

ABSTRACT

Claire and Solange are the maids in Jean Genet's *The Maids*. Having no life outside their servitude, the maids are "the other," the submissive and subordinate. The maids invented a make-believe world in which they play roles as being a mistress and a servant. In the absence of the real Madame, Claire and Solange exercise a ritual of Madame humiliating her servant who in turn is supposed to murder her. The shifting of power is seen as the maids who are socially powerless threaten to murder Madame and take the power. However, the ritual never comes to its ends; Claire is never able to kill Madame played by Solange. Not being proud of themselves, the maids do not have a compelling basis for their rebellion. As the oppressed, the maids tend to be reactive, and their values are accordingly weaker, while Madame, representing the ruling class, actively controls their destiny with stronger values. Having been tried but unable to conduct the crime of killing Madame, both in the make-believe world and in reality, Solange finally seeks an escape in the illusory criminal world in which she is already the famous criminal. Having tried too long to come to term with being the "other," Solange finally breaks down and becomes everyone else.

Key words: the other, make-believe, the oppressed, the ruling class, shifting of power.

A. Introduction

Literary works are created by author living in a society and being a member of the society. Therefore, it is common to see literary works that represent life and social problems. Such literary works can be found in Jean Genet's plays. Genet was born on December 10, 1910, in Paris, France, to twenty-two-year-old prostitute Camille Gabrielle Genet. She gave him away to an orphanage the following summer. He was soon put in a foster home. At age ten, he was accused of stealing. At age thirteen he was removed from his foster home and school, and later underwent psychiatric treatments after he embezzled money from his new guardian. He tried to escape from authorities several times but failed. He was sentenced in 1926 to the penitentiary colony at Mettray for two years. His time in prison hardened Genet's criminal instincts, his resentment against French bourgeois society, and it allowed him to explore his potential homosexuality. Bettina Knapp quotes Genet, "Abandoned by my family, I already felt it was natural to aggravate this condition by a preference for boys, and this preference by theft, and theft by crime or a complacent attitude in regard to crime. I thus resolutely rejected a world which had rejected me" (17). Since society repudiated him, Genet chose to repudiate society. In his early life, he chose a life of a crime as a prostitute, a thief, a

er on he stopped the first three identities, he retained

Genet's early life shaped his sense of "Otherness". An abandoned child and despised by society, Genet admires the saints for the ideas that they are children who abandon their father and mothers to follow Christ. Sartre says on Genet, "God compensates for the absent mother, for indifferent society. In becoming an object of concern to an infinite being, Genet will acquire the being which he lacks. He will be a saint, since he is not a son" (30). Thus Genet starts to do his "pilgrimage" by committing crime: stealing, prostituting, convicting, and becoming homosexual. According to Knapp, in doing his pilgrimage: "His goal was to reach the lowest possible state of evil. To become base, sordid, vile, degraded was his credo; his way. His would be an inner and downward journey into an abyss" (18). Genet becomes more solitary, and he consciously rejects others. He wants to be a saint as a negation of man. The "Other" is defined by having a marginalized opposition to the status quo, the ruling power. Genet chooses to be the "Other" by being an outcast of the society.

One of Genet's plays that presents the notion of the "other" is *The Maids*. It is a play within a play about two maids, Claire and Solange, who invent a make-believe world in which they play the roles of being mistress and servant. Claire plays as Madame and Solange as Claire. *The Maids* also portrays the complicated relationship between sisters who happen to be maids and their relationship with their mistress, Madame.

B. The Shifting of Power in *The Maids*: Unsuccessful Rebellion of the "Other"?

Although Solange and Claire appear physically to have freedom to go out, they never leave Madame's apartment. All their activities are done in the apartment. Their daily chores, their secret theatrical, and even their love affairs with the milkman take place within the apartment's boundaries. Their designated domain is the kitchen, with its filth and bad odors. They have their sleeping lodgings, the garret, which is described as a place of total crudeness and simplicity.

Compared to Madame, the maids are nothing. They are the "Others" as they are the submissive and subordinates. Although they live in the same luxurious apartment as their mistress, their only domains are the filthy kitchen and their garret. Their garret is in the attic, which is in a separate part of the apartment, with only two iron beds, a table, and a pinewood dresser with a little altar to the wholly virgin. Claire says she likes the garret, but Solange loathes it because she sees it as bare, mean and shabby. The only reason she likes the garret is

oes not have to do all the things she has to do as a
ient.

