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Stories of New England Witches and Vampires: Invisible Magic and Malice

Chiho Nakagawa

New England is haunted with the history of witchcraft. In "Young Goodman Brown," Nathaniel Hawthorne pictures the old Puritan New England as a place infested with the suspicion that anyone can be a witch. Witchcraft inspires New England writers in their depictions of fears and mysteries of human psyche. For Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Edith Wharton, too, witchcraft has a special significance, as seen in their two short stories about supernatural fears in small New England villages in the beginning of the twentieth century. Both stories revolve around female vampires but the texts use the words “witchcraft” and “bewitched,” suggesting these stories are both vampire stories and witchcraft stories. Freeman’s "Luella Miller" (1902) and Wharton’s "Bewitched" (1925) are vampire stories that double as those of witch hunts.

Each vampire/witch story has another important character, the woman who accuses the other woman as a vampire/witch. By focusing on the accused, these "vampire stories" can reveal what people regard as “evil” in small communities in New England, while by focusing on the accusers, these "witchcraft stories" can illuminate the tactics by which certain women manipulate others to survive in New England, where the memories of witchcraft are far in the past yet never completely faded. A witch reading refers to the way in which stories become surfaced and circulated, and a vampire reading refers to the form in which threats and fears take shape. John Demos argues in his book on witchcraft in New England that "witchcraft belonged, first and last, to the life of the little community" (275). These vampire/witch stories are about lives of women in little communities. The women struggle to secure their own places in their communities by accusing "vampires/witches," yet various social—economic, political, and historical—elements determine ultimately whether the communities agree on their views or not. The New England vampire/witch stories tell the stories of communities’ fears and persecution, and moreover, the attempts of survival of women amid social pressures that work to contain them. The different endings to these two stories offer an insight into complicated factors that determine these women’s success or failure in surviving unchanged yet changing climates of New England.

Although "Bewitched" and "Luella Miller" can be called vampire stories, both stories do not clarify what kind of monsters those women really are. No one witnesses the actual blood/energy sucking in both stories, but the only way to explain the way those women affect people is that Luella in "Luella Miller" and Ora Brand in "Bewitched" are vampires. The deaths or possible deaths Ora and Luella bring to their victims are very similar: the victims simply waste away, as if they were feeding those women with their vital energy.

There is no physical witness to these New England vampires in "Bewitched" and "Luella Miller," because these stories are based on the folk legends of vampires in New England in the nineteenth century. The monsters that put their victims to slow deaths were presumably tubercular patients, according to several studies. Paul S. Sledzik and Nicholas Ballantoni’s anthropological study finds twelve historic accounts of the victims of tuberculosis seen as vampires in the nineteenth century New England. People assumed that a dead TB patient had come back to take the lives of people close to him or her, whom the TB patient had already infected before his or her
death. Faye Ringel also discusses this vampire superstition in New England, while warning us that the name "vampire" may not be the appropriate word to refer to this "native bogey" (138). Like witches, according to Ringel, the "vampire superstition can stand for backwoods degeneracy, secret sins, and the region's fall from economic and political pre-eminence" (138). New England vampire stories reflect small villages' economic decline and accompanying impoverished minds—poverty causes tubercular deaths while people willingly accept superstitious explanations. In "Luella Miller," people around Luella become weaker and weaker until they die. Luella's husband, Erastus, dies of "consumption," and one by one the others die slow deaths. Luella's health also declines when no one is left to take care of her. Other than Erastus's case, not a single case is medically diagnosed. Hypothetically, Luella could be a carrier of TB virus, living well as long as she rests well and is fed well, while infecting her caregivers. In "Bewitched," Ora Brand started getting weaker once she came back from the town she had gone to learn bookkeeping. Ora's cause of death is again not specified, but her old lover, Saul Rutledge, gradually loses weight and dwindles away. Ora could have contracted with TB virus in the town, and then brought it home with her and given it to Saul while she was alive. Because Ora's mother has died in the same way, Ora also could have had it even before going into the town. A pulmonary disease also causes the last death in the story, that of Ora's sister, Vanessa. Because in impoverished New England villages no one could diagnose and treat TB patients, the mysterious deaths linked to these two women become supernatural, equated with the deeds of vampires. Luella and Ora could be victims of tuberculosis as well as their alleged victims.

