Gothic Servants: Mothering Power Under the Guise of Servility

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Abstract

In this paper I challenge many of the previous readings and analysis of the Gothic servant and mother figures found in the American Gothic works of Henry James and Edith Wharton. Much of the Gothic tradition focuses on moral and social transgressions and their impact on morality and status. Because so many critics chose to focus on the impact of social hierarchies and the horrifying impact of the lower class abducting the role of the upper-class of whom they serve, often times those women in the role of the caretaker and nurturer are painted as social climbers concerned only with their upward mobility. Similarly those in the power to care for those above them in status are often vilified because of their understandings of nature and knowledge of the homes where they care supersedes the knowledge of those for whom they care. I, however, argue that the Gothic servant/nurturing figures found in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, Edith Wharton’s “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” “All Souls,” and *Ethan Frome* do not exemplify the social climber willing to sacrifice the well-being of those in her keep, but rather the intrinsically, benevolent influences of a motherly figure to protect those in their keep.

My Introduction illustrates much of the current criticism written about the social anxieties of class fluctuation and upheaval, the construct of power in mothering roles, and the potential for positive mothering forces in American Gothic works, including criticism from Fred Botting, Allan Lloyd-Smith, Bruce Robbins, Gloria Erlich, Priscilla Walton, Holly Blackford, Karen J. Jacobsen, Claire Kahane, Roberta Rubenstein and lastly Cynthia Murillo. I explain how the working classes enter into a partnership with the aristocracy, willingly or out of sheer desperation, and how it enables the movement of those in the working class to exert power held previously by the aristocracy. I explain how though Fred Botting's work on the Gothic genre is helpful in elucidating the Gothic elements in Gothic fiction, we must fuse and acknowledge later criticism and class examination to ultimately lead us to a firmer understanding of the role of the servant-mother and the positive power of her position in the aforementioned works. I go on to highlight some of Bruce Robbins’ Marxist criticism of *The Turn of the Screw* and explain both its values and shortcomings in regards to the stance it takes on the intentions of the governess in the text. There is a co-dependent nature that exists between the mistress/master and his/her caretaker, whether it be a maid, caretaker or governess. Once the servant appeases the need of the mistress, the roles reverse and the mistress ultimately becomes reliant on the servant for survival. This paradigm shift elicits a sense of horror on the part of the mistress because she recognizes the limitations of her seeming power and influence and becomes childlike and consequently helpless but is nonetheless, protected from the dangers of the truth by those around her. While this exertion of power may be classified as monstrous because it is out of the realm of the servant’s position, I maintain it is an act of the mothering servant whose intention is to protect those in their care, not, like many critics contend, to lead their mistresses astray for their own gains.

I argue how *The Turn of the Screw* depicts the confusion inherent in both the social and mothering role of the governess in my chapter “Mothering Figures in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*.” While many literary critics disparage the role of the governess in this tale and focus mainly on her possible sexually driven decisions, there is much more to consider about the governess’s actions that actually disrupt this commonly held belief of her as a whore figure. I illustrate through a close read how we must
recognize the positive intentions of the governess to play the role of the substitute mother for Miles and Flora but because of her young age, lack of experience and social status, is ill-equipped to be the substitute mother. She does not willingly embody the whore figure like the governess who came before her, but through a series of her attempts to thwart such a fate for herself, while simultaneously mimicking the positive mother role that Mrs. Grose sets out for her, causes her loss of the children in her keep.

In "Mothering Figures and their Power in the Works of Edith Wharton" I recognize the extensive scholarship on Gothic mothers. I argue that though we cannot dismiss the economic motivation and subversive discussion of class and economic commentary, the domestic servants and characters in Wharton’s work, though powerful, do not manipulate the mistresses and family members in their keep for social gain, but rather because they are taking on the role of the nurturing mother whose goal is protecting those within the realm of the home. This argument is substantiated through the close-reading and analysis of Wharton’s works “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” “All Souls,” and Ethan Frome. Through my analysis, I explain how these nurturing women capitalize on their ghostlike presence in their homes not to menace but to help those whom they serve and protect.

It is necessary to look at the works of Henry James and Edith Wharton with a discerning eye that separates the previously held belief that the servants and caregivers’ in American Gothic literature’s ultimate intentions were to usurp the power of the master/mistress from the notion that the intentions of the caregivers is to mother and nurture those above them, despite knowledge they have that those higher in status might view as threatening to their positions. While in some texts the best intentions of the caregivers do not supersede tragedy, it is still necessary to acknowledge the intent and not the effect of the mothering of these benevolent caregivers.
GOTHIC SERVANTS: MOTHERING POWER UNDER THE GUISE OF SERVILITY

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Introduction

From the inception of Gothic literature were issues inherent in social class fluctuation and upheaval. Certain authors in this genre including Henry James and Edith Wharton illustrate what Alan Lloyd-Smith in his *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* suggests are, "Significant among these fears [social anxieties] are having to do with the suppression of past traumas and guilt, anxieties concerning class and gender [and] fear of revolution (7). These social anxieties became the subtext for many Gothic works and have been examined by a variety of critics from a variety of literary standpoints.

Within Edith Wharton's "All Souls," "The Lady's Maid's Bell" and *Ethan Frome* in addition to James's *The Turn of the Screw*, we see the hegemonic forces of the aristocracy trying to maintain power, class structure and appearance to their equals, as well as the working class with which they have contact though with closer study seems to be a losing battle to those otherwise deemed below them. The tensions between what one's social standing and how the individual views herself is a recipe for the palpable anxiety in Gothic texts. Because the working classes enter into a partnership with the aristocracy, willingly or out of sheer desperation, it enables the movement of those in the working class to exert power held previously by the aristocracy. Though Botting's work is helpful in elucidating the Gothic elements in Gothic fiction, we must fuse and acknowledge later criticism and class examination to ultimately lead us to a firmer understanding of the role of the servant-mother and the positive power of her position in the aforementioned works.
Allan Lloyd-Smith in his *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* explains the recurrent concern for the anxiety inherent in social mobility especially in the realm of the domestic and how it is a nod to the previously depicted class stratification concerns in earlier British Gothic works. He shares “domestic Gothic is intimately bound up with the idea of house, gender, and the family, which becomes, through metaphor, a way of externalizing the inner life of fictional characters” (Smith 102-3). He also contends that the house setting of many Gothic texts can be quite telling about the workings and conflicts of those within them. For example, he makes a point to highlight that Bly, in *The Turn of the Screw* is an English home which he points out “the story concerns some of the sinister implications of master-servant and class relations in English society as seen by an Anglicized American author” (105).

As Fred Botting suggests in his work *Gothic*, “Gothic texts were also seen to be subverting the mores and manners on which good social behavior rested” (4). The tensions between what class one is categorized as with what to what one views him/herself as having potential to be, is an on-going anxiety during the Victorian era in America. Botting continues in the vain when he suggests, “Gothic novels frequently adopt this cautionary strategy, warning of dangers of social and moral transgression by presenting them in their darkest and most threatening form” (7). Botting’s work further elucidates this class struggle for he states, “the Gothic figures that appeared in so many novels, as well as critical, aesthetic and political discussions, became signs of a pervasive cultural anxiety concerning the relation of present and past, and the relationship between classes, sexes and individuals in society” (Botting 89). Botting urges us to believe “in the skeletons that leap from family closets and the erotic and often incestuous tendencies
of Gothic villains there emerges the awful tendencies of Gothic villains there emerges the awful specter of complete social disintegration in which virtue cedes to vice, reason to desire, law to tyranny" (Botting 5). This worry of class upheaval often leads us to focus on the social no-no's of some of our heroines and detracts from the positive influence of the safeguarding servant. This often results in a picture of many of the female characters as monsters rather than defenders of female virtue that they are.

Bruce Robbins in his article "They don't count much do they?": The Unfinished History in *The Turn of the Screw" employs a Marxist lens upon his reading of *The Turn of the Screw* and focuses much of his argument on the concept that the servant-governess is of the low class so she must be striving to take ownership over something, or in Robbins's view- someone. According to Robbins:

> In interpreting *The Turn of the Screw*, it may help to know that, since the beginnings of the English novel in the eighteenth century, the point of view of fictional servants and governesses has often been closely associated with those energies that have been pushing hardest to change the world" (Robbins 334).

If we are to examine the Gothic elements inherent in such texts, would we find more than Marxist undertones of social mobility and dangers of these transgressions. Robbins continues, "Even if we are to agree to consider *The Turn of the Screw* as a class allegory, this is clearly not the whole truth about it. For one thing, the story has little to say about the governess's relations with the master. It has a great deal to say, on the other hand, about her relations with the ghosts. And odd as this may seem, it is her relations with the ghosts that lead us to the very heart of the story's reflections on social hierarchy and its
refashioning of social allegory" (Robbins 335). Here Robbins makes the connection between lowly servant and ghost, suggesting the two are almost interchangeable.

Though Robbins does make the connection between ghost and servant, there is little more analysis beyond that point. Linking this with the Gothic ghosts, apparitions and with the privilege of omniscience due to their “invisible” status, were afforded access to information, conversations and close to limitless access to the secrets of the past and of the house. So, those viewed as invisible were inadvertently granted access to the ghosts (both literally and figuratively) of the home and family “in charge”. This access and possession of knowledge of families and their secrets make the servant-mother not only smarter but richer than the master, for the master's understanding of their knowledge makes the servant somewhat necessary to continue the master's purported life.

When acknowledging Bruce Robbins work on class struggle and structure we must also then look at Stuart Burrow's article "The Place of a Servant in the Scale" which not only critiques some of Robbins' notions about class but also challenges us to look at the "all-too-familiar interest in consciousness" (74). Burrows contends:

What interests James about the relation between upstairs and downstairs, in my reading, is not the obvious social and economic inequality between Master and servant, but the representational equivalence between the two. This suggests that it might be time to revise one of the most influential recent accounts of James's depiction of servant life—Bruce Robbins’s 1986 study of *The Turn of the Screw* in which Robbins contends that the governess's horror at the appearance of the ghosts of a previous governess
and valet 'has as much to do with the sexual and class transgression as with their ghostly reappearing act'" (88).

Much of the horror and terror we find in American Gothic ghost stories lie in the unknown. Though many authors and literary critics have worked to analyze class issues and structures inherent in American Gothic texts, I maintain it is the inherent power as the mother-nurturer enables those lower in the home hierarchy access to power which ultimately gives them the privilege to rule over those above them.

There is a co-dependent nature that exists between the mistress/master and his/her caretaker, whether it be a maid, caretaker or governess. In Wharton’s work, and in “All Souls” specifically, we see frustration with the maid, which mirrors the way in which a mother might be frustrated with a child. This all-knowing and all-powerful, though subtle presence of the maid in the mothering/ruiling role is present in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” as well. Very much like in “All Souls,” in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” the mistress is more in need of companionship, which places the power with the maid. Much of this power struggle is indicative of Wharton’s upbringing. Gloria Erlich shares with us in her work *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* “Wharton’s memoirs and fiction tell us more or less directly that love without power within a child’s own destined social world does not suffice to make it feel protected and prepared for life” (Erlich 15). With this in mind, we see the construct of power, trust and nurturing inherent in the caretaker roles in Wharton’s work, albeit at times, the servants are not as benevolent as they might be capable. Once the servant appeases the need of the mistress, the roles reverse and the mistress ultimately becomes reliant on the servant for survival. This paradigm shift elicits a sense of horror on the part of the mistress because she recognizes the limitations
of her seeming power and influence and becomes childlike and consequently helpless but
is nonetheless, protected from the dangers of the truth by those around her.

