escalate: “I was just beginning to huddle on my clothes when I heard another sound. This time it was the door of the locked room opposite mine softly opening and closing. I heard the sound distinctly, and it frightened me so that I stood stock still” (7). It is this scene explicitly, and what comes directly thereafter, that entrap Alice in the house. Emma continues to instruct her to do what she no longer can – protect Mrs. Brympton from her husband. The haunting is happening because of this, and Alice seems to be the only maid capable of filling Emma’s shoes. In order for the haunting, and its subsequent reasons, to continue, Alice has to stay. This entrapment and incarceration of Alice within the house seems to extend even after Mrs. Brympton passes, as she notes that, “we servants went back alone to the house” (14), as Mr. Brympton leaves again shortly thereafter the funeral. Alice remains in that place, even though, realistically her need for doing so has ceased, and we can assume that just as Mrs. Brympton has gone, so too has Emma.

Kerfol provides an interesting combination of the two previous kinds of entrapment and incarceration that we have seen: physical place and physical body. We can see this through the narrator, when he first visits Kerfol, but also through Yves de Cornault and his wife Anne. Initially we, and the narrator, are told that Kerfol is “just the place for a solitary-minded devil like you” (89), and the narrator is left to go and explore the house and its grounds by himself. He is extremely isolated from the very beginning, which we can see when he says that, after lighting a cigarette, “It may have been the depth of the silence that made me so conscious of my gesture. The squeak of my match sounded as loud as the scraping of a brake, and I almost fancied I heard it fall when I tossed it onto the grass” (90). The house itself is set up to be a desolate place, isolated by its own volition, which we can further see through the narrator as he, “crossed the bridge and tried the iron gate. It yielded, and I walked through the tunnel formed by the thickness of the chemin de ronde” (91). All of this is made the more interesting by the presence of the dogs, which he initially believes to be real. He makes comments such as, “Presently I looked across at the ruined façade, and saw that in one of its empty window-frames another dog stood” (92), and even refers to the circle of dogs as a “cloud of witnesses” (93). Which is ironic, in the sense that nobody else is there except for him, and he is more so the only witness to the dogs, instead of the other way around. Even when he remarks, “‘I wonder if there is a ghost here, and nobody but you left for it to appear to?’ The dogs continued to gaze at me without moving” (94). The narrator seems to bring himself into this liminal space, as we learn later that there is only one day of the year in which the dogs appear, and there is a sense that as he crosses the bridge and sees the dog in the window, that is speaking to him occupying a transitional space, where he stands between the world of the living and the world of the dead, by himself. He seems to bring himself into this liminal space, both in action and in acknowledgement. And just as easily as he entered it, he leaves it, as he says, “I had the sense of having escaped from the loneliest place in the whole world” (94). What this entire interaction speaks to, and the actions he takes to figure out Kerfol’s mystery afterwards, is how his disposition and curiosity entraps him in this haunting. He becomes incarcerated not just by the house, as he existed alone with the dogs at that time, but also of his mind, and he delves further into its history – thereby feeding the haunting himself, as he recounts the tale to us, the reader.

As well, the two main characters of the tale we are told about Kerfol, Yves de Cornault and Anne, so too represent this blurring of the lines between conventional and non-conventional entrapment and incarceration. With Anne it can be found with how she is confined to the house, both during her marriage and after the death of her husband. The text tells us of her isolation when it says, “the only grievance her champions could call up in her behalf was that Kerfol was a lonely place, and that when her husband was away on business at Rennes or Morlaix…she was not allowed so much as to walk in the park unaccompanied” (98). Anne is quite literally trapped – in her marriage and in her home, a situation which, among her inability to have a child, leads her to have a devout love for her dogs, both the one her husband gifts her with and the others who find their way into her care. It is her love for her dogs, and her husband’s subsequent jealousy and lack of love for them, that spurs in motion the vengeance that the dogs seek both for themselves and for their loving owner. Furthermore their love for their owner also enabled them to ensure that her sad tale was told, by appearing to the narrator and having him learn about it all, including the ensuing court trials, which led to Anne eventually being deemed a mad woman, and being incarcerated in Kerfol until she died.