SOLANGE. I liked the garret because it was plain and I didn't have to put on a show.

No hangings to push aside, no rugs to shake, no furniture to caress ó with my eyes
or with a rag, no mirrors, no balcony. Nothing forces us to make pretty gestures
(50).

In contrast, Madame's bedroom, presented on stage, is a luxurious one. For the maids,
Madame's bedroom is a forbidden territory which they are supposed to keep clean and tidy.
They are not supposed to use it ever. They share their life with Madame, but they are not her
family. They do not share Madame's luxurious life. They remain outside, at the margin. They
handle Madame's beautiful dresses and jewelry, but they can not put them on. The maids do
not seem to have proper clothes but the black dresses and what Madame gave them
occasionally. The maids' being is defined by Madame who commands them what to do.
Madame grants a very limited amount of freedom to her maids. It can be seen from her
wonder when she notices the unhooked telephone receiver, the powder dust on her dressing
table or make-up on Claire's cheeks.

Madame and the maids may be said as representing what Nietzsche claims as two
types of individuals ó master and slave ó with two different ethical codes. According to
Nietzsche, there are always a great number of people who obeyed, compared to a small
number who command. The masters are leaders and struggle to stand out; the slaves follow
out of fear or resentment (O'Hara 22). Master morality is an ethic of overflowing power, of
self-control and self-rule. Slave morality is a morality of pity, of compassion out of fear of
suffering. Masters strive for excellence, always do their best, and have an ethic of virtue.
Steinhart resumes on slaves: "Because slaves are parasites, they value flattery; because they
are too weak to fight an open honest fight, they value dirty tricks and sneaky craftiness.
Resentment and passive aggression are praised by slave morality (64). Therefore, the
oppressed are always reactive, and their values are accordingly weaker, while the ruling class
actively controls their destiny with stronger values. However, in master-slave relations, each
also come to be dependent on the other. The relation between Madame and her maids to some
extent represents the master-slave relation.

Madam, a wealthy older woman, employs Claire and Solange as her maids. She lives
a plentiful lifestyle, wearing furs and drinking champagne. Madame is not as merciless as the
maids paint her to be, but she is not altogether kind, either. She prefers Claire to Solange. She
thinks that Claire is fit for better things. She lashes out at Solange and thoughtlessly takes

lly ashamed for not knowing her way around the

MADAME [smiling]. It's true I'm something of a stranger in the kitchen. You're at home there. It's your domain. You are its sovereigns (75).

Her comment only affirms her wealth and her position. Madame entrusts the maids her daily accounts, has them responsible for certain errands, and let them purchase on her behalf. The maids, however, are penniless themselves and are dependent to Madame. Madam, on the other hand, is also dependent to the maids and scared that the maid will desert her.

MADAME. If you find the house too sadí .

SOLANGE. We will never desert Madam.

MADAME. I know you won't, Solange. You've not been too unhappy with me, have you? (69).

Madam has occasional impulses of generosity, but she often lashes out at the maids. The maids are objects that she does not like but depends on for everyday tasks.

Both Solange and Claire recognize that they are slaves to Madam. They feel ashamed and dirty because of their poverty. They hate themselves as they associate themselves with filth. They are maids, and their job is to clean filth. Filth serves a reminder of their slavishness, their shame and their poverty. Madame holds the power over them. Madame is the status quo, and they are the marginalized opposition. They are looking at themselves as the maids, and by comparing themselves to Madame, they see what they are not.

CLAIRE. [*she stands up and cries*]: Speak more softly, please, please. Speak ó speak of Madame's kindness.

SOLANGE. Her kindness, is it? It's easy to be kind, and smiling, and sweet ó ah! That sweetness of hers! ó when you are beautiful and rich. But what if you're only a maid? The best you can do is to give yourself airs while you're doing the cleaning or washing up (52).

Therefore, they hate themselves as much as they hate Madame. They hate Madame in her glory. Any victory for Madame is a defeat for them. As a result, the maids desire to overturn Madame's power.