Similarly, there is the presence of a powerful mothering role of the maid and
governess as in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. Mrs. Grose contrasts with the new
governess, for the maid in *Turn of the Screw* becomes the protecting mother while the
governess, who is supposed to take on the role of mother, becomes a source of anxiety in
the household. Priscilla Walton, in her essay "'He took no notice of her; he looked at me'
: Subjectivities and Sexualities in *The Turn of the Screw*" proposes that "governesses
were single women employed to act as mother substitutes. Frequently lower class, or at
least lower than the class of their employers, these servants were a source of controversy
due to the problematic nature of single women and their sexuality" (306). Although the
governess is meant to mother, she still needs guidance from the maids and those who in
essence, have become the mothers of other caretakers in the home.

Writers of Gothic literature illustrate family and its home to highlight the possible
horror and terror inherent in the dismantling of the hierarchy in the household. Blackford
contends, “Houses, signifying domestic function, replace uncaring or persecuting
husbands, the attentions of which both mistress and servant want” (Blackford 236).
Many argue that the sins of the past are something that cannot be escaped, homes
depicted in James’s and Wharton’s work are an embodiment of a family’s genealogy and
sins of the past. Blackford continues, “Domestic servants are spectral presences that
haunt upper-and middle-class households, subsequently haunting the bourgeois female
psyche. Their liminal position in the house gives them a freedom of mobility that upper-
class female characters do not feel and, in fact, envy. And, yet, deprived of cultural
authority and recognition, servants become ghosts, automatons, and conservative forces that keep the past alive” (Blackford 237). Though most view the servants, maids and governesses in these spaces as nothing more than appendages to the home, they have the omniscient mothering power over those living in the house and therefore may guide and manipulate those around them, even their masters who have the guise of power over them. While this exertion of power may be classified as monstrous because it is out of the realm of the servant’s position, I maintain it is an act of the mothering servant whose intention is to protect those in their care, not, like many critics contend, to lead their mistresses astray for their own gains.

Karen J. Jacobsen’s politically and economically charged article “Economic Hauntings: Wealth and Class in Edith Wharton’s Ghost Stories” illuminates the early twentieth-century American struggle with wealth and class and its representation in Gothic literature, particularly that of Edith Wharton’s. Jacobsen maintains that Wharton’s dual view of the “insider and outsider of upper-class society” in her works is a nuanced version of social criticism (Jacobsen 101). Within the social critique embedded in Wharton’s work is the presence of class-anxiety and the servant-employer relationship. Jacobsen acknowledges other critics, like Inness, who stress Wharton’s conformity to the pervasive views of the master/servant dichotomy of the time while at times disrupting this view with the anxiety-inducing view of the servant abusing their role to assert power over the master (108). Jacobsen also suggests that the unsettling aspect of Wharton’s work comes from the suggestion that the servant class is capable of living without the aristocracy they serve, causing great anxiety and highlighting the “trivial and dispensable” (Jacobsen 109) nature of the upper class and their fear of losing their place.
in society. While Jacobsen includes a brief discussion of Rollins’ “maternalism dynamic” the notion of power relationships inherent in servant/mistress, it relies much more on the economic side of the potential conflict rather than that of the actual mothering anxiety present in much of Gothic fiction which I am asserting is the most important aspect to examine.

Claire Kahane in her article “The Gothic Mirror” moves away from the pervasive Oedipal angle of Gothic literary analysis and asserts the focus of mother and daughter is a significant thread in Gothic works that must be addressed. She contends the Gothic castle/house is symbolic of the “dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront” (Kahane 336). She goes on to contend that the origin of the mother-daughter connection is biological and thus makes the ensuing separation between mother and daughter a much more confusing and problematic venture than a son separating from his mother. This “tenuous and fundamentally ambivalent struggle a separate identity” is what Kahane suggests is the true tension in much of Gothic literature (Kahane 337). The mother-daughter bond, and the attempt at separation provides us with a landscape colored by the tension created by this (attempted) break.

Continuing with the concept of house as mother, Kahane argues the heroine’s discovery of the house, including its passageways and secrets is metaphorically her discovery of her own body/self and power. She later argues that when a heroine chooses to try to go beyond the limits of the walls of the protective mother-house, that is presents a struggle for the heroine. This sets up her contention that the mother is not a guiding benevolent force, but rather a menacing obstruction to the young woman’s attempt at
breaking from the dark nurturer. Kahane substantiates her claim when she writes
“various female characters continually attempt to escape by repudiating their
womanhood, their flight invariably proves to be circular, nightmarishly bringing them
face to face, that is with mothers” (Kahane 347). She adds another layer to this power
struggle when she shares that “transgressions allowed expression” and culminates her
argument with the notion that “a spectral mother, the original Other, reveals herself as the
antagonist in our common struggle to locate a self...Gothic fiction is dominated by the
uncanny mother of infancy, who will continue to haunt us as long as women remain, on
the one hand, the sole custodians of infantile identify, and on the other, on the margin of
social power” (351).

While Roberta Rubenstein’s article “House Mothers and Haunted Daughters:
Shirley Jackson and Female Gothic” focuses primarily on Jackson’s work, there is much
to gain when looking at the Female Gothic through the analysis she provides. She
examines the relationship between heroines and “the tensions between ‘mother/self’ and
between ‘home/lost’ to make the overt connection to the mother who becomes
interchangeable with the home. She continues to assert “Gothic narratives pivot upon
anxieties about self-hood and entrapment, represented through bizarre or exaggerated
events that may or may not be explained as manifestations of the (typically) female
central characters troubled imagination” (Rubenstein 311). Within the article is also a
focus on Kahane’s stance of the menacing gothic “un-dead” mother that the heroine must
confront (qtd in Rubenstein 311). As these women maintain, “Gothic genre are
elaborated in particular ways, notable through the central character’s troubled
identification with her good/bad/dead/mad mother whom she ambivalently seeks to
kill/merge with; and her imprisonment in a house that, mirroring her disturbed imaginings, expresses her ambivalent experience of entrapment and longing for protection" (Rubenstein 312). While many critics have adopted Kahane’s stance of the threatening mother within the (Female) Gothic, I maintain it is not necessarily the mothering character’s intention to do harm. Cynthia Murillo asserts in her article “The Spirit of Rebellion: The Transformative Power of the Ghostly Double in Gilman, Spofford, and Wharton,” “the ghostly doubles in these works serve less to represent a brief unleashing of libidinal impulses, as many feminist scholars attest, than a realistic portrayal of the New Woman, the triumphant alter-ego to the slowly fading “True Woman” at the fin de siècle” (Murillo 756). She illustrates how the women in Gothic texts have “life affirming potential, rather than the destructive qualities” (Murillo 756) in her article. I maintain that we must eschew the previously held opinion that women and their doubles in Gothic texts stand for little more than representations of unbridled sexuality. Consequently, we must adopt the positive view of the Gothic woman and even her double when examining the role of the servant-mother role in the work of James and Wharton. That positive mothering figure becomes a lens through which our heroine and/or servant/master may seek the truth. While the truth might have foreboding consequences, the mother figure becomes the protector by sharing or shielding the ugly and potentially harmful truth from those whom she serves and protects.

Rubenstein continues her affirmation of Kahane’s stance as she shares her views on maternal spaces as “the maternal blackness to which every Gothic heroine is fatefuly drawn [which encompasses] the mysteries of identity and the temptation to lose it by merging with a mother image who threatens all boundaries between self and other” (qtd
in Rubenstein 320). While there are some stories, like *The Haunting of Hill House*, where one could argue the mother image is consuming of those who enter the boundaries of the home, the stories of James and Wharton depict a mothering servant whose intention is not consumption of those females in the house. Rather, these mothering figures, though intimidating by their connection to the home, its secrets, and inherent dangers of moral transgressions, are helpful beings who try to shield and protect others in the house from the impending dangers and doom. While the “fear of self” is a central trope in most of Gothic literature, it is necessary to not assume this fear is a direct result of a monstrous mothering figure but instead a result of being confronted with truths the mothering figure is trying to save our heroines from—the truth these young heroines might not be capable of seeing without the help or shield of her “mother”.

**Mothering Figures in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw***

Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* depicts the confusion inherent in both the social and mothering role of the governess. While the governess’s role is to maintain order and morality for the benefit of those children in her keep, Miles and Flora, she struggles with the power and ability she has to do so. While many literary critics disparage the role of the governess in this tale and focus mainly on her possible sexually driven decisions, there is much more to consider about the governess’s actions that actually disrupt this commonly held belief of her as a whore figure. I contend readers must recognize the positive intentions of the governess to play the role of the substitute mother for Miles and Flora but because of her young age, lack of experience and social status, is ill-equipped to be the substitute mother. She has no other choice but to lean on
Mrs. Grose, a lower servant, who has age, experience and knowledge of (presumed) motherhood (she is a Mrs. after all) to help her make sense of her nebulously defined role of governess.

Many people, like critic E. Duncan Aswell in his article “Reflections of a Governess: Image and Distortion in *Turn of the Screw,*” focus very much on the instability of the governess’s mental state, and her intention to overcome the projected double of herself, Miss Jessel and ultimately evil. Aswell suggests, “The children have to be fully initiated into the evil she has discovered; salvation can only come from damnation. She thus takes it upon herself to play the devil and tempt Miles, so that she can then act the angel and rescue him” (58). While the governess does, in fact, concern herself about the status of the souls of those she cares for, I argue that the governess is not consciously being treacherous, rather, she is doing what she believes to be fit for a protective mother to do in order to protect who she deems as her own children. In addition to the examination of the mental state of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw,* other critics, including Stuart Burrows, has examined James’s text for issues and power inherent in the social class. In his article “The Place of the Servant” Burrows contends that James depicts the servant class because he is interested not necessarily the outsiders looking in at class structures [within a home] but rather the interplay between members of the same class. He contends that servants “come to understand that their own freedom depends on their success not simply in imagining what other people are thinking but actually in ventiloquizing these thoughts” (Burrows 75). Burrow’s article examines the notion of the governess’s role in contrast with other servants and the challenging task of “knowing one’s place” (qtd in Burrows 89). While both Aswell and Burrow examine the
position of the governess in James’s work, neither of them examine the essential position of governess as a mother-substitute to those in her care. Despite inherent social class issues and the mental stability of the governess in *Turn of the Screw*, the reader does not have a comprehensive picture of the governess’s actions without the examination of the governess trying to fulfill the role of the mother, despite hindrances she encounters, even if they are in the form of the ghosts of the former governess and valet.