Whereas for Yves, he fell victim to his own actions. Entrapping himself within the haunting that ultimately took his life, “Yves de Cornault…was found dead at the head of a narrow flight of stairs leading down from his wife’s rooms to a door opening on the court” (100). Not only was

Yves isolated at the time of his death, he was trapped by his own wrongdoings – which quite literally came back to haunt him. The dogs who had been unjustly strangled, their owner who had been unfairly treated, they were able to achieve both immediate justice as well as long-term vengeance, as the events that happened at Kerfol continued to be passed down by way of storytelling, for many years after the events happened. Yves actions both enacted and justified the haunting by the dogs at Kerfol. The representations of entrapment and incarceration in the case of Yves and Anne differ in the sense that the haunting was not something they experienced throughout their entire time at Kerfol, but rather the events that happened put it into motion. It is the starting point of a haunting that we get a better understanding of through what the narrator experiences at the empty house. This story also gives us a non-human haunting, that differs from a situation like that of Alice and Emma from the Lady's Maid's Bell, and from Emily Dickinson's poem number 407, as the animals are unable to express much of anything through voice or facial expressions, and we are not privy to any thoughts to be had from their minds. The dogs, and their ghosts, serve only as witnesses to an injustice, one they attempted to rectify, but also as a reminder to any that get the opportunity to see them.

In conclusion, these varying representations of entrapment and incarceration, how they aid in the haunting experience, and why they are significant, are evident within these three different texts. Through them we are able to see a varying amount of representations, of how isolation and circumstance cater to the intensity of a haunting. We have entrapment and incarceration that is literal, specific to a location, a person, but also of the mind, of someone's own doing. Hauntings depend on these circumstances both to come to fruition, but also to be effective. In The Lady's Maid's Bell, Alice becomes trapped in the manor due to her devotion to Mrs. Brympton, which is inspired by Emma, despite the way the place makes her feel. She is incarcerated in the relationship first, and the house by proxy. Her relationship with Emma Saxon, the deceased former maid, hinges entirely on the necessity for Mrs. Brympton to be protected from her husband. Because of this, Alice is essentially isolated both in location, but also in her relationships. She really has no other place for any other meaningful relationships, so long as Emma is occupying the "empty" room across from her own, and so long as the bell continues to ring. The end of the story, if anything, proves just how effective the entrapment and incarceration was, as there is an air of confusion as to how anything is to proceed for Alice, now that Mrs. Brympton, and therefore most likely Emma, are gone.

Kerfol gave a non-traditional haunting, with its entrapment and incarceration elements spanning over a period of time. Its use of animals, specifically dogs, as the ghostly apparitions allowed for a lack of immediate communication, and therefore the necessity for a non-linear form of story-telling. We have the events that led to the haunting, which include the entrapment and incarceration of Anne by her husband, but also by her place in time, and her husband's family. Then there is Yves, who is the vehicle for the entire haunting, one that traps him into his own self-conceived fate. As well there is the narrator, who by his own nature is isolative, and therefore the perfect person to witness a haunting of this nature, as he is sure to be the one who once more brings light to the terrible injustice that happened at Kerfol. He feeds into the haunting, falling victim to its entrapment mostly by his own natural curiosity.

Finally, Emily Dickinson's poem number 407, gives a self-inflicted entrapment and incarceration by one's own mind, and subsequently a self-inflicted haunting of the mind and body. An internal haunting is far more horrifying than an external one, as you cannot escape it is any of the traditional manners. You cannot escape from yourself, even if you try, and having to face aspects of yourself you have tried to quash, or silence is not so easily done. Dickinson showed

the significance of these elements, by drawing attention to this – haunting yourself as opposed to being haunted. She uses the body in replace of a physical dwelling, like a house, and the mind as a substitute for a traditional ghost. All of these stories have showcased the significance of entrapment and incarceration in terms of how they aid and benefit a haunting, but have done so through multiple mediums, which only further validates how prevalent these aspects are. No matter the form it takes, it is there if you look for it, and they both intensify a haunting, add to its ability to fear-monger. They show that for a haunting to be successful, in whatever way it is trying to be or whatever point it is trying to make, entrapment and incarceration are necessary in one way or another.