In order for this type of a vampire to be born, it has to be talked about. This is where these stories deserve to be called "witchcraft stories," because only the act of accusation can set a story in motion. The importance of "talking" has to be measured according to the dynamics of the communities in which these stories take place. Both stories are set in small New England villages in which the other parts of the world seem so far away. One particular example of the talking in a vampire/witchcraft story, H.P. Lovecraft's "The Shunned House," can illuminate what "talking" does in a small New England village. "The Shunned House" revolves around a cursed house, which sends its inhabitants to deaths or insanity. The villagers just "shun" the house, without clear perception of what is wrong with it. However, when a woman hired from outside the town—from a village with the story of unnatural deaths and the undead—gives "definite shape to the sinister idle talk" (104), the house earns the reputation as a haunted house. In order for a superstitious horror story to take shape, it needs to be talked and circulated in a community.

In "Bewitched" and "Luella Miller," people are not aware of the dangers of these female vampires until someone starts talking. "Bewitched" opens with Prudence Rutledge's accusation that Ora Brand has come back from her grave to have an affair with her husband. Prudence invites three men to her house to discuss her husband's infidelity, or "bewitching" by Ora Brand. Until then, none of them has known about this "bewitching" incident. In addition, except for the limited words of Prudence who claims she "knows," and has "seen them" together, and Saul Rutledge's cryptic affirmation, no other evidence is submitted. "Luella Miller" is told by Lydia Anderson, who claims that Luella Miller has killed one person after another. Lydia is the only person who directly knows Luella, so the information regarding Luella Miller—how she behaves and looks and how she causes deaths around her—all comes from Lydia, seen and told as Lydia sees and understands. In this story as well, objective evidence is non-existent.

The circumstances surrounding the acts of storytelling define how these stories are received. People cannot hide anything from others in small villages; everyone knows about everyone else and nothing can be kept secret. Aside from the stories of "bewitching" or "vamping/vamiping" told by the accusers, Lydia Anderson and Prudence Rutledge, the texts also supply the background information by means of the unidentified narrator.
in "Luella Miller," and of Orrin Bosworth, one of the men whom Prudence invites in "The Bewitched." These narrators provide supplementary information to the reader to suggest that both stories cannot be read and judged exclusively on the basis of the old women's stories. Any villager who hears the story of Ora Brand's bewitching knows that Ora's family may be connected to a woman who was burned to death a long time ago, and that she is a daughter born from a marriage between cousins. No villager who hears the story of Luella Miller, however, possesses knowledge about Luella, who has joined the community as an adult. Deep ties to the community create a prejudice against Ora, while Luella is practically a tabula rasa on which any beautiful or ugly portrait can be painted. These two accused women, Ora Brand and Luella Miller, may be the targets of baseless accusations, malicious rumors, and defamations, yet the circumstances particular to small villages make it possible to turn the simple rumor into something more. The antiquated discourse of witchcraft still has the power to affect people in small New England villages that are separated from the outside world and, thus, may not be as far removed from two hundred years before.

The "witch" reference does not only indicate people's backwardness that convinces them to believe in the existence of supernatural evil, but also suggests the sanctioning power of the communities. A witchcraft accusation provides for a means to detect and to give a verdict to someone who is not wanted in the communities. Many historians now see the seventeenth century witchcraft cases as the results of the conflicts, disputes, and power struggles between the villagers. For example, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum argue there is an economic basis in the 1692 Salem village case, and Demos points out psychological and economic factors in the accusations. According to Carol F. Karlsen, the most likely targets of accusations were single women and widowed women without children. She uncovers various elements that lie under people's hatred towards those women who were accused of being witches. The types of women found to be witches do not greatly deviate from the stereotype that people have about witches: unmarried old women. Those women were deemed "witches" not only because they caused troubles, but also because they did not fulfill their duties as women in Puritan New England—producing offspring and being the helpmeets to men—and ultimately they could threaten the men's sphere by inheriting property. Considering that widowed women normally received only dower—temporary arrangement of one-third of their late husbands' real estate—for the rights of married women were greatly impinged, childless widows could easily be regarded as threats when they were to inherit their husbands' entire property. As Karlsen argues, many women became the targets of accusation when they lost their husbands, and thus, widows were threats and at the same time easy targets. For women, husbands functioned both as supervision and protection from witchcraft accusations. Single old women were left alone to be hated and persecuted.