Solange has a more resentful attitude toward Madame. Claire also loathes Madame, but she is also quick to defend her by pointing out her kindness.

CLAIRE. *She* does, *she* loves us. *She's* kind! Madame adores us.

ay she loves her armchair. Not even *that* much! Like
ink enamel toilet-seat (52).

Although Solange is older than Claire, she does not play Madame in their make-believe world. She maintains her role as a maid. While Solange forces her aggression in resenting Madame, Claire wants to be Madame. Claire strolls around Madame's balcony at night as if she were royalty, and loves making herself up with Madame's cosmetics.

Solange is masochist and self loathing. She insists that their role-playing starts by shattering her esteem, which is easily done by Claire. In doing the humiliation, Claire reminds Solange of her poverty and her filthiness. Claire herself tries to forget her filthy occupation, and she seems to resent Solange, who reminds her of her filth, more than she resents Madame. Her pleasure in the role-plays results from humiliating her sister, and her sadistic insults revolve around her loathing of servants. The relation between these two sisters is that of love and hatred based on their hatred toward their poverty.

SOLANGE. I want to help you. I want to comfort you, but I know I disgust
you. I am repulsive to you. And I know it because you disgust me. When
slave love one another, it is not love.

CLAIRE. And me, I am sick of seeing my image thrown back at me by a
mirror, like a bad smell. You are my bad smell (61).

Claire's phrase "from an image to a smell" captures the essence of "Otherness" that she hates. Her being the "Other" is defined by her marginalized opposition to Madame. By comparing herself to Madame, Claire sees what she really is. As Solange is also the "Other", seeing Solange strengthens the sense of "Otherness" that she hates.

In the opening of the play, spectators see Madame and her maid in Madame's luxurious bedroom. While helping Madame to get dressed, the maid is being humiliated by Madame. Later on spectators come to know that Madame on the stage is not the real Madame. They are the maids in their make-believe world in which one plays Madame and the other as her maid. Feeling ashamed and dirty because of their poverty, the maids act out intricate play in which Claire plays Madame and Solange as the maid. In their illusory world, Claire fulfills her dreams of wealth and prestige by playing the arrogant Madame, and Solange satisfies her desire to prove herself worthy as a maid by beating down Madame.

Having no other life outside their servitude, the maids feel being rejected by society. By being servants, they are forced to serve an authoritative figure. Resenting their low status, the maids seek to disown Madame of her status by impersonating her. In the role-play, Claire is now Madame, the mistress, and Solange is Claire, the maid. Claire-Madame orders

gloves which belong to the kitchen because

en is spit!ö (35). Rubber gloves and kitchen are symbols of their servitude. Claire-Madame makes her up and calls in Solange-Claire to bring her dress, jewels and leather shoes. Obeying the order, Solange-Claire spits on the shoes in order to make them shine. Her spitting reveals her hatred toward Madame and her sister who plays Madame. Claire-Madame wants to wear the white dress, but Solange-Claire insists that Madame wears the red dress. Claire-Madame submits and says Solange-Claire loathes her.

SOLANGE [*coldly*]. Madame will wear the red dress.

CLAIRE [*simply*] Quietly. [*Severely*] Hand me the dress. Oh! I am so alone and friendless. I can see in your eyes that you loathe me. You don't care what happens to me.

SOLANGE. I will follow you everywhere. I love you.

CLAIRE. No doubt. As one loves a mistress. You love and respect me. And you are hoping for a legacy, a codicil in your favor ö (39-40).

öAs one loves a mistressö indicates that they know that love for an authoritative figure is mixed with anxiety, fear and hatred. It is the love of the inferior. That Solange loves her as öone loves a mistressö gives Claire sense of importance.

The identity shifts in their make-believe world is complicated because the maids are also sisters who share much in common. Solange cautions Claire as to the importance of boundaries and frontiers between themselves, öLimits, boundaries, Madame. Frontiers are not conventions but laws. Here, my lands; there, your shore ö (42). However, they find it difficult to put it into practice. Claire often mixes up the two identities when she confusedly mumbles both her name and Solange's. When Solange threatens Claire-Madame, she shows her the reflection of Solange and Claire- the-maid.

