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## Tools of Horror: Servants in Gothic Novel

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### TOOLS OF HORROR: SERVANTS IN GOTHIC NOVEL

The servants within 18th- and 19th-century English literature play an undoubtedly vital role within everyday life. Elizabeth Langland highlights this point in her discussion of the middle class: “Running the middle-class household, which by definition included at least one servant, was an exercise in class management, a process both inscribed and revealed in the Victorian novel” (291). In Victorian England, especially, class and rank were everything. While during the Romantic period servants were common, rising concerns for their role in the household becomes more apparent during the Victorian Era. Gothic novelists take their concerns for these domestic issues and use the servants as easy targets to become scapegoats in the novel themselves. In both the *The Castle of Otranto* and *Wuthering Heights*, the fear of exploited power and class position leads the authors to use servants as ignorant tools in order to heighten the suspense and terror, thereby exhibiting the concerns for their role in society.

Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, interferes with dealings between the inhabitants of Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights so much that some critics see her as the “villain.” When she has a chance to stop Isabella from entering Wuthering Heights, she neglects her duty and instead follows her inside. Other servants, such as Joseph, increase the terror by releasing the dogs to attack Lockwood as he leaves Wuthering Heights. In *The Castle of Otranto* the servants, especially Bianca, enhance the terror by telling of the horrific sights they encounter, like the giant hand. While it is true that they manage daily household duties and often care for children, they also have the opportunity to abuse their power, which causes anxiety among the ruling classes.

This anxiety over the abuse of power, which the upper class seems to fear, is a unique and interesting situation. The author Graeme Tytler says, “Although masters (and mistresses) ultimately have the upper hand of their servants, it is noteworthy how much power servants exercise within the sphere of domination to which they are subject” (44). The servants, although subordinate to their masters, hold much control over the domestic sphere. They are not only in charge of chores and cleaning, but the most trusted ones also help raise children and act as the master’s confidant—someone they can talk to and confide in.

The servants are constantly around the family and are able to observe all the inner-workings of the household. There was a massive fear during this time that servants, the more inferior beings, would rise up against the upper classes and assume control: “If the master lost status in the outside world, or if coalitions within the family, formed with or without the assistance of the servant, led to a decline of the master’s status within the family, the servant might well be tempted to betray a master who was no longer quite as masterful” (Coser 36). The master’s status, whether through social or financial loss, gave an excuse for servants to seek control. Servants could seek control and rise through the ranks, in theory, in a number of different ways.

One of these ways is to reveal the seemingly endless amounts of family knowledge that many of masters held as secretive family information. Lewis A. Coser says, “Servants have occasion to observe the behavior of their masters, being privy to many of their secrets. Hence they are able, at least potentially, to reveal these secrets to interested outsiders” (35). This idea of betrayal through the telling of secrets is most notable in the character of Nelly Dean. She tells the entire family history, even the most unfavorable parts, to a stranger (i.e. Mr. Lockwood). As will be discussed later, Nelly has the potential of raising her status by informing Lockwood of the story, and inciting a relationship between him and Cathy.

Marriage ties are the second most notable method for servants potentially gaining power. There was a great deal of stress placed upon “servants marrying into a higher class, [which] went hand-in-hand with a concomitant middle-class fear of falling into the lower ranks, revealing the insecurity of a fluctuating and competitive class formation, both of these process were reflected widely in Victorian literary production” (Lynch 94). The hands of the lower classes seem to hold the bulk of this idea of “a fluctuating and competitive class formation” of the gothic novel. This is evident in the novel *Jane Eyre*, where complications arise because Jane wants to marry Mr. Rochester, a man of a much higher class. In the eyes of Victorians, one of the few ways to place them on the same level is to have Bertha Mason, Rochester’s wife, locked away secretly in the attic. Charlotte Brontë, as well as other gothic novelists, uses horror as a way to highlight these problems and as a plot device to make these scenarios even remotely possible.