The social statuses of the accusers and the accused do not correspond perfectly to the profiles of those in these stories. Luella is widowed, yet still a young woman, and Ora is a single young woman. Moreover, in these stories, the accusers, Lydia and Prudence, are old women, who resemble witches more than the women accused of witchcraft. As in the witchcraft days, these old women do not seem to be completely safe from critical gazes. Ora's accuser, Prudence Rutledge, exhibits "cold manners," with "solitary character," and has an inexpressive face, making it impossible for others to read her emotions. The description of Prudence Rutledge—dressed in a black calico with white spots, a collar of crochet-lace fastened by a gold brooch, dark hair parted tight and braided—reminds us of the woman in Grant Wood's famous painting American Gothic. The association of Prudence with the woman in American Gothic is very suggestive indeed; the stern-faced woman in front of an American Gothic house, does not impress us with her piety and charity, instead, repressed anger and discontent. Prudence's overzealous religiousness—suggested by the text on the mantelpiece saying "The Soul that Sinneth It Shall Die," (130) and her chanting "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (138)—makes us suspect her of witchcraft herself, instead of
being a victim of one, as Benjamin Fisher points out. Paradoxically, however, her anger expressed in the form of
the witchcraft accusation hints at her religiousness, as Demos insists that “witchcraft made an exception” about
expressing anger while “Puritan values condemned the expression of anger most severely” (304). Her aloofness,
combined with the psychological distance the location of her house creates—described as “as far away from
humanity” (128), or the place where “miles ain’t the only distance” —suggests her isolation from other members
of the community.

In “Luella Miller,” as well, Lydia, an older woman after childbearing years, leads a solitary life. She stays
single throughout her life, presumably because she has not recovered from the pain of her lost love, Erastus—
Luella’s husband. The unidentified narrator tells us of an episode, before Lydia starts talking about Luella, of a
nameless and homeless woman who dies in the deserted house of Luella Miller, foreshadowing the fate of an old
woman without offspring. Luella Miller’s cursed house is introduced with an episode in which “one friendless
soul” who had no other place to go died only after a week she entered the house. Although Lydia does not seem
to live in utter solitude, thanks to her active gossiping, she does not die surrounded by the people who love her.
Lydia Anderson dies as an old solitary woman, just like the homeless woman. She dies in front of Luella’s house,
not inside, but still alone, as an old unwanted woman. Prudence Rutledge and Lydia Anderson are not persecuted
openly, but they are not embraced by their communities either. They are not needed or wanted as women, for
being old and for lacking the feminine attractiveness.

Luella and Ora, on the other hand, possess the feminine attractiveness that the accusers are lacking. As
Nina Auerbach calls Luella a “perfectly idle Victorian lady” (108), Luella is the epitome of femininity. With her
“blue eyes full of soft pleading, little slender, clinging hands, and a wonderful grace of motion and attitude” (78),
Luella just charms people without effort. However, to call Luella a “perfectly idle Victorian lady” is based on a
misunderstanding of Luella’s social position, to say the least, and this hopeful misunderstanding plays a crucial role
in the villagers’ oscillating perceptions of Luella. Although Auerbach goes on to say that she is the “exemplar of
her class and time, the epitome of her age, not an outcast to it,” Luella belongs to a class in which a woman also
has to engage in some kind of work. She has to work as a teacher before she marries Erastus, and even after her
marriage, she does not have servants to do household chores. Her husband does all the household chores in her
place, and this overwork leads him to his premature death. Auerbach’s indication that Luella is a Victorian “lady”
is based on a false assumption, but also it points to the true misfortune—for Luella, and for the villagers who die
for her—that she was born into the wrong attractiveness.