SOLANGE. Now, here are the two maids, the faithful servants! They are standing in front of you. Despise them. Look more beautiful. ö We no longer fear you. We are merged, enveloped in our fumes, in our revels, in our hatred of you. The mold is setting. We are taking shape, Madame (46).

The reflection on the mirror shows Solange and Claire, the maids. They are merged in their hatred of Madame. However, the reflection of Madame which Solange addresses is also the reflection of Claire on the mirror as Madame. Claire may be merged with Solange at the moment, but she is also merged with Madame. Therefore, the hatred is not only toward the mistress but also the maids themselves.

ame, Madame's power is shifted to her. At certain part
e is ready, and then declares her hatred for Claire and

begins insulting her aristocratic appearance.

SOLANGE [*coldly*]. That'll do! Now hurry! Are you ready?

CLAIRE. Are you?

SOLANGE. [*she steps back to the wardrobe*]. I'm ready. ó I'm tired of being
an object of disgust, I hate you, too. I despise you. I hate your scented
bosom. Your í ivory bosom! Your í golden thighs! Your í amber feet!
I hate you! [*she spits on the red dress*] (43-4).

While she declares her hatred toward Madame, she also has her own self-hatred. On the other hand, the declaration and insult toward Madame shows that even though Solange remains as a lowly maid in the make-believe world, she escalates above her position by enabling herself release her steaming emotion and insult Madame.

The oppressed are always reactive, and their values are accordingly weaker, while the ruling class actively controls their destiny with stronger values. The reactivity of the maids is apparent, even when no one is around. The first three sequences in the play are demarcated by a ringing bell—the alarm clock, the telephone, and the doorbell. Each time it excites fear that they will be somehow discovered. Claire always sets the alarm clock to let them know that Madame is about to come, therefore they have to finish their role-playing.

SOLANGE. But before I go back, I'm going to finish my job. [*Suddenly an alarm clock goes off. SOLANGE stops. The two actresses, in a state of agitation, run together. They huddle and listen.*] Already?

CLAIRE. Let's hurry! Madame'll be back. [*She starts to unfasten her dress*].
Help me. It's over already. And you didn't get to the end (46).

The maids are never able to finish what they are supposed to do in their illusory world: murdering Madame. When the phone rings, Claire picks it up and learns from Monsieur that he has been freed from prison. Trembling, she is unable to hang up the phone. Solange insincerely congratulates Claire on the fine job she did with the letters, and suggests Madame and Monsieur may even recognize her handwriting. Claire says Solange should have finished off Madame when she had the chance, and points out that their game, which leaves traces each time the Madame catches, endangers them.

CLAIRE. We've got to carry on with the same kind of life. With the same old
game. But, you poor wretch! Even the game is dangerous. I'm sure we've
left traces. We leave them every time. I see a host of traces I'll never be

and she, she walks about in her tamed menagerie. She
he points to our traces with the tip of her pink toe. She

discovers us, one by one. Madame jeers at us. And it's your fault. All's
lost because you lack strength (58-9).

She accuses Solange of being weak, but Solange defends herself— she couldn't murder her
because she was so close to Madame in her sleep. Claire says she could have done it, and
will. The fear of being discovered makes Solange and Claire contrive another plan,
confirming their reactivity: poisoning Madame.

After the doorbell rings, Claire and Solange rush to prepare for Madame's entrance.
Madame grants Claire with the red dress and gives Solange her cape fur, but then Madame
quickly takes back the fur she bequeaths to Solange. Madame's altruism is an occasional
advantage for charity she produces to make herself feel better. Madame shows her self-
control and self-rule in her relation to the maids. She does not really care about her maids,
and she confirms her superiority such as when she says: "When you needed anything, I saw
you got it. With my own old gowns alone you both could have dressed like princess" (69).
The maids are also unable to make Madame drink the poisoned tea even though they have
tried many ways to persuade her to do it. Madame's sense of upper-class shame contrasts with
the maids'. Madame's shame stems from guilty excess, as she feels guilty about getting tea
when Monsieur is in prison, and not from dispossession. Even her "weak" values, then, do not
conform to Nietzsche's reactive slave morality, but are active— she brings the guilt, one borne
from her wealth, upon herself, while the maids have nearly no choice but to feel ashamed
over their lower positions. When Madame declares that she is the "stranger" in kitchen while
the maids are the "sovereign", she suggests the contrast of the "Other" and the aristocracy by
flipping the regular meaning in that Madame is the "Other" and the maids are the aristocracy
for the servile task of cooking.