It really is no surprise that the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* does not have a name. Because of her social class, which lands her above that of a mere house servant but only with the slightly higher powers of a single governess, she is not in the married social position that would enable her to be a mother. As Walton suggests, “Governesses were single women employed to act as mother substitutes. Frequently lower class, or at least lower than the class of their employers, these servants were a source of controversy due to the problematic nature of single women and their sexuality” (306). *The Turn of the Screw* reflects this historically oblique position in the reflection of options for the new governess: she can become the Madonna or the whore figure, or even less appealing, the madwoman. Walton proposes much of the governess’s struggles are inherent in the models she is presented with at Bly, “The other women the governess encounters at Bly signify the traditional spaces inhabited by women. The governess is confronted with the responsible mother figure in Mrs. Grose, and the sexually fraught whore figure in Miss Jessel, the previous governess. Not surprisingly, it is Mrs. Grose, the ‘proper’ feminine character, who alerts the governess to the dangers inherent in rejecting a patriarchally inscribed role by telling the story of Miss Jessel” (Walton 311). As a result of her “options” of female roles possible at Bly, the governess spends much of her time
attempting to exert ownership over Miles and Flora, as if they are hers. This is because they are the only chance she has at being a mother, which would enable her to align herself with the proper mother figure role she would like to fulfill. Despite her best efforts at “protecting” the children from the ghosts no one else seems to see, she is unfit and unable to fulfill the role of the mother she is trying to assume. She often looks to Mrs. Grose who is more of the maternal mothering figure, despite her lower social class, for guidance on how to proceed with the children and problems she is encountering at Bly. While our governess is the reason for the upset she causes Flora through her antics and is assumed to be at least partially complicit in Miles’ death, she is not a monster driven by her own neurosis; rather, she is a young woman trying to mother the children in her keep the best way she knows how. Unfortunately, she is not successful, but it is certainly not out of malice or strictly because of her supposed love for her absent master, which many critics would claim to be the case.

From the start of the novel, we are made aware that the parentless children have been placed in the hands of Mrs. Grose “belowstairs only” because she was the maid to the master’s mother, and thus, the reader can infer, was someone the family trusted. So while the maid could help in the interim absence of governess, a new governess would be needed for “supreme authority” to replace the lowly servant caring for the children (James 27). Mrs. Grose, though to the outsider is a common servant, is likened to a ghost for she is connected to the past of Bly, which provides her with even more knowledge of the home, those in it and its secrets, which empowers her above her mere status. She is also ghostlike in the sense that she can be the caretaker, but out of the view of anyone else above her own status. Bruce Robbins elucidates the historical hierarchy of those in
the upper-class when he explains, "Cooks, ponies, and gardeners are equal, leveled out as items on a list of Bly's possessions; none of these servants counts more than an animal. Servants, like ghosts, are something less than human beings" (336). Immediately the dramatic irony is apparent- the maid who is not fit in rank to openly raise the children ultimately becomes their safe haven when the governess, who higher in status than she, is unable to fulfill her mother-like duties. The children had a previous governess that Bly "had the misfortune to lose" and the reader learns through this description that she was honorable "till her death" (James 28).

The female servant in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, particularly that of Mrs. Grose is an empowered woman who both keeps order and acts as a mothering figure to those in the house but does so subversively. Though at first meeting, she appears to be nothing more than a maid in the household, she is truly part of the fabric of the household in which we see the action of the story. Mrs. Grose has a "liminal position in the house gives them [servants] a freedom of mobility that upper-class female characters do not feel and, in fact, envy. And yet, deprived of cultural authority and recognition, servants become ghosts, automatons, and conservative forces that keep the past alive" (Blackford 237). Mrs. Grose does assume the role of nurturer to the governess herself because of the mothering guidance and experience within Bly that she can provide for the fledgling governess.

The new governess meets Flora soon after her arrival and the description of her shows the seriousness with which the new governess takes her position. She describes Flora as, “so beatific as the radiant image of my little girl” and shares its impact on her ability to even sleep due to her excitement of her new position (Wharton 30). Note the
use of the governess’s pronoun—my—in relation to her new charge, indicating the earnestness she feels to her duty and the children at Bly. This is indicative of the social status, or lack thereof that women who took on the role of governess had. According to Robbins, “She who, as an upper servant, possesses almost nothing else but her responsibility to the children—little time of her own, no love, and hardly any life—comes back to “the chance of possessing” the children” (Robbins 343). While she is newly in charge of Flora she immediately takes possession of her and regards Flora as hers. She also recognizes the mother-like pleasure Mrs. Grose gains from the affection the governess has for Flora. James follows what the governess views as mutual admiration between she and Mrs. Grose with an admission by our narrator that “I think, is what I came for—to be carried away” (James 31). This is a poignant moment of dramatic irony because as the story unfolds, the governess does get carried away and though she does so in the attempt to protect “her” children, she fails as a mother though her intentions are in the right place. Her position as doting governess is reaffirmed by the blossoming relationship between she and Flora and she even shares “I had the fancy of our being almost as lost as a handful of passengers in a great drifting ship. Well, I was strangely at the helm” (James 33). This line works metaphorically and represents the misguidance she will ultimately give “her” children as she tries to steer them towards safety and away from moral and physical harm.

The governess, while well-intentioned, does not have the experience or understanding to fulfill the role of caretaker that she so desperately wants to do well. When confronted with the letter about Miles’ dismissal from school, she is at a loss as to what to do, so she reaches below her status to find the counsel of Mrs. Grose for “it
finally got so the better of me that I determined to open myself at least to Mrs. Grose” (James 33). Though Mrs. Grose is below the governess in status and power, it is her guidance and insight that ultimately help the nascent governess fulfill the mothering role she is responsible for undertaking. In another moment of dramatic irony, when Mrs. Grose and the governess are discussing how bad Miles is, the governess states “That he’s an injury to others” when describing why he was dismissed from school to Mrs. Grose, though she has no specific data to support such a claim. The irony hinges on her assumption of Miles being an injury to others when she, herself becomes an injury, or at least a liability to the children in her keep. She tries to prove her dedication to the children after her possibly misguided understanding of Miles by being overly demonstrative with Flora. One has to wonder: is her overly doting on the child a genuine act of mothering or is she trying to convince the child, the other servants, and even herself that she can impose and fulfill this idea of a mother through her governess-child relationship?

Mrs. Grose’s benevolent mothering of both the governess, and the children from afar, can be seen through the advice she gives to the governess in reference to her contacting the master about the supposed issues at Bly. Robbins suggests “When social station of the person you are addressing is at stake, there are severe limits on what can be said . . . For if there are things that the governess cannot say to Mrs. Grose because of the class difference between them, the story invites us to see that there are also things Mrs. Grose will not be able to say to the governess, and for the same reasons” (Robbins 337). There might be some who assume Mrs. Grose’s “guidance” of the governess might be a
result of her hoping she, like Miss Jessel will somehow leave Bly and leave the children once again in her keep.

But, that would be a short-sighted argument, for aside from the interim care of the children if the governess needs replacing, there is nothing for Mrs. Grose to gain from the new governess’s poor choices in reference to her employer. Mrs. Grose certainly goes beyond the limits of her status as she advises the governess, but only when it is sought out. Very much like Mrs. Blinder in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” in Wharton’s work, Mrs. Grose also lies by omission for the protection of the children and of the governess. When the governess continues to question Mrs. Grose about the dead Miss Jessel, she ends the conversation by stating “I must get to my work (James 36). This leads the reader to wonder what she is hiding, but she is not being passive-aggressive to the new governess, she is merely trying to protect her from a truth that can only concern someone in her position, much like a mother might do out of the best interest of the “child.”

Mrs. Grose contrasts with the new governess, for the maid in *Turn of the Screw* becomes synonymous with mother while the governess, who is supposed to take on the role of mother, is inexperienced and unfortunately becomes a source of anxiety in the household as she tries to be a good mother figure. This is a bit of an ironic concept, because in the framed narrative, our narrator Douglass reflects upon his own love for the governess who cared for his sister after her experience at Bly. Though he does paint her as a benevolent and loving young woman, he undermines his own attempts at representing a pure woman, “Although Douglass tries to mitigate the sexual connotations of the governess’s position, or in my terms, reduce their visibility, in fact, he draws attention to her attractions by admitting his own infatuation with her” (Walton
While the governess struggles against being viewed as the sexualized governess, especially as she learns more Miss Jessel and disdains her actions, in light of the framed narrative readers might be left to wonder if she did, in fact walk the fine line of the historically sexually "free" woman. This glimmer of a thought by the reader becomes compounded as the governess has a clear affinity for Miles, who later in the text becomes her primary focus of her care and concern even when both the children are, as she sees it, in a moral dilemma. The governess, however aware or unaware of her potential to be the sexualized governess/whore figure consciously tries to mimic and impose the concepts of a righteous and moral mother upon herself and in moments of weakness, she seeks the help of the model of motherhood, Mrs. Grose.

We continue to see Mrs. Grose, the maid-servant, placed in a role of motherly authority and power as the new governess asks a lot of questions about Miss Jessel, the past governess. Mrs. Grose entertains her questions but does not disclose and awful lot, for as the governess depicts her reaction to a question, Mrs. Grose, "turning her back on me was fortunately not, for my just preoccupations, a snub that could check the growth of our mutual esteem" (James 36). While the maid and governess do not necessarily have to work together, Mrs. Grose decides (for the best interest of the children) to stand by the governess and even goes as far as to elicit a warm relationship where the governess and she even "embraced like sisters" (James 37). This indicates much more than just a cordial working relationship, but rather an equal partnership in sorts where Mrs. Grose becomes the mothering over-seer to the new and learning governess.

After the governess sees Quint's ghost for the first time she encounters Mrs. Grose and projects her own fear onto her counterpart. We see this projection as she
shares, “This picture comes back to me in the general train—the impression, as I received it on my return, of the wide white paneled space . . . and of the good surprised look of my friend, which immediately told me she had missed me” (James 41). Here, the governess appears to be quite needy and hungry for attention and doting. Her attempt to ingratiate herself with Mrs. Grose is apparent through the way she continually addresses Mrs. Grose as her friend as a means to keep her close. The governess would have been well-aware of her status being above that of Mrs. Grose, but she is calculating in the sense that she is in need of someone to both care for her and help her care for her children, so she uses “friend” to maintain a camaraderie with her adoptive mother figure.

Through James’s narrative perspective, we are only privy to the thoughts of the anxious governess, so we may assume that her projection of insecurity and fear of the ghosts is a result of being at a loss for what to do about her position to protect the children. The governess’s anxiety is palpable as she shares:

It wasn’t so much yet that I was more nervous than I could bare it to be as that I was remarkably afraid of becoming so....The shock I had suffered must have sharpened all my senses; I felt sure, at the end of three days and as the result of mere closer attention, that I had not been practiced upon by the servants or made the object of any “game.” (James 42)

The governess’s certainty of the ghosts’ malevolent intentions starts to overcome her reason and her judgment. The governess is so intrinsically afraid of not being able to protect her “children” that she begins to project her own insecurities on other’s intentions,
even of the ghosts, as she shares, “On the spot there came to me the added shock of a
certitude that it was not for me he had come. He had come for someone else” (James 44).

Soon after the second visit from Quint, the governess encounters Mrs. Grose
much like she has the previous time. The governess does not recognize that her own
fears begin to impact those around her and assumes that others, like Mrs. Grose are
sharing the same fear as she. The governess recalls “She saw me as I saw my own
visitant; she pulled up short as I had done’ I have her something of the shock that I had
received. She turned white, and this made me ask myself if I had blanched as
much....But there’s only one I take space to mention. I wondered why she
should be scared” (James 45). She is acting like a bit of a madwoman so Mrs. Grose is reacting as
any mother or caregiver would- by reflecting her concern in a sense of empathy. This,
unfortunately for the governess is misinterpreted as Mrs. Grose’s fear of the ghosts as
well. The governess’s projection of her fear and insecurity continues to touch Mrs.
Grose. By the second visitation, Mrs. Grose is less likely to stand for what might very
well be the governess being irrational and since she knows the governess has grown to
rely on her insight, she is not willing to accept the projection of potentially dangerous
assumptions. We see the interaction between the two:

“Have you seen him before?”