Turning towards the beginning of the Gothic novel, one must examine Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. This book is the first of its kind and helped to establish the Gothic genre. Although written in the 18th Century, this novel uses servants as a means of increasing horror, suspense, and the plot. Instead of being so outwardly expressive in their fear of servants, the early gothic novelists seemed to internalize these problems. However, these elements still break through the surface in the literature. George E. Haggerty writes, “By attempting in the *Castle of Otranto* (1764) ‘to blend . . . the ancient and the modern’ romance to enrich the nature-bound conventions of the novel by means of the ‘great resources of fancy,’ Horace Walpole set the Gothic novel on a course both self-contradictory and seemingly self-defeating” (379). These fantastic Gothic elements seem like they crashed-landed in the middle of an otherwise typical romance. The realistic elements and underlying societal problems surface in the text set against the contrasting Gothic background. This essay will examine three separate instances in the novel, that demonstrate this point.

The first notable instance of the use of servants in *The Castle of Otranto* appears when the two servants, Diego and Jaquez, see the giant leg and foot in one of the rooms. They go and tell their account to Manfred, which in turn invokes terror and advances the plot. The book reads, “For heaven’s sake my dear good lord, cried Jaquez, do not go into the gallery! Satan himself I believe is in the great chamber next to the gallery” (Walpole 34). Walpole uses servants as scapegoats here in order to advance the plot. He places the servants in the position to see the giant hand and foot, for it is certainly more acceptable for lower classes to give in to superstitions than upper classes. It also allows for greater terror and suspense, for it is certainly scarier for the audience when Manfred, an upper class man, begins to believe in the curse. Up to this point, the servants are “blockheads,” but once Manfred places their

accusations along with his own experiences, he is able to believe them a little—but still not respect them (34).

The second instance occurs when Bianca is talking with Matilda. In this passage, they discuss Hippolita's personal matters. The text reads:

What! was she sorry for what she had said? asked Bianca—I am sure, madam, you may trust me.—With my own secrets when I have any, I may, said Matilda; but never with my mother's: a child ought to have no ears or eyes but as a parent directs. Well! to be sure madam, you was born to be a saint, said Bianca, and there's no resisting one's vocation: you will end in a convent at last. But there is my lady Isabella would not be so reserved to me: she will let me talk to her of young men . . . (41)

This excerpt perfectly exhibits the fear of servants knowing too much information. Bianca is a trusted member of the household (especially by Isabella), since she is always present and close with the family. Bianca gets to examine the inner workings of the family and is able to see many of their dark secrets. It is of no surprise then that Bianca acts angry when Matilda refuses to discuss these matters with her. Bianca is even so upset that she begins to act insubordinate and steps outside her servant position, mocking Matilda that she will end up in a convent. Shortly afterwards, they are interrupted by a noise which they believe to be a "ghost" or "angry spirit" (42). This once again propels the plot forward and incites terror within the reader.

The third major example of this type of incident in Walpole's novel is the scene where Bianca bursts into the room and tells Manfred of the giant hand. The novel reads, "Oh! the hand! the giant! the hand!—Support me! I am terrified out of my senses, cried Bianca: I will not sleep in the castle to-night" (102). Bianca, the lower class servant, serves once again as the superstitious informer of the upper class man, Manfred. By being the informer, she has a significant amount of power in how the plot will develop. Servants as a class are also close to this idea of the terror from dismembered limbs. Eve M. Lynch makes a very important observation dealing with servants. She says, "body parts, especially hands, were the common way to signify the uncanny human void in the servants position. It is no wonder that the rising Victorian ghost story drew on the vast supply of servants from below the stairs to physically coordinate the haunted domestic space." It is possible that these dismembered limbs—the giant foot and hand—are representative of a disorganized and faulty social structure. Gothic literature often relies on the function of these servants to create the terror. Although there is no lack of servants in the novel, the "human void" means the lack of moral and intellectual capacity that the upper classes see the servants as having. In many of their eyes, servants are simply walking husks, devoid of life, and meant to serve the master's will. Walpole, being an upper class man himself, may be showing some of the contempt he has for servants and lower classes during his time.

The second major novel that requires analysis is *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. This novel is highly concerned with social structure and relationships, as exhibited between the Linton and Earnshaw families. One critic notes that, "*Wuthering Heights* participates in the socio-political upheavals of the era . . . where the subordinate do not remain in their places, and where dominant modes of power are disparaged" (Cory 6). This idea of insubordinate people runs rampant throughout the novel. The servants, Nelly Dean and

Joseph, are often insubordinate to their superiors, especially when they are outside members of the family. Heathcliff, not a servant, but who begins as a member of a lower class, rises in the ranks and gains power. Through his eventual marriage to Isabella and his sketchy relationship with Hindley (much due to gambling debt), he is able to become the owner of Wuthering Heights.