Although Solange is ruthless, beating Claire at times, she was also coward, unable to
finish off Madame when she had the chance.

SOLANGE. It was because I couldn't see her face, Claire. Because I was so
close to Madam, so close to her sleep. I lost my strength. In order to get to
her throat, I'd have had to lift the sheet from her heaving bosom.

CLAIRE. And the sheets were warm. The night dark. That kind of thing has to
be done in broad daylight. You're incapable of it. It's too terrible a deed.
But *I* can manage it (59).

be aristocracy and submerging into escapist
secretly reading Claire's fantastical crime and

romance stories.

Solange displays a blend of dominance and submissiveness. Solange remains the lowly maid in their role-plays. Solange is a masochist, and she first requires that their role-plays shatter her esteem. This is easily accomplished, since Solange is self-loathing, and all Claire needs to do is humiliate her sister by reminding her of her poverty and her filthiness. Solange even becomes aroused during this stream of insults.

CLAIRE. I said the insults! Let them come, let them unfurl, let them drown me, for, as you well know, I loathe servants. A vile and odious breed, I loathe them. They're not of the human race. Servants ooze. They're a foul effluvium drifting through our rooms and hallways, seeping into us, entering our mouths, corrupting us. I vomit you!

SOLANGE. Go on. [*Silence. CLAIRE coughs*] Go on! I'm getting there, I'm getting there! (86)

Solange asks Claire to continue her insults which at a certain point she asks Claire to stop because "I've got there" (87). Claire then begins to dominate Claire-as-Madame.

SOLANGE. Down on your knees! [*Claire hesitates and kneels*] Ah! Ah! You were so beautiful, the way you wrung your precious arms! Your tears, your petals oozed down your lovely face. Ah! Ah! Down! [*CLAIRE doesn't move.*] Down! [*SOLANGE strikes her*] Get down! [*CLAIRE lies down*] Ah! You amuse me, my dear! Crawl! Crawl, I say, like a worm!

The revenge is that much greater, for now she can feel as if she, the "slave," is superior to her mistress. The power is now reversed from the mistress to the maid. The maids play out these illusory roles to give them more power as each sadistically reduces her sister before her eyes. Claire, as Madame, feels elevated above her real position as a maid, and Solange can cut the fake Madame down to size.

The make-believe world that the maids perform serves as an escapist world comprising submission to authority and the integration of authority. Their self-loathing is confirmed with their submission, but they also get their authoritarian. Claire always plays the dominant role first, and Solange follows. Claire is already the higher-up; Solange bears the burdens of insults knowing that soon she will overturn them, still as the maid. The authoritarian Claire ends up as a submissive Madame, while slavish Solange ends up as a

to finish early before Solange can dominate. The
loyalty takes its proper place.

When Madame returns home, the maids are thrown back to their reality as the maids. So far the maids are unable to murder Madam by strangling her, both in their make-believe world and in reality. They change their plan to poisoning Madame. Although Claire, who is favored by Madame, is quick to show Madame's kindness, she later on expresses her rage against Madame with even more hatred and bitterness than Solange. Unlike Solange, who cowardly backs out of the murder, Claire is willfully ruthless and tries her hardest to get Madame to drink the poisoned tea.

CLAIRE. Madame should have some tea because of the cold.

MADAME [*laughing*]. You're trying to kill me with your tea and your flowers and your suggestions. You're too much for me, Claire. No. I've never felt so alive. Oh! And served in the best tea set, the *very* best tea set! Such pomp! Such elegance! [*She wants to leave, but CLAIRE stands between her and the door.*]

CLAIRE [*imploringly*]. Madame *must* drink it. Otherwise í .

[*SOLANGE dashes in. She pushes her sister aside and turns to MADAME*]

Claire is unable to get Madame to drink the tea. Unable to execute the second plan of murdering Madame, the maids' hatred toward Madame is heightened. At the same time, they are also more scared that Madame will discover their betrayal.