“Yes—once. On the old tower.”

She could only look at me harder. “Do you mean he’s a stranger?”

“Oh very much!”

“Yet you didn’t tell me?”

“No—for reasons. But now that you’ve guessed—
Mrs. Grose’s round eyes encountered this charge. “Ah I haven’t guessed!” she said very simply. (James 47)

In an attempt to refocus the obviously fragile governess, Mrs. Grose refocuses her by suggesting they go to church in a manner that many parents employ to re-direct children who are upset and are verging on inconsolable. After the governess expresses her fear of Quint, Mrs. Grose is described by the governess:

Mrs. Grose’s large face showed me, at this, for the first time, the far-away glimmer of a consciousness more acute: I somehow made out in it the delayed dawn of an idea I myself had not given her and that was as yet quite obscure to me. It comes back to me that I thought instantly of this as something I could get from her; and I felt it to be connected with the desire she presently showed to know more. (James 47)

We see the concept of maid as the woman of power in the house while the governess continues to misinterpret the relationship between she and Mrs. Grose. The irony of the narrator’s words here is that she feels as though she is informing Mrs. Grose of the situation, Mrs. Grose is more in the know that she will ever be because she in essence, is part of the house. Additionally, Mrs. Grose is also mothering to the governess at the same time, reflecting the notion that a home itself is mothering shielding force. Although Mrs. Grose is lower in status than the governess, she is a necessary component to life in a place that might happen to be haunted because she has seen and experienced past experiences that are now coloring the present of the governess and the children.

The governess comes to realize that even though others in the home might not be experiencing the same things as she, as a means to protect her reputation and status,
chooses to confide only in Mrs. Grose and shield the others from her seemingly insane antics. She shares, “She herself had seen nothing, not the shadow of a shadow, and nobody in the house but the governess was in the governess’s plight; yet she accepted it without directly impugning my sanity the truth as I gave it to her...What was settled between us accordingly that night was that we thought we might bear things together; and I was not even sure that in spite of exemption it was she who had the best of the burden” (James 50). The partnership between the governess and Mrs. Grose becomes something that assuages the governess’s fears. While she does infer that Mrs. Grose is an equal by using words such as “together,” the truth of the matter is that as the story progresses, the governess becomes dependent on Mrs. Grose’s guidance and looks to her for motherly advice, though the governess behaves as if the governess should be happy to be partners with her in this pursuit.

At times, however, the governess is aware of the power Mrs. Grose has over the knowledge of the home. Priscilla Walton, in her essay ""He took no notice of her; he looked at me': Subjectivities and Sexualities in The Turn of the Screw" claims:

The other women the governess encounters at Bly signify the traditional spaces inhabited by women. The governess is confronted with the responsible mother figure in Mrs. Grose, and the sexually fraught whore figure in Miss Jessel, the previous governess. Not surprisingly, it is Mrs. Grose, the 'proper' feminine character, who alerts the governess of the dangers inherent in rejecting a patriarchally inscribed role by telling the story of Miss Jessel. (Walton 311)
While Walton makes a valid case about Mrs. Grose as the one maintaining, or at least trying to maintain morality and decency at Bly, this presents a moment of dramatic irony. We know this is her intention, yet the governess who never fully loses her paranoia of compromising her status by appearing as weak or fragile has her own idea as to why Mrs. Grose might be a bit tight-lipped. The governess states, "still haunted with the shadow of something she had not told me. I myself had kept back nothing, but there was a word Mrs. Grose had kept back. I was sure moreover by morning that this was not from a failure of frankness, but because on every side there were fears" (James 52). Instead of the governess admitting that she herself was fearful of the unknown, she suggests that Mrs. Grose must too be just as fearful, and inferentially, as weak as she, thus maintaining the balance of status and power at Bly.

The governess, as much as she is in charge of Flora and Miles' well-being, disrupts her role of protector as she includes the children in her antics as opposed to being a shield for them, even though she is not really sure what she should be shielding them from. Her inability to take on the role of the nurturing protector becomes clearer when she suggests “I was there to protect and defend the little creatures in the world the most bereaved and most loveable, the appeal of whose helplessness had suddenly become only too explicit, a deep constant ache of one’s own engaged affection. We were cut off, really together; we were united in our danger...I was a screen...The more I saw the less they would” (James 53). In adopting the children as part of the “we” despite her intentions to shield them from whatever danger she perceived, they become part of, not separate from the situation. She does, however recognize her failing ability to mother and seeks out Mrs. Grose’s motherly guidance whenever she is unsure of what her future
actions should consist of regarding Miles and Flora. As much as she is above Mrs. Grose’s position, she has no compunction seeking out her for guidance and reassurance with her reactions and future intentions. Mrs. Grose assumes the voice of reason when the governess encounters Miss Jessel. She asks for clarity of the governess’s ghost sightings “‘Tell me how you know’ my friend simply repeated...She once more took my hand in both her own, holding it as tight as if to fortify me against the increase of alarm I might draw from this disclosure. ‘They were both infamous,’ she finally said” (James 58). Again we see Mrs. Grose’s motherly affection as she tries to soften the blow of the truth when she discloses some of the truth to the governess. The action of holding her hands illustrates the strength she is trying to give to the harried governess as she helps bring her around to the truth in the softest way she can. The governess becomes more persistent because she can tell, and we the readers can infer, that Mrs. Grose most likely is at least aware of the possibility of the idea of the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel being at/returning to Bly. The governess pushes her “friend” when she begins to feel as if Mrs. Grose has the power of knowledge over her, “I scarce know what to call it—to invoke such further aid to intelligence as might spring from pushing my colleague fairly to the wall. She had told me, bit by bit, under pressure, a great deal; but a small shifty spot on the wrong side of it all still sometimes brushed my brow like the wing of a bat” (James 61). As much as the governess regards Mrs. Grose as her equal when it suits her in this bastardization of a sisterhood, she still distrusts her because she, in essence is both her model woman and competition.

The governess, despite her obsession with the ghosts reflects on how fondly the children regarded her. “They were at this period extravagantly and preternaturally fond of
me; which, after all, I could reflect, was not more than a graceful response in children perpetually bowed down over and hugged...They had never, I think, wanted to do so many things for their poor protectress” (James 65). The governess reflects on the impact of the doting she gives to the children which reinforces her status—she “bowed” to hug them—and is also a reminder that she too, it technically beneath them, which she is painfully aware of in hindsight of the “base menial” comment from Miles earlier in the text. This subtext of class and its impact on interactions between and among classes is recognized as the governess regards the stairs in which Miss Jessel’s ghost travels. While she was willing to run outside to chase Quint’s ghost outside, she does not follow the ghost of Miss Jessel downstairs (lowering herself literally and figuratively) at all. As she collects herself and returns to Flora, just as she had just felt the superiority over the ghost of Miss Jessel, even though they would be equals, Flora welcomes the governess back with a chide that snaps her back to her role of governess “‘You naughty where have you been?’ Instead of challenging her own irregularity I found myself arraigned and explaining” (James 69). The children’s awareness of governess as servant is jarring to the governess and drives her even further to at least try be more like their mother and protector rather than the hired help.

After Miles and Flora complete the plan to show the governess how bad he could be and flex their status muscles, (at this point she is not privy to the reality of Miles’ true colors yet) she again seeks Mrs. Grose out as her confidant:

I drew a great security in this particular from her mere smooth aspect.

There was nothing in her fresh face to bass on to others the least of my horrible confidences. She believed me, I was sure absolutely; if she hadn’t
I don’t know what would have become of me, for I couldn’t have borne the strain alone. But she was a magnificent monument to the blessing of a want of imagination, and if she could see in our little charges nothing but their beauty and amiability, their happiness and cleverness, she had no direct communication with the sources of my trouble. (James 72)

What is telling about this selection are a few subtleties that reaffirm the governess’s reliance on Mrs. Grose for help both emotionally and with her position. She is grateful that Mrs. Grose’s demeanor does not tip anyone else off in the house about the peculiar happenings that the governess is the only one privy to. In addition, this passage indicates that despite Mrs. Grose’s steady head with all of the governess’s quirks, the governess is yet paranoid that now Mrs. Grose might be part of the ghosts’ plot to go after the children and needs to reassure herself at their meetings that she is not. Another point worth noting is there is a shift in the use of pronoun that the governess uses in reference to the children. Up to this point, she refers to the children as hers but interestingly enough, at this juncture in the text, when speaking to Mrs. Grose she uses the word “our” when describing the children. Is she finally convinced enough that Mrs. Grose, despite her comforting and mothering actions, is actually on her side? Or, is she finally admitting to Mrs. Grose that the children are equally theirs because of all the wise advice she has been provided in regards to their keep? Robbins would suggest that since servants “don’t count as people” and there is a “confusion of ghosts and servants” that even though Mrs. Grose was below the governess, they were, in many ways, equal (Robbins 335). Despite the equality in inequality Robbins suggests historically, the governess purports that she is still in the power role in the friendship she forged with Mrs. Grose. She reflects:
I had made her a receptacle of lurid things, but there was an odd recognition of my superiority—my accomplishments and my-function—in her patience under my pain. She offered her mind to my disclosures as, had I wished to mix a witch's broth and proposed it with assurance, she would have held out a large clean saucepan. (James 73)

The governess admits her pain and her need for someone to assuage it but regards Mrs. Grose’s willingness to do so as something she should do because the governess, someone with more clout and resolve demanded it.

The governess attempts to get Mrs. Grose to be on her side of what she deems is the truth and reality when Mrs. Grose “slowly got up, and I scrupulously added: ‘Unless, of course, we can prevent’” to which she replied it was the uncle’s job, not theirs and certainly not hers to take on (James 77). According to Aswell, “Her ambiguous personal pronoun, ‘we,’ is revealing. It cannot refer to Mrs. Grose and herself and so can only point unconsciously to her collaboration with the other side of herself, acting as her wicked predecessor” (Aswell 61). While he offers this reading in his article to illustrate his point that governess, not the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel as the intruders at Bly it does not make full sense when the rest of the text is taken into account. Earlier in the text the governess evokes a similar collective pronoun to elicit the help of Mrs. Grose by using “our” to refer to the children and the suggested shared responsibility between them. Here, it would stand to reason that the “we” again is to suggest the alliance the governess so wants to maintain with Mrs. Grose to help herself achieve the role of the mother she is so desperately trying to force through her protection of the children, even if it is with consequence for both she and the children.
Mrs. Grose’s dedication to the children can be seen in the interaction when discussing the culpability of the uncle:

“The fault’s mine.” She had turned quite pale

“Well, you shan’t suffer,” I answered.

“The children shan’t!” she emphatically returned.

They continue to discuss how the uncle must intervene and Mrs. Grose is willing to step out of her boundaries for the mental well-being of the governess and for the sake of the children, only she is not literate, so she must leave it up to the governess.