Luella Miller’s frail beauty represents a form of femininity that disagrees with the way of life of working
class people in a small village in New England. Luella’s does, however, express her discontents and discomfort
like an “idle Victorian lady.” She is discontent because she is in the wrong place, but she does not know how to
express her discontent because her “femininity” prevents her from expressing her lowly discontents. Luella’s
means of expressing the discontents also indicate how and why Luella can be a threat in the small village, as
Lydia Anderson repeatedly points out. Lydia suspects Luella of acting out her “hysterical fits,” and therefore, of
her consciously manipulating the people around her. Although later Lydia is convinced otherwise, it can simply
show that either Luella’s performance is so great that Lydia believes it, or that Luella herself does not know of her
intention. Therefore, Lydia likens Luella to a “baby with scissors in its hand cuttin’ everybody without knowin’
what it was doin’” (97). Luella’s helplessness is comparable to that of a baby; Luella falls into a hysterical episode
when no one is around to take care of her, and she faints when she cannot counter the accusation that she is killing
off her caretakers. By describing Luella with the analogy to a baby, the story evokes the connection between a
baby and hysteria, and also between a baby and femininity.
Hysteria has been considered a female disease since the time of Hippocrates. Curiously, the word hysteria is often used in conjunction with witchcraft cases, both tied to the accusers and the accused. For example, the expression “witchcraft hysteria” is often used to describe cases of witch hunts to suggest they are the results of collective delusions. Also some feminists connect two of their favorite words, “witches” and “hysteria,” to represent the stereotypical cases of female oppression. For example, Catherine Clément argues that the hysterics resist the androcentric logic, like witches who revolt against the male control over women. According to Clément, the role of sorceress and of hysteric is antiestablishment, because the “symptoms—the attacks—revolt and shake up the public, the group, the men, the others to whom they are exhibited” (5). Similarly, the “witchcraft hysteria” suggests the accusers and the communities are in confused states, without logic and proper judging abilities. The rebellious hysterics, resisting the order of society, deviate from logic, which some feminists like Clément considers belongs to men. Both of the usages suggest hysteria as the state in which one is without reason, but hysteria also suggests another significance—the question of the motives of the accusers; he or she may be lying to attract attention. The hysterical acts out symptoms that are “symbolic resolution of an unconscious psychological conflict,” or a conversion of her or his unexpressed desires and wishes, according to the DSM-IV-TR, in the section of the conversion disorder, which is one of the descendents of hysteria (494). As a person with limited communication skills—here both associated with upper-class femininity and immaturity—Luella Miller depends on her hysterical symptoms to communicate her inarticulate complaints and discomforts. With her limited communication skills and her helplessness, Luella is a misplaced lady in this small New England village.

When one sees Luella as a “hysteric,” like Lydia does, Luella’s undesirability becomes clear; however, Luella’s state as a misplaced lady allows her to be the object of desire throughout. Her virtual baby-like state possesses something that “draws the heart right out of” others (93), and thus, she is tended to and cared for like a baby without questions until the word spreads that the “days of witchcraft” have come again (97). Her dependent nature evokes in others not hostilities but pity, or rather desires to protect, cherish, and spoil, like an innocent baby does. Luella Miller’s seeming harmlessness does not alarm anyone except for Lydia, whose careful observation detects her threats. When calling her innocence and helplessness “hysteria,” however, Luella’s desirability becomes suspect.

The text offers very little information about why Ora Brand has to be regarded as a threat. Ora’s behavior or words are not recorded, and there is no sighting of her except for Saul Rutledge’s testimony. Ora and her sister, Vanessa, are very beautiful girls, but their relationships with the villagers are not clearly known. Ora used to live with her sister and her father, Sylvester Brand, a rough and barbaric hard-working farmer. Saul explains that they used to date, but Sylvester tore them apart, seemingly without a reason. Gloria C. Erlich argues that Ora was the victim of incestuous abuse, which can be inferred as the reason behind Sylvester Brand’s opposition to Ora’s relationship with Saul. However, the narrator Orrin Bosworth shares his knowledge that Sylvester has told his favorite daughter, Vanessa, that he would also send her to the town after Ora would get married. It is more probable, thus, to think that the father of the beautiful sisters planned to marry them off to rich men in the town, rather than settling down with an older man like Saul Rutledge, who lives in the “lonely stretch between North Ashmore and Cold Corners” (128). Sylvester’s two plans do not become realities; Ora did not marry, and Vanessa was not sent to the town.