In regards to the failure of the maids in murdering Madame, Philip Thody calls *The Maids* as "the study of an unsuccessful rebellion" (165) because by not being proud of themselves, the maids do not have a basis for an effective rebellion. Thody asserts:

As Sartre has often argued in his political essays, revolutions are possible only when the victims of oppression can look upon their present condition as a possible source of future dignity. In classical times, the slave who became Christians saw in the virtues of poverty and humility the very image of his own condition (165).

Claire and Solange, unfortunately, are not proud of themselves. They even hate each other for being poor. They are outcasts, and they have a reminder of that alienation every time they see each other. Solange says: "I can't stand our being so alike" (60). They see themselves as so low that even love is impossible to exist between them, as Solange says: "When slaves love one another, it is not love" (61). Religion also does not help the maid to see the virtue of their

ide to go to church and to be submissive. They resent

CLAIRE. Let me alone. Think of what comes after.

SOLANGE. Nothing comes after. I'm sick in tired of kneeling in pews. In church I'd have had the red velvet of abbesses or the stone of penitents, but my bearing at least would have been noble (56).

As Thody argues, because the maids are not proud of themselves, they don not have a basis for an effective rebellion. Therefore, they are unable to execute their plan to murder Madame.

Claire's illusory life is constantly undercut by her self-consciousness she often feels someone is watching her and Solange or recording their gestures.

CLAIRE [*She wants to gain time*]. You're not listening to me Solange. I assure you, I feel something, I feel it. Listen, we're being spied on. I'm sure she'll come back unexpectedly. She'll have forgotten her handkerchief. Or her gloves. [SOLANGE *shrugs her shoulders*.] Or her compact, God knows what. But I feel there's something here, Solange ó something in this room ó that can record our gestures and play them back. Remember, Madame told us not to latch the front door! (83).

The idea that someone or something is keep watching and recording them applies an excessive pressure on the maids.

Solange launches a long monologue at the end of the play in which she acts out the dialogue surrounding a number of invented events and characters.

SOLANGE. Madame! .At last! Madame is dead! í .laid out on the linoleum í .strangled by the dish-gloves. What? Oh, Madame may remain seated í Madame may call me Mademoiselle Solange í .Exactly. It's because what I've done. Madame and Monsieur will call me Mademoiselle Solange Lemercier í . Madame should have taken off that black dress. It's grotesque. [*She imitates Madame's voice*.] So I'm reduced to wearing mourning for my maid. As I left the cemetery all the servants of the neighborhood marched pass me as if I were member of the family. I've so often been part of family. Death will see through the bitter end! (91-2).

Unable to conduct the crime of killing Madame, both in the make-believe world and in reality, Solange seeks an escape to the illusory criminal world in which she is already the famous criminal. She has too long tried to come to hold with being an "Other," an oppressed

position to the ruling power. She finally breaks down

After Madame departs gloriously, the maids are left alone. Claire once again takes up the role of Madame. She performs her final attempt to save them from servitude.

CLAIRE. Be still. It will be your task, yours alone, to keep us both alive. You must be strong. In prison no one will know that I am with you, secretly, on the sly (97).

She forces Solange to make her drink the poisoned tea. When Claire dies, Solange will be in a circumstance of being accused of murdering Claire. Claire sacrifices herself so that Solange may attain the glory and prestige of being a murderer. Therefore, both of them will be free from the servitude.

C. Conclusion

In her monologue at the very end of the play, Solange faces the audience. She declares that they have now achieved their final liberation.

SOLANGE. Madame steps into the car. Monsieur is whispering sweet nothings in her ear. She would like to smile, but she is dead. She rings the bell. The porter yawns. He opens the door. Madame goes up the stairs. She enters her flat ó but Madame is dead. The two maids are alive: they've just risen up, free, from Madame's icy form. All the maids were present at her side ó not they themselves, but rather the hellish agony of their names. All that remains of them to float about Madame's airy corpse is the delicate perfume of the holy maidens which they were in secret. We are beautiful, joyous, drunk, and free (99-100).

The freedom Solange declares in her final words is, in her eyes, freedom from the oppressive authority of Madame. However, her freedom is only illusory and temporary; she is still a maid, and Madame and Monsieur will come home again the following day. On the other hand, if Claire is really dead, Solange will be free from the servitude. She will carry Claire within herself, and attain the glory and prestige of a criminal.

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