As the ghosts permeate the governess’s perception of reality, she becomes more and more concerned with the loss of “her” children’s lives—and souls. We see her desperation “it made me drop on my knees beside the bed and seize once more the chance of possessing him” (James 95). In this interaction the governess outpours her fears “I just want you to help me to save you” (James 95) which thumbs its nose at the code with which she was to purport herself. It is possible to view this borderline obsession with Miles and his potential moral degeneration with the governess’s possible love for him—not love in the mothering sense, but rather in a sexualized manner. If we chose to acknowledge this passionate love the governess has for Miles, we then recognize her continual struggle to avoid the sexualized fate of Miss Jessel in her attempt to force the unnatural mothering role upon her potentially “immoral” thoughts and actions. After she riles Miles and is solely concerned with him, the governess finally thinks to Flora and does not get as remotely panicked with her initial inability to find her as she does Miles because she assumes she would be with Mrs. Grose. As the two women try to determine where Flora is, the governess falls into her own set of reasoning as to where Miles and
Flora must be. Perhaps the governess’s concern lies more in finding and saving Miles because she knows he has already dabbled in being “bad” where as Flora still remains pure and innocent. Her affinity for Miles and his safety might also be connected to the governess’s affection for the uncle, whom Miles is a direct line to and could be seen to her at least as a double of him. While this leads the reader to an uncomfortable Oedipal reading of the governess and Miles, it makes for the perfect metaphor, because Jocasta, Oedipus’ mother was well aware of her son’s transgressions (of which she too was complicit) and in an attempt to save him from the truth, does everything in her power to keep him safe and from the truth. In this same vein, since Flora doesn’t need to be protected from her past transgressions, because she hasn’t any, the governess is not nearly as concerned with her and is wiling to allow Mrs. Grose help her maintain her innocence because she is the pinnacle of female morality at Bly. When the governess doesn’t make sense to Mrs. Grose and is questioned, she reflects “the chain of my logic was ever too strong for her” (James 100). Mrs. Grose in what the reader might infer as her protection of the children from their own governess, starts to take on more of the mothering role beyond the mother of the governess and the governess reflects “I saw Flora’s face...the flicker had left it; but it strengthened the pang with which I at the moment envied Mrs. Grose the simplicity of her relation” (James 100). The governess is well aware of the complications she is having at being the children’s governess and becomes painfully cognizant of the distance she is creating between she and “her” children through her behavior that is ironically fueled by her intentions to protect herself from becoming that which she replaced by being an incredibly defensive mother.
Mrs. Grose goes into protective mother role to assuage the concerns Flora must have as she sees her governess react quite strangely to a ghost she cannot see:

Into this attitude Mrs. Grose immediately and violently entered, breaking, even while there pieced through my sense of ruin a prodigious private triumph, into breathless reassurance.

“She isn’t there, little lady, and nobody’s there—and you ever see nothing my sweet! How can poor Miss Jessel—when poor Miss Jessel’s dead and buried? We know, don’t we, love?”—and she appealed, blundering in, to the child. “’t’s all a mere mistake and a worry and a joke—and we’ll go home as fast as we can” (James 103)

As much as the governess wanted to ally herself with Mrs. Grose and her knowledge of Bly, she recognizes the competition between her inability to mother and the ease with which Mrs. Grose mothers. The governess’s anger over her own ineptitude results in jealousy and malice towards Flora and her relationship with Mrs. Grose. Flora goes from the poor child to “the wretched child” within a matter of moments when the governess loses control and scares her keep. Mrs. Grose is fortunately there to help care for Flora, but the governess sees it as a threat and decides she will leave soon. Her narration illustrates her loss of the child when she regards Mrs. Grose’s “happiest arrangements” with Flora in her keep (James 104). Even though the governess essentially brushes off her loss of Flora, she is fixed on saving Miles from Quint. “It was the very confidence that I might now defy him, as well as the positive certitude, buy this time, of the child’s unconsciousness, that made me go on” (James 117). The governess shares her perceived victory, “I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion; but at
the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped" (James 120). She has “saved” Miles from Quint and all the dangers he might represent, but this last action is a reflection of her inability to protect and mother. She has a false sense of what it means to mother, partially because she was a childless woman herself, and partially because she is young and inexperienced and is trying to do more to avoid the fate of the whore figure than to constructively be the loving mother-figure like Mrs. Grose. Mrs. Grose, however, because of her age and her experience, understands her position, yet her maternal instincts are such that enable her to save Flora from the governess’s actions and be the mother the governess tried so desperately to be.

**Mothering Figures and their Power in the Works of Edith Wharton**

Even though the protagonists in Edith Wharton’s “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” “All Souls” and Ethan Frome are all adults, unlike the children in James’s The Turn of the Screw, they too are all presently without an actual mother. The protagonists in the three aforementioned works of Wharton’s exemplify the intrinsic, benevolent influence of a motherly figure, and similarly to James’s The Turn of the Screw, exhibit the need for such motherly guidance from the servants, despite the protagonist’s age. In the two short stories, the role of mother/caretaker is assumed by the help, and in Ethan Frome, in the surprisingly stoic character of Zeena. Much of Edith Wharton’s work has been examined for its economic and class implications by authors such as Holly Blackford and Monika Elbert. Blackford contends that much of the struggle between the servant and upper class lies in the psychological impact and struggle between different parts of the “female
psyche” and the “vision of womanhood” that will win out (Blackford 235). She also contends that the relationship between servants is a contentious one for they compete for possession of households, a possession crucial to female authenticity and desire” (Blackford 234). While I am sure there were the occasional social climbers, I contend that the possession of the home was not the sole intention of the servant, but rather the care of the upper-class within the home. Monika Elbert argues in her article "The Transcendental Economy of Wharton’s Mansions” that “many of the pacts made between master/mistress and servant in Wharton’s gothic fiction center on duplicitous appearances and economic necessity” (Elbert). She continues to illustrate how Wharton, much like her Transcendentalist influences, is concerned about the binaries created by American materialism. Elbert goes on to explain how it ultimately colors relationships between classes as well as how the home and its technology can create horror.

In addition to the class and economic issues inherent in Blackford and Elbert’s work, there is extensive scholarship, especially by Gloria Erlich, that examines biographical elements of Wharton’s own privileged and servant-reliant upbringing. There are still others, including Claire Kahane who assert the mothers in Gothic works are menacing, selfish and monster-like figures who are determined to bring about the demise of their mistresses for their own self-gain. Though we cannot dismiss the economic motivation and subversive discussion of class and economic commentary, I assert the domestic servants and characters in Wharton’s work, though powerful, do not manipulate the mistresses and family members in their keep for social gain, but rather because they are taking on the role of the nurturing mother whose goal is protecting those within the realm of the home. While Kahane vilifies the power exerted by servants and
governesses and others who take on the role of care-taker in Wharton’s work, I will highlight the intrinsically mothering behavior and attitudes that paint them more as saints rather than the fiends they have been depicted as a result of readers’ concern of the lower class usurping power over the aristocracy.

Servants’ Power in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell”

Similar to the powerful roles of the governess and maid in Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw* is the power inherent in the maids in "The Lady’s Maid's Bell" and "All Souls," as well as the caretakers in the novella *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton. These maids, much like Mrs. Grose, have either an extensive knowledge of the history in the places they inhabit or the ability to see and acknowledge the ghosts and history of the house that the master might be blind. To outsiders, these maids seem like nothing more than ghostlike/transparent beings who benignly work around a house, but in reality, it is the maids' likeness to a ghost that enable them the power that helps them shape the life and perception of those they care for. In essence, it is the apparition-like and omniscient powers of the maids that give them the power over a household and all those who live there under their mothering care and watch.

Much like the servants in James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, the servants in "The Lady’s Maid's Bell" are part of the furniture of the home and are ghostlike in their abilities to come and go around the home freely, as if they had no master or mistress. We are left with the impression that Hartley, Mrs. Brympton’s maid will too, become learned in the ghost stories of the home and thus will have more knowledge that will empower her stability in the home, much like the mistress of the house. In "The Lady’s Maid's
Bell," Mrs. Brympton, the mistress, is more in need of companionship than Hartley, which places the power with the maid. Though almost surprising to Hartley, she is presented with a weak mistress who subconsciously suggests this opportunity for power in her new maid. This becomes evident as Wharton writes, "Mrs. Brympton was lying down in her bedroom . . . she was a delicate looking lady, but when she smiled I felt there was nothing I wouldn't do for her. She spoke very pleasantly, in a low voice asking me my name and age and so on, and if I had everything I wanted, and if I wasn’t afraid of feeling lonely in the country" (Wharton 15). While at first glance this interaction paints Hartley as a dedicated servant, Mrs. Brympton’s concerns for her servant’s needs and feeling of belonging, subvert her own power, and disrupts the expected servant/maid dichotomy. Despite this potential for the abuse with this “extra” power, Hartley does not abuse it but rather uses it to protect her mistress until she meets her end.

With power comes influence over others, and we see this notion as the female servants vie for ultimate power in the home, and most importantly over the mistress. Before Hartley begins to acclimate herself to her new surroundings, her soon-to-be mistress’ aunt, Mrs. Railton provides her with an introduction to her new job and hints at the possibility of having power above the status of simply a maid. Hartley learns, "Her former maid who died last spring, had been with her twenty years and worshipped the ground she walked on . . . And you’re the very woman I want for my niece: quiet, well-mannered, and educated above your station...She wants a maid that can be something of a companion: her last was, and I can’t say how she misses her" (Wharton 13). The suggestion of the maid being a companion, an equal, along with the acknowledgement
that her education places her above the lowly job as maid demonstrates the potential power Hartley possesses even before she steps foot in the home.

Within moments of Hartley’s arrival as the mistress’ new maid, she is confronted with a vision of a woman who is only visible to her, as the housemaid she is with does not acknowledge the presence of anyone other than Hartley. We are left to wonder whether the housemaid sees but does not acknowledge the ghostlike figure or whether Hartley, by virtue of her new assignment as the mistress’ maid is the only one privy to the spectral figure. As they pass the open door of what we later find out is Emma’s (the previously beloved servant of Mrs. Brympton) old room, the housemaid reacts quite strongly to the door being open. With this vehement reaction of the housemaid comes both the reader and Hartley’s suspicious of the truth in regards to the pale woman we have encountered. As Holly Blackford would assert, "servants refuse to allow female newcomers authority in the houses they serve" (Blackford 233). While this might seem to be the case thus far for Hartley, this interaction provides us with beyond a gender driven power struggle between the old versus new. This moment forces us to take pause and think about the power the housemaid has had so far in shaping Hartley’s concept of truth and reality in the home, so we can only infer this same shaping of reality is something the servants and maids have the power, insight and flexibility to exert among others beyond their station.

In addition to Agnes’ ability to shape Hartley’s perception of truth, Mrs. Blinder too helps Hartley acclimate to the home. Mrs. Blinder’s name alone connotes some kind of dishonesty, or perhaps lying by omission. Though typically putting “blinders” on someone is deemed as dishonest, in the case of Mrs. Blinder, the servant who has spent
the most time in the home, putting blinders on Hartley is purely for her own well-being and good. When she is questioned about the lack of a sewing room as well as the empty room across from her bedroom, Mrs. Blinder shares that the room has been closed since Emma’s death because “My mistress loved her like a sister” (Wharton 17). Before Hartley can ask any additional questions of Mrs. Blinder, she quickly absconds as she shares “I’m no great hand at describing...and I believe my pastry’s rising” (Wharton 17).