The presence of Ora and Vanessa, who are wandering around in the community in death or in life, disturbs the peace in Hemlock County. Ora threatened and continues to threaten the marriage of her former lover, and Vanessa is engaged to a young man in the village. Their threats, although not clearly specified, may be in the fact that these beautiful girls are not fit to be farmers’ wives. Orrin Bosworth notes that when these girls’ mother
died "nobody suggested that anything had been wrong with her mind," indicating in a twisted way that there is a suspicion regarding her sanity, and Vanessa does not bring flowers to the graves of her sister and her mother because she is "too wild and ignorant" (140). Ora and Vanessa were born out of a questionable marriage between cousins, and something could be "wrong with their mind," as Orrin remembers his parents' gossiping while he listens to Prudence's story. Ora, as well as Vanessa, may be threats to the community because of the possibilities that their physical attractiveness can lead to tragic marriages and procreations. In other words, Ora and Vanessa are also misplaced ladies in the tough surroundings of Hemlock County. These young attractive women are evil femme fatales, possibly hysterics, for their attractiveness may lead men in the communities to their total ruin. Luella and Ora cannot become productive members of society as wives and mothers who help their husbands and reproduce healthy and sane members of society. The "vampire" quality in them draws people, but they only spawn deaths.

Therefore, the accusers of witchcraft, Lydia Anderson and Prudence Rutledge, focus on these young women's vampiric aspect in order to show them in a negative light. By accusing them, of course, these old women can attract attention that they do not normally have. The jealousies of Prudence and Lydia drive them to seek means to retaliate against the women who take away the objects of their love, as well as the attention and affections they believe they deserve. Yet these two women go down different paths: one woman dies in solitude, another successfully blends into the community.

The villagers have accepted and cherished Luella Miller until Lydia Anderson calls attention to Luella's vampiric aspect, and in the end, the villagers' love for Luella does not completely disappear. Luella is a widowed wife without a child, but except for a temporal solitude, she never becomes completely alone. Her inheritance from her late husband is not questioned or seen with jealousy, except by Lydia. Luella's situation shows a changed view of widows brought about by the abolition of dower and the expanded rights of married women in the nineteenth century. Although the value of Luella's child-like femininity is temporarily questioned, she ultimately is appreciated as a lovable wife and a marriageable woman. A wife inheriting her husband's property is not regarded as a threat any longer and, as a result, that changed view foils Lydia's plan. Lydia remains a single woman, never wanted and looked at by men as a marriageable woman. She fails to secure her place in the community by her storytelling, and she dies alone, like the poor old woman who dies in Luella's house in the beginning of the story.

On the other hand, the ending of "Bewitched" finds Prudence happy and content. In the last scene, Prudence is not in her isolated house, but surrounded by the villagers, proclaiming that she will buy some soap, as if she started her new life in the community. Prudence's story is heard, and her desire is fulfilled. The solitary woman away from the village in the beginning of the story now finds herself among the villagers.

Prudence's success is partly due to the appropriateness of the channel she goes through, in addition to the other socioeconomic elements. As if she filed an official complaint in court, she calls for three men of authorities in three different fields: religious, familial, and political—Deacon Hibben—a religious official, Sylvester Brand—the father of Ora, and the narrator Orrin Bosworth—a selectman, or a municipal officer, of the area. Unlike Lydia Anderson, who just rambles on with the story to anyone who listens, Prudence talks selectively to be heard. Rather than spreading the story of witchcraft randomly, Prudence chooses to appeal to these three men, whose judgment carries more significance. With her husband's corroboration and his emaciated look, in addition to the background knowledge they have, they believe her accusation enough to go and see with their own eyes the place where the meeting with the dead is supposed to take place.

Without premeditation, these three men come up with the solution to the problem—the elimination of Ora, or her second death. Sylvester Brand, the father, actually puts the bullet into his daughter, while the political
and religious authorities, Orrin Bosworth and Deacon Hibben, witness the execution. The final action must be taken by the father because the problem deeply lies in the family. At the end of the story, Sylvester Brand is without any offspring or family. He answers to Orrin Bosworth who offers a ride home after the funeral, "Home? What home?" (146), indicating the end of Brand's family. We learn that Sylvester shoots something in the dark hut without knowing what it really is, and the next day Ora's sister, Vanessa, dies of pneumonia. Whatever or whoever it is that Sylvester Brand shoots, he kills his daughter, who is cursed with witchcraft or inbreeding.