The roles of servants within the novel are difficult to place. They serve so many roles, many of which the essay discussed earlier, such as raising children, teaching, household chores, and letting their masters 'confide' in them. The multi-faceted roles of Nelly and Joseph provide them with a great deal of power. The author Graeme Tytler says:

...it is noteworthy how much power some servants, Nelly Dean and Joseph in particular, are vested with in the upbringing of the children under their care.

Joseph, for example, as well as being chiefly responsible for instructing them in religious doctrine, is now and then described as thrashing Heathcliff or boxing Catherine's ears for their respective misdemeanors. (45)

The raising of children gives them extreme amounts of control over the family setting. They decide how to raise the children, and what moral values they should instill in them. Although the upper classes see servants as inferior beings, both intellectually and morally, they are for some reason giving them this huge responsibility. This aspect of the novel perhaps stresses the deterioration of the family unit, especially when the reader sees how Heathcliff and the other children they raise turn out. Rather than the mother raising the children, it is the servants. Even later in the novel, there is strong evidence of Joseph influencing Hareton's upbringing: "Joseph had instilled into him a pride of name, and of his lineage; he would, had he dared, have fostered hate between him and the present owner of the Heights, but his dread of that owner amounted to superstition" (Brontë 178). There are several elements working together in this passage. First, Joseph has enough power over the domestic sphere to influence Hareton. He encourages the pride of the Earnshaw name, which in turn perpetuates the hatred between the opposing families. Second, the novel lowers Joseph as a servant by his "superstition." This is another example of the degraded servant instigating the conflict.

Nelly also is a significant instigator of conflict between the families. One of the best examples of this is when Catherine is dying. Nelly realizes that Catherine is slowly dying and becoming delirious, however, she insists on keeping Edgar ignorant. There were multiple opportunities for Nelly to seek help. Catherine, in one of her rants, brings to light Nelly's true character. Catherine says, "'Nelly is my hidden enemy—you witch! So you do seek elf-bolts to hurt us! Let me go, and I'll make her rue! I'll make her howl a recantation!'" (Brontë 125). *Wuthering Heights* portrays servants as meddling enemies of society. Nelly manipulates situations, which she is able to do because of her social position as a servant and trusted member of the family.

Some authors have gone as far as to say that Nelly Dean is the villain of *Wuthering Heights*. She meddles with the family affairs so much, placing her own spin upon the action when she relays it to Lockwood, that she seems to be the primary instigator of many of the problems. Much of this has to do with Nelly struggling to place her identity among the families. James Hafley says that Nelly believes herself "as rightly belonging to the same social level as the Earnshaws" (203). Nelly especially places herself among the higher ranks of society as she begins to further in age. She becomes the main caretaker of The Grange

after the death of Edgar Linton. The fear of servants rising in class is also extremely evident in the case of Nelly. Through her tale to Lockwood, she attempts to fulfill her own goals. James Hafley makes the argument against her character: “She has, of course, not told this long story to Lockwood without a very good reason: he is gullible, he is weak, he is disposed to like her. He would, in short, make a very good ‘master’ for her should he marry Cathy now that young Linton has died; it is her purpose to arrange his desiring such a marriage” (212). By this rationale, it is Nelly’s intentions to have a weak master, so that she can gain further control within the family and household. However, Nelly fails in her plan of having Lockwood pursue a relationship with Cathy. Instead, a relationship develops between Hareton and Cathy, which also ends up helping Nelly’s status (although perhaps not to the extent she wants). Nelly ends up running most of the family and looking over Cathy, Hareton, and the other servants.

The servants within both of these novels, *The Castle of Otranto* and *Wuthering Heights*, highlight the fears and anxieties of the upper class. The Gothic novel evolved into a warning of the faulty organization of the class hierarchy. There was a fear that servants and the lower class would rise in rank and usurp power. Servants can achieve a higher class through marriages and family meddling, such as the case with Nelly Dean. Due to these societal fears, the Gothic novel places servants in positions that enable them to increase horror within the literature. They lie, spy, and increase suspense through ignorance and strive for social position. Masters, on the contrary, degrade and punish them for their insubordination. By examining these pivotal characters within the Gothic novel, one begins to realize the societal underpinnings and problems with 18th- and 19th-century society.

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