The servants’ power in the home is also fueled by what they are privy to see and ultimately deduce from what they experience. Most of those at the home recognize the brutish power of Mr. Brympton and because of that, dismiss the friendship and visits that take place between Mrs. Brympton and Mr. Ranford. Hartley explains an interaction with Mr. Ranford, in contrast to the grumbling, drinking Mr. Brympton, when she shares “I thought him a rather melancholy-looking till I saw his smile, which had a kind of surprise in it, like the first warm day in spring” (Wharton 18-19). Because the home has been described as cold and dark, the “first warm day” becomes indicative of the warmth and happiness one has upon the ending of the cold season, so thus Mr. Ranford becomes analogous to the warmth, light and happiness he brings as an outsider to the Brympton home. The reader can infer there might be a relationship between Mrs. Brympton and Mr. Ranford, for Mr. Ranford is seen most often when Mr. Brympton is not at the home. Due to Mr. Ranford’s gentile manner, however, the servants, who could very easily intimate something amiss to the master of the house, chose not to use their influence to interrupt the meetings that provide their mistress with joy and companionship. Mr. Ranford becomes the opposite to Mr. Brympton’s brutality through his interest in spending time with Mrs. Brympton in the afternoon, “he would read aloud to Mrs.
Brympton by the hour, in the big dark library where she sat in the winter afternoons” (Wharton 19). Mr. Ranford’s home also becomes a symbol of happiness for Hartley because it becomes synonymous with her ability to leave the confines of the dark gloomy house and lift her spirits. The created trips and errands, though slightly beneficial to the mistress, are indicative of the concern and care for which Mrs. Brympton had for her own servants well-being and her awareness that the outside could help cure that which was festering within the home. Perhaps this is another reason both she and her servants welcome the influence of company of Mr. Ranford.

Though “only” a servant, we infer the power Hartley has as a single, autonomous person as she recognizes the powerlessness of many other women, particularly her mistress. She shares, “I met him coming up the stairs in such a state that I turned sick to think of what some ladies have to endure and hold their tongues about” (Wharton 19). Even though we have not witnessed Hartley being outspoken, through this comment of hers, we understand she is the embodiment of an empowered woman, which foreshadows her ability to protect her mistress from those things she can not protect herself from alone. Unfortunately, those things that infect the mistress’ demeanor also color the tone of the home itself and all those working in it. Hartley feels relief when she travels out of the home, but the home’s negative energy is so palpable that Mrs. Blinder is relieved at Hartley’s arrival home because “I can’t a-bear to have madam left alone even for a day” (Wharton 21). As Hartley tries to acclimate herself to her new home, she begins to question the influence of the house over those in it and wonders why the maids always seem to leave.
Upon the first time Mrs. Brympton rings Hartley's bell, Hartley begins to become aware of the secrets of the home, which will ultimately give her the power she needs to protect her mistress from those in it. While Hartley sees the bell “still quivering,” she starts dressing and hears the feet of what she assumes is a “woman’s step” heading to her mistress’ room. When she reaches the room she is strangely engaged in commentary with Mr. Brympton as he asks “How many of your are there, in God’s name?” possibly suggesting that someone—like the ghost of Emma—may have reached the room first (Wharton 24). As Hartley reaches her mistress, she is confused and refers to her maid as Emma. Once she is corrected, Mrs. Brympton simply dismisses her.

As a result of the odd happenings in the home, Hartley begins to jump to conclusions about her mistress, purely based on her empirical knowledge and experiences. When asked to go fetch a prescription, she shares “I began to wonder if the poor lady was weary of her life, and had come to the mad resolve of ending it” (Wharton 25). While there is not much to support this opinion just yet, this becomes a moment of dramatic irony because Hartley’s position and experience with Mrs. Brympton has lead her to deduce that Mrs. Brympton’s life is perhaps in danger and thus shows the power she has to perhaps intervene if she chooses to act on this impulse. While at this juncture in the story Hartley is not reassured of the inklings she is having, she does, however, think to turn to the other maids in the home, not the mistress, to clear up the questions she has about the mistress. She shares, “I thought of speaking to Mrs. Blinder or to Mr. Wace, the only two in the house who appeared to have any inkling of what was going on, but I had a feeling that if I questioned them they would deny everything, and that I might learn more by holding my tongue and keeping my eyes open” (Wharton 27). Hartley
makes a conscious decision to distract herself by returning to sewing on a machine that had not been used since Emma’s death “And suddenly, I remembered the pale woman in the passage” (Wharton 27). Here we see the appearance of Emma when Hartley finds herself confused about the well being of her mistress. While some might read this interjection of the ghost as a menacing, thwarting action by the previous servant in an attempt to keep Hartley from serving the mistress to her best potential, it should be viewed as an act of benevolence. Just like Emma’s appearance and attempt to help Hartley make sense of the Mr. Ranford’s role in Mrs. Brympton’s possible danger, here she appears to help guide Hartley to the knowledge and understanding that will help the living maid save Mrs. Brympton.

When Hartley later questions Mrs. Blinder about Emma directly, Mrs. Blinder adopts the same avoidant behavior to avoid sharing the truth with Hartley. While this seems callous and unfair, the maids in the home help those who are newcomers to steer clear of truths that will do nothing but frighten and disrupt the working dynamic of the home. It is very obvious Mrs. Blinder cares for Mrs. Brympton’s well-being, so her lying by omission is her way of keeping Hartley there caring for the mistress. By keeping Hartley, Mrs. Blinder can at least try to ensure that Mrs. Brympton is safe. Mrs. Blinder capitalizes on Hartley’s acceptance of her lack of details because she understands the dynamic inherent in the Mrs. Brympton/servant dynamic and knows Mrs. Brympton becomes reliant on her mistress. Hartley becomes aware of the dependence Mrs. Brympton has on her, like a child depends on a mother, and instead of capitalizing on it by abusing her power, she accepts her mothering role of protection despite her misgivings for her own well-being. She shares “Whether is was compassion for my mistress, who
had grown more and more dependent on me, or an unwillingness to try a new place, or
some other feeling that I couldn’t put a name to, I lingered on as if spellbound, though
every night was dreadful to me, and the days but little better “ (Wharton 29). Hartley
continues to internalize and concern herself with the emotional well being of her mistress
and views her as an extension of herself. When she shares “I don’t know if it was
because of my being in better spirits, but I fancied Mrs. Brumpton looked better too, and
seemed more cheerful in her manner” it becomes clear that there is a reciprocity between
the servant and mistress (Wharton 30). Hartley is in control of how she aids her mistress
and as a result, is a very mother-like figure in the sense she adopts her mistress’ feelings
as a reflection of her own behavior and actions.

Hartley is shaken as she encounters Emma Saxon’s ghost and in an attempt to
understand all that she has been sheltered from, decides to follow her. Interestingly
enough, Hartley pauses just long enough to grab an old shawl of Mrs. Blinder’s before
she proceeds to follow the ghost. Though this small action seems little more than plot-
based, it is indicative of the protection and comfort Mrs. Blinder has provided Hartley in
her new position in the home, just as the shawl will protect Hartley from the harshness of
the elements outside the home. While she follows Emma through snow all the way to
Mr. Ranford’s home, because she does not directly question Emma, she is left to infer
what she was trying to communicate. Hartley shares “A sense of helplessness came over
me. She was gone, and I had not been able to guess what she wanted” (Wharton 32).

Here, we have another subtle reference to power in regards to the maids. While Hartley
and the late Emma have power in their home, when out of their sphere, they are literally
left with no voice and no ability to demand information from another, even if it is for the
well being of another. After this encounter with the ghost of Emma, the reader is left to
wonder why she, the protective spirit, would lead the live and protection-worthy servant
to Mr. Ranford’s home. Was is to make Hartley aware of the threat Mr. Ranford posed to
Mr. Brympton so she may intercede and protect her mistress? While Hartley becomes
distressed by her lack of understanding through Emma’s leading her to Mr. Ranford, this
serves as foreshadowing to Emma’s need to intercede with the living and “save” Mrs.
Brympton, for Hartley, though well-intentioned, does not fully understand the
implications of Mrs. Brympton’s combative relationship with her husband and thus is
unable to save her—but Emma is.

Once Hartley returns to the home later that night, she has another encounter with
the ringing of the bell. Despite her seeing Emma “peering dreadfully down into the
darkness” (Wharton 33) she runs to Mrs. Brympton’s room only to find out that she had
not rung the bell, but she is a bit faint and she suspects Mr. Brympton is in the house.
When Mr. Brympton comes to his wife’s room and is disinterested in her circumstances,
Hartley adopts the role of a mother and finds her voice to speak up to the man of the
house as she asks “are you mad? What are you doing?” (Wharton 34). She is dissatisfied
with his nonchalant response so she audaciously grabs him and states “for pity’s sake
look at your wife” (Wharton 34). Despite Hartley’s insistence, Mr. Brympton tries to
shake her off, but in dismissing Hartley, he winds up directly encountering the ghost of
Emma Saxon. It’s necessary to look not only as Mr. Brympton as the possible
perpetrator for Emma’s death, but also at Emma as a guardian for the new maid Hartley.
Emma’s actions and intervention helped Hartley protect Mrs. Brympton not from her own
actual ailments, but from the brutality of her husband. It is in this way essential to
acknowledge the success of Hartley and Emma in protecting their mistress like a mother would.

**Servants’ Mothering Power in “All Souls”**

Just like Mrs. Brympton in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” Sara Clayburn, our protagonist in "All Souls" is a grown woman who at the start of the text is under the impression she is in charge of her home. Though both Mrs. Brympton and Sara ‘run’ their homes, they both operate like children who rely on their servants to act as their mothers. These servant-mothers meet their mistress’ needs and protect them from unsavory truths within their homes. Little does Sara understand that her maid, Agnes, truly runs the house and holds all the power. Sara winds up falling and hurting herself, and upon her awaking the next morning, she finds herself alone, and as Kathy Fedorko in her chapter "Surviving the Abyss and Revising Gender Roles" states, "in this case to become aware is to feel the terror of ‘sinking back wholly into the helplessness of infancy,’ to be overwhelmed by rather than learn from the primal maternal power, because one has never completely separated from it" (163). Sara's haughtiness about her position in her household mirrors that of the new governess in *Turn of the Screw*—both females were under the impression that the other maids in their respective homes needed *their* company, when in essence, it is the power and the comfort that the maids offer to the mistress and the governess that truly are necessary not just for pleasantries, but for survival. Fedorko continues, "Sara scoffingly denies such a possibility, given that she had her old servants to keep her company. Her apparent unwillingness to acknowledge the loneliness of Whitegates portends her lack of awareness about living life alone, without
servants, without the outward fulfillers of life's needs who substitute for self-nurturing" (159). Sara's insistence that she needs only her servants only solidifies the power that they have in her life. In an attempt to ignore the true power the servants in Sara's home have, and thus her lack of power, she chooses to regard them as companions while she remains the mistress of the house. This question of 'who really holds the power?' is brought to light as we read Wharton's narration that, "luckily, however, Sara Clayburn had inherited from her mother-on-law two or three old stand-bys who seemed as much a part of the family tradition as the roof they lived under; and I never heard of her having any trouble in her domestic arrangements" (277). Here we see that like in *Turn of the Screw* the maid is viewed as a household figure, more of chattel than that of a human being. Agnes' ability to understand and anticipate the needs of her mistress mirrors that of a mother who can assess the needs of a child almost immediately. While Agnes is described as "the dour old Scotch maid" she is also portrayed as someone "who knew exactly what to do" when Sara hurts herself outside (Wharton 279). While the choice of dour initially suggests a gloomy, stern individual, Agnes does much to ensure her mistress is comfortable and cared for.