Kathy A. Fedorko argues that patriarchal power represented by Sylvester Brand, united with Prudence who, with her bonnet, represents "rigid phallic strength that denies the feminine," controls and ends female sexuality (112). However, this killing of "female sexuality" here ends the Brand family. I would instead argue that Sylvester's act reflects his patriarchal responsibility; his decision seems to be guided by the old superstition, but it could also be informed by eugenics. The father who has intended to marry his daughters to the men without knowledge of their family history knows how his beautiful daughters are regarded as threats in the community. The memory that keeps coming back to Orrin Bosworth while he listens to Prudence's accusation is of his insane aunt confined in a room with iron bars in the windows, located "beyond Sylvester Brand's" hill farm (138), indicating the fears of degeneracy underlies their decision. Sylvester takes the responsibility as the patriarch of the family to end his bloodline, and by doing so, he eliminates the cause of trouble in the community.

"Bewitched" ends without clarifying several mysteries. First, is it Ora or Ora's sister who is having an affair with Saul Rutledge? Second, does Vanessa die of pneumonia or tuberculosis, or of a gunshot wound by her father? Ultimately, whom does Prudence believe that her husband is having an affair with, Ora or Vanessa Brand? Whether Prudence herself believes it or not, the ending brings peace to her, whose face now comes to show the sign of happiness. Prudence gains what she has been lacking—attention, care, and her husband—by making accusations against Ora Brand of witchcraft. Although multiple other elements work for her, the accusation of witchcraft functions as a dispute claim that has to be examined and solved accordingly to the rules of the community. Prudence accuses Ora Brand of witchcraft so that her advantage over Ora will be verified and her place will be secured in the community.

These two witch/vampire stories both revolve around the disputes between women. Even though old women seem not to have been visibly ostracized after two hundred years in New England, Prudence and Lydia, both older women past childbearing age, are more prone to persecution in the form of isolation. They are no longer openly persecuted like two hundred years before but secretly excluded from the community. These two stories tell the stories of the old women's attempts of reversing the hostile situation by accusing the popular women as witches focusing on their vampiric characters, or in other words, the hopeless and sinister sterility of the attractive women. These old women's attempts succeed or temporarily succeed depending on how well their claims correspond to the benefit of their communities. The witchcraft stories are the stories to be interpreted, and the most powerful—or the most authoritative—interpretations come from the authorities that reflect the social climate. The different treatments of Luella and Ora, as well as Prudence and Lydia, in the end also suggest the different climates in the early twentieth century from that of the seventeenth century. Luella is not persecuted in the absence of her husband without offspring, because her property, a house inherited from her husband, belongs to her without question in the early twentieth century. Luella's legitimacy as a wife and a marriageable woman wins over an unwanted woman like Lydia Anderson. Ora, or Vanessa, has to be executed because she violates the rights of a married woman, and because her cursed blood is not allowed to pass down. A married woman, Prudence Rutledge, can enjoy her power and money, in addition to being a member of the community. These New England vampire/witch stories tell the stories of conflicts and conflict resolutions between women who live in the
closed communities with old traditions and yet with changing perceptions about women's rights.

The stories we read are another instances of witchcraft testimonies. These stories are open to different interpretations, for these two writers leave the stories without giving us definitive clues to guide us to definite readings. A reader may give each story a different verdict: Luella Miller may be punishable and Lydia Anderson has to be appreciated, or Prudence Rutledge may deserve ostracism and Ora, or at least, Vanessa is allowed to survive in Hemlock County. Different perspectives regarding the desirability of women can lead to different views and judgments on each woman. These two stories reproduce witchcraft trials in the reader's mind, for he or she is also a juror who serves on the trials of these accused witches.

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1 This folk legend is not limited to New England. Paul Barber suggests that this theory is applicable to European vampires as well in his book, *Vampires, Burial, and Death.*

2 When Wharton wrote this story set in an impoverished village in New England, she lived in the villa in north of Paris, Pavillon Colomb, and then in Ste. Claire de View Chateau in French Riviera, far away from cold and frigid New England. However, she must have had a certain knowledge about the prevalence of tuberculosis, because around that time she also did her charity work to help build an organization for tubercular soldiers.

3 Gloria Erlich introduces the word, “reflector,” to explain Orrin Bosworth’s role in the story. According to her, the reflector is the “Wharton’s useful word for the character through whose sensibility the story is told” (106).

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