Sara operates under the guise that she is in charge, but because she views these servants in this duplicitous manner as house fixtures and companions, when she is seemingly alone in the house once she is injured, she feels even more abandoned and helpless, for she is without friends AND without the mothering help she is so used to. Fedorko elucidates this complication as she points out "The narrator's comments that Sara had... also prepare us for Sara's inevitability unsettling realization that her servants are animate individuals, not inherited pieces of property whose only purpose is to service her
Santo's helplessness and realization that she is dependent on her servants mirrors Blackford's concept that "the eyes of the housekeepers, in the Gothic, becomes objects of horror, but they double for the heroine's eyes upon herself, scrutinizing the impossible task of having authority in the estate setting" (245). Ironcally, previous to Sara being "abandoned", she refers to Agnes as an "Obstinate old goose" when Agnes tries to insist that she leaves food and drink behind for Sara 'just in case' (Wharton 280). Sara, like a child who is annoyed by a doting mother, still secretly appreciates Agnes' fussing over her, as indicated by the omniscient narration “rather touched by the old woman’s insistence” (Wharton 280). Agnes' intrinsic power over the house and over Sara becomes evident in hindsight, for Agnes tries to leave behind is what Sara ultimately wants and needs—as if as Sara's maid, Agnes, can and does anticipate the happenings of the house and the needs of those around them—particularly those in their charge almost in a supernatural fashion.

Sara’s reliance on the mother-like Agnes continues to be seen in her awaiting the servants the morning after her accident. We learn that she is not enjoying the quiet of her home, but rather, “she lay still and strained her ears for the first steps of the servants” (Wharton 280). Her dependence on those around her, especially in this debilitated stance reinforces the reliance with which the aristocracy leaned on those ‘beneath’ them. Her fanciful thoughts of the furniture moving about at night amongst her but coming back to order also highlight her thought process of the power Agnes, not she, has over her home. She thinks, “It knows Agnes is coming, and it’s afraid” (Wharton 281) which transparently indicates the power the mistress recognizes and allows in her home because the level of care suits her needs. When she becomes anxious when the electricity is out
and she cannot seem to reach anyone by phone, we understand even more Sara’s dislike for quiet. The narration illustrates Sara’s being unnerved by the silence through the lines “Silence—more silence! It seemed to be piling itself up like the snow on the roof of the gutters. Silence. How many people that she knew had any idea what silence was—and how loud it sounded when you really listened to it” (Wharton 283). It is presumable that Sara, along with others in similar positions in similar households, fill their lives with those who work for them. Sara has not filled the house with the noise of blood relatives or friends, but rather relies on the normal sounds of her servants working about the house. These servants and their power are not a threat to Sara’s power, like many Gothic literary critics assert, but are a welcome and needed part of the aristocratic home—something those in charge become well aware of in their absence.

Sara’s fear of abandonment from her servant-mother becomes palpable as she hobbles through her home, against doctor’s orders to seek out Agnes, and if need be, at least another servant who can fill her stead in the time-being. Because Sara does not want to acknowledge her potential abandonment by her “mother”, she creates scenarios about how and why Agnes might be missing, “Perhaps one of the men at the garage…Yes—that must be the explanation…Yet how much it left unexplained” (Wharton 285). Even as she goes through the home, she knocks on doors as opposed to barging in, indicating the common courtesy Sara has for those who work for her, despite her right in a situation such as this to barge in and out of rooms because it is her place—or so she thinks. Despite the suggested equality between Sara and her servants, she does not, however choose to use the back stairs, despite their convenient proximity to where she is at the current moment. She opts to take a longer journey to travel down the front
stair, and the narrator shares “she did not know why she did this; but she felt that at the moment she was past reasoning and better obey her instinct” (Wharton 286). This decision could be read as Sara’s attempt at an affirmation of her waning power over the empty household despite what is described as her admittance of being “utterly alone in her own roof” (Wharton 288). The absolute nature of the word “utterly” in the line above indicates the sadness in her understanding of acceptance of her seemed abandonment.

After her tip-toeing about her house, Sara discovers the wireless in the kitchen and the all-too perfect order left behind by those working in the home. She comes to remember:

> Agnes, on leaving the evening before, had refused to carry away the tray with the tea and sandwiches, and she fell on them with a sudden hunger. She recalled also noticing that a flask of brandy had been put beside the thermos, and being vaguely surprised. Agnes’ departure, then, had been deliberately planned, and she had known her mistress, who never touched spirits, might have need of a stimulant before she returned. Mrs. Clayburn poured some of the brandy into her tea, and swallowed it greedily (Wharton 291).

There are two interesting things worth examining in this passage. First of all, the admittance that Agnes has deliberately planned on leaving Sara is not reflected on in any negatively emotive way—rather, she falls into a very practical reflection of this fact and eats—not with disdain or anger, but with greedy relief. Also, it is interesting to note that in this passage, like most of the others when Sara is alone in her home, she is referred to as Mrs. Clayburn, in juxtaposition to Agnes and the servants who are acknowledged only by their first names. Could this be a reflection of the lost nature of the upper-class without servants or a way to highlight the irony in a Mrs.—a grown adult woman—being
alone and afraid in her own home because she is not in the company or proximity of her beloved mothering servant?

In "All Souls," though less so than in *Turn of the Screw*, we see the maid, in this case, Agnes' frustration with her mistress, suggesting that the maid is the mother and the keeper of those in the home. The narration leads us to believe we should vilify Agnes for her abandonment of Sara when she is speaking to the doctor and Sara. Agnes' surprise to the electricity being cut off is described as "masterly" to highlight the power she is exercising in manipulating the situation (Wharton 292). Even when Sara tries to cover up her vulnerability once she is again reunited with the doctor and her servants, Agnes' power is illustrated by her reaction to Sara's suggestion at neglect, "Agnes' sallow face flushed slightly, but only as if in indignation at an unjust charge" (Wharton 293). But as Fedorko explains, Sara's lack of power is exemplified because "such denial of vulnerability usually allows one 'to maintain an illusion of total control; the illusion that in exercising competence we can exert absolute power over everything that matters" (162). While Agnes seems to be in control of this situation it is more for the emotional welfare of her mistress than for the exertion of power for selfish purposes. Mrs. Clayburn in her physically unfit state "grew drowsy and understood that her mind was confused with fever" (Wharton 294). Had Sara been truly concerned about the malevolent nature of her servants, she might have been less likely to rest and feel calm upon their return, but her anxiety is assuaged by their attendance to her, just like a child would be comforted by the return of her mother. The narrator is surprised by her "authoritative cousin" not examining or pushing the issue of the strange occurrence, which took place the night of her cousin's supposed abandonment (Wharton 295). Sara's
acceptance of the events as something of her own making is a way for Sara to cope with the incredible reliance she has on her servants and her inherent fear of being abandoned by them, helpless. In graciously accepting the servants back into her daily life, she embraces the powerful motherly roles they play in her life.

The Manifestation of a Mother’s Power in *Ethan Frome*

The servants in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” and “All Souls” share similarities with Zeena from *Ethan Frome* because they all illustrate the power inherent in the mothering role and its influence on the actions and thoughts of those for whom they care. While their mothering actions may, at times, be misinterpreted as manipulation of those they care for, in closer examination, we see the altruistic intentions of their mothering actions.

Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*, like many other Gothic works employs the framed narrative to tell the story of Ethan Frome and his inability to leave Starkfield and the woman who embodies the cold, destructive weather, his wife. Because the unnamed narrator has pieced much of his story together from two members of the town of Starkfield (Harmon Gow and Mrs. Hale) as well as from a brief bit of time with Ethan himself, we are left to wonder if the vilified Zenobia, Ethan’s wife is really the ghostlike, haunting vampire she is painted as through our limited narration or if she is a misunderstood, misrepresented mothering figure. We are led to believe she is the monstrous wife/should-be caregiver to Ethan, but in reality perhaps we should look at her as a realistic mothering figure who is not haunting Ethan but rather protecting him from the dangers of challenging social conventions. As Nancy Chodorow argues ‘mother is not a noun, it’s a verb’” (qtd in Erlich 4). So, despite arguments to the contrary, Zeena
acts as a mother when there is a need—for Ethan’s mother, and ironically for Ethan and Mattie, despite the actions that were intended to land them far from Starkfield.

Because Ethan and Zeena’s relationship is not shared in a chronological fashion in the text, the first concept of Zeena in Ethan Frome is the notion that she is negative and sickly. Before we even meet her, we understand that she receives medication in the mail and is obsessed with her own ailments. Through Harmon Gow’s statements of Ethan’s situation, after the “smash-up” the reader is perhaps misled as to the lack of mothering capabilities of his wife, for as Harmon see is, “I guess it’s always Ethan done the caring” (Wharton 5). Many of those who examine Ethan Frome malign Zenobia, but upon closer examination of our unreliable narrator and some of the subtle descriptors of Ethan and Zeena’s character, it becomes apparent that Zeena is not the monstrous wife, but rather a mothering figure who might be realistic in her actions which seem callous, but who does not abandon those in her realm when they need care—even in light of Mattie’s role of the servant who acts more as a love figure to Ethan. Ethan is likened to Starkfield— the personified wintry hell where those who are “smart” escape. Ethan’s character is directly correlated to the stifling force of Starkfield, as our narrator tell us “He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface” (Wharton 8). While we have to question the reliability of our understanding of Ethan, Zeena and Mattie, because our story is pieced together by some short interactions between our narrator and what he has learned from Harmon Gow and Mrs. Hale, it is necessary to examine the roles of the woman to see if the juxtaposition between the warm, vibrant Mattie and the cold, angular Zeena is truly fair.
Mattie, unlike Ethan and Zeena is described (at least until the accident) as the antithesis of the Fromes. She is warm and vibrant which stands in stark contrast to her surroundings as well as those she has been brought in to care for. Ironically, it is the harsh winter that changes Mattie from the breath of summer air for Ethan into exactly what his wife is- cold and numbed by the harsh winters, just as he has been.

Despite Mattie’s liveliness, it is necessary to acknowledge her sole purpose for going to the Frome’s house was to care for Zeena and act as a maid to the Fromes. Interestingly enough, however, it is intimated in Ethan’s initial views that “She don’t look much on housework, but she ain’t a fretter anyhow” (Wharton 17). Mattie’s lack of ability in the housekeeping realm is overshadowed by our one-sided narrator who focuses on the warmth Mattie provides for Ethan rather than the sinister threat to Zeena and Ethan’s marriage. Through further narration we learn:

His wife had never shown any jealousy of Mattie, but of late she had grumbled increasingly over the house-work and found oblique ways of attracting attention to the girl’s inefficiency….Mattie had no natural turn for housekeeping, and her training had done nothing to remedy the defect. She was quick to learn, but forgetful and dreamy, and not disposed to take the matter seriously. (Wharton 18)

While we do not know for sure how Ethan behaved prior to Mattie’s arrival, his actions reflect his desire to keep the ill-equipped servant around by quietly helping her with her daily tasks. Though Mattie is the warmth in the home, she certainly is not fulfilling the role she was to fill. At one point, after Ethan secretly tried to scrub the floor Mattie should have cleaned herself, Zeena “surprised him at the churn and had turned away
silently, with one of her queer looks” (Wharton 19). It is interesting to note how Ethan does not go about these actions begrudgingly, rather, he does so to enable Mattie’s tenure in the Frome house because of the vivacity she brings.

Zenobia, in juxtaposition to Mattie, is likened to be ghost-like; she is often described as lifeless, cold, and grey. But, like many of the other servants in Wharton’s work, it is other’s miscalculation of this superficial gossamer-like being that enables her the ability to unsuspectingly behave and gather information that will help her maintain her household. The narrator shares “Once or twice in the past he had been faintly disquieted by Zenobia’s way of letting things happen without seeming to remark them, and then, weeks afterward, in a casual phrase, revealing that she had all along taken her notes and drawn her inference...Zeena herself, from an oppressive reality, had faded into insubstantial shade” (Wharton 20). This “insubstantial shade” is what gives Zenobia her power. Because few, including her husband, give her the credit of being an autonomous individual, many neglect the power she actually has over the house, its morality and the virtue of those in it. While she is likened by those who interact with her as a vampire-living off the vibrancy of others, she in fact is just painfully aware of the actions and intentions of those around her. Because there might be dishonesty in the heart of her husband, outsiders view her outward coldness as the cause for Ethan’s distance, not, unfortunately, the result of it.

When Ethan’s personal dismay at Mattie’s possible leaving with Denis Eady comes up in conversation, even Mattie admits that “You mean that Zeena—aint’ suited with me anymore? ... You know she hardly ever says anything, and sometimes I can see
she ain’t suited, and yet I don’t know why” (Wharton 25). This is ironic for she openly admits later in the text that she is not so good at the nurturing role she was to fill.

When Mattie and Ethan come home late one evening, they assume Zeena would have left the key under the mat because she should be asleep but then are disturbed that the key is not there because Zeena is waiting up for them. While the description of the home when Ethan and Mattie come home is “a deadly chill of a vault after the dry cold of night” (Wharton 27) it is Mattie’s duty to be there, warming the house to care for Zeena, not the other way around. Then, when Ethan asserts his desire to stay downstairs in the freezing home, Zeena uneasily responds with “You’ll ketch your death” (Wharton 28). While many may view this as Zeena’s attempt to needle at a suspicion of Ethan’s intentions, she is acting as a mother to him, albeit abrasively- the only way she really knows how to in a place that engenders the coldness of those animate and inanimate.

What is most significant when examining Zenobia in Ethan Frome as a nurturing woman rather than the self-serving villain she is often portrayed is the sense of duty with which Ethan held in high regard at the beginning of her stay. The narrator shares, “After the mortal silence of his long imprisonment Zeena’s volubility was music in his ears...she laughed at him for not knowing the simplest sick-bed duties and told him to ‘go right along out’ and leave her to see to things” (Wharton 35). This is in glaring contrast to the way Zeena is pervasively illustrated in the text. The “music” in her voice and her laughter very much mimic the qualities Ethan values in Mattie. Similarly, we learn that had it not been for his mother passing in the winter, he may not have married Zeena. Interestingly enough, had Mattie not appeared in the dead of the winter, would her vibrancy have seemed as compelling and contagious as it had to Ethan? It is also
important to note Zeena is at her best when she is caring for someone and acknowledged for her mothering role. Her reverting to the sickly role becomes a way in which she can captivate Ethan’s attention, for we learn that Zeena had wished to move from Starfield years before because she needed to be in a place that “was sufficiently aware of her” (Wharton 36). Though Zeena is incredibly aware of what is transpiring in her household, she is looking for a reciprocal sense of duty from her husband. We also know that Zeena began to adopt those sickly notions because Ethan ‘never listened’ now that she wasn’t actively caring for someone sick (Wharton 36).

Zeena’s cat seems to fill her stead, like a specter, and watches over Mattie and Ethan’s dinner in her absence, helping her maintain her motherly duty of maintaining virtue in her home. After the cat disrupts the meal by breaking the pickle-dish, Ethan tries to have Mattie assume the role of wife by having her literally sit in Zeena’s chair. But, Ethan’s reaction is not that of happiness, rather “As her young brown head detached itself against a patch-work cushion that habitually framed his wife’s gaunt countenance, Ethan had a momentary shock. It was almost as if the other face, the face of a superseded woman, had obliterated that of the intruder. After a moment, Mattie seemed to be affected by the same sense of constraint” (Wharton 44).

Here we see the notion of the home- this one associated with Zeena and the order she keeps, as there is a nod to the difference between inside and out- freedom and order, virtue and vice, much like the Shakespearean play on the freedom of the country and the constraints of the city. Ethan thinks about kissing Mattie when they are alone in the house, yet once he vocalizes his intimation of it Mattie is guarded by “her blush had set a flaming guard about her” (46). In Ethan’s thoughts he shares, “…when he had put his
arm around Mattie, she had not resisted. But that had been out-of-doors, under the open irresponsible night. Now, in the warm lamp lit room, with all its ancient implications of conformity and order, she seemed infinitely farther away from him and more unapproachable” (Wharton 46). Their hands touch and they share “an electric current” (Wharton 47) after they discuss Zeena’s displeasure with Mattie’s servant duties. Despite Zeena’s absence, her cat helps to foil the moment between the two would-be lovers by darting after a mouse and setting Zeena’s rocking chair to motion “and as a result of the sudden movement the empty chair had set up a spectral rocking” (Wharton 47). Ethan recognizes this as the only evening he and Mattie would have together and resignedly retires for the evening. So, despite the lackluster marriage between Zeena and Ethan, her power and influence still maintain order in the house, even in her absence. The next morning, despite the spoiled romantic dinner, Ethan finds himself hopeful. Here in the narration, however, we see a slight change in his behavior towards Mattie, almost as if to suggest she might assume Zeena’s position, for as breakfast is happening in the kitchen, he is “lounging back in his chair...and not so much as offering to help Mattie when she rose to clear away the dishes” (Wharton 49) despite our understanding of his previous help of her to ensure she stays and Zeena does not fire her.

Mattie’s inability to assume the mothering role is evident when Zeena returns to the Frome house and it is described as “cold and squalid in the rainy winter twilight” because of Mattie’s neglect of the household duties (Wharton 52). So, the original perception of the Frome house as cold and unwelcoming because of Zeena becomes complicated and that is only furthered by Wharton’s focus on the limited interaction we see between Zeena and the others, particularly at mealtime.
Meals are often viewed as a depiction of communion and connection between individuals, and upon Zeena’s return, she turns down supper with Zeena and Ethan because as to Zeena tells Ethan “I am a great deal sicker than you think” (Wharton 54). This statement of Zeena’s is quite telling in that she is well aware of her lack of health, but is reminding Ethan that he, and perhaps even Mattie, have not regarded her ailments with enough attention. Because we are privy to Ethan’s thoughts through the omniscient narrator, we see Ethan’s response “what if at last they were true” (Wharton 54). At this point it is hard to ignore Ethan’s hope to rid himself of Zeena’s presence in his life, and perhaps is at ease that he might not have to assert himself as an adult and make a choice about his marriage if Zeena might just die. But, as he misreads his wife’s needs he sees “she wanted sympathy, not consolation” (Wharton 55) when he tries to challenge the advice of her doctor. This goes back to the notion that Zeena as the dutiful wife and caregiver needed nothing more than Ethan’s recognition of her needs too. It was the physical ailments of his mother that brought he and Zeena together, and it is Zeena’s sickness that should inspire a mutual duty of Ethan to his wife. And, since Zeena’s doctor suggests she needs paid help, because Mattie cannot fulfill the mothering role to her, Ethan becomes defensive of his economic inability to care for his wife- the only care he really understands how to give. After he and Zeena’s conversation, she refuses dinner and stays upstairs even before they discuss the fate of Mattie.

Zeena’s role of the matriarch of the family is compounded as Ethan petitions for Mattie’s staying at the house. Ethan tries to use the potential impact on the townsfolk as they learn of Zenna’s coldness of turning away family to persuade her to keep Mattie. However, Zeena reinforces her knowledge of her home and the relationships within it as
she responds “I know well enough what they say of my having kep’ her here as long as I have” (Wharton 58). Though not definitive, we may infer Zeena’s understanding of the nature of the mutual interest between Mattie and Ethan and that it was her duty to eradicate such impropriety from her home and her marriage. Because the narration is limited omniscient, we are not privy to Zeena’s emotions and thoughts in reference to the possibility of her home becoming a place of ill repute and are unfairly lead to sympathize with Ethan as he broods that “She had taken everything else from him; and now she meant to take the one thing that made up for all the others” (Wharton 59). While it is easy to empathize with Ethan, we cannot take his inappropriate desire to keep his would-be lover over the morality that Zeena is imposing in the home she has been acting as mothering caregiver in one capacity or another for more than seven years.

Despite Zeena’s lack of communion with Ethan and Mattie at dinnertime, the would-be repeat of the previous night’s meal between Ethan and Mattie is impossible. Similarly to Zeena’s power to maintain morality even in her absence from the house, Ethan is unable to eat with Mattie that evening out of disgust. This inability on Ethan’s part to share in the meal with Mattie is indicative of their inability to consummate their relationship and acts as foreshadowing of their inevitable inability to be together in the future. This is due to the power Zeena has in the home even in her absence, despite the desperate kiss Mattie and Ethan share that was fueled by his anger with Zeena, and her control over their collective married life. Zeena’s omnipresence in the home inspires her to once again foil the immoral action in her kitchen by actually returning to the kitchen and eating. Mattie “nibbles” at her food but Ethan sat “not pretending to eat” and reinforce his relationship with his wife as well as thwarting the sexual role that Mattie
should not hold for Ethan because of her assigned role as the mothering caregiver in the home.

The fractured relationship between Zeena and Ethan is represented by the broken pickle dish—despite its being secreted, the spectral Zeena is very much aware of it being hidden away. One has to wonder why after all the non-use of an item, Zeena immediately goes to use it, as if her cat (who acts as a ghostly familiar) lead her to it once she returned home. While some may view Zeena’s reaction to the broken dish of “and now you’ve took from me the one I cared for most of all” (Wharton 63) as an overreaction to a piece of glass, it is necessary to consider that the dish was a wedding present. Also, the “one I cared for” is not necessarily the dish, but the dish is the catalyst that enables Zeena to openly admonish Mattie for the inappropriate advances she has made on her all-too-willing husband. Many would like to simply label Zeena’s reaction as a hysterical womanly outburst over something petty, but at closer examination we see her power as she reaffirms her power of duty over the household to maintain care and morality over those in the four walls.

Despite Zeena’s motherly influence of propriety in her own home, even as she seemingly rids her home of Mattie, in the sled outside, Ethan and Mattie can again touch—and hold hands without her watchful eye or presence. Mattie and Ethan reminisce. Then, Mattie and Ethan reflect on their morbid thoughts of loss; Ethan shares his thoughts that he would rather Mattie die than marry and Mattie shares that she wishes herself dead because no one had treated her as he has. In the dark, on the outskirts of town they freely kiss and express their emotional and physical affection for one another when they are well beyond the darkened Frome mill. Ultimately, they agree to coast to
their deaths together after the both agree they would rather die than go on living their lives apart.

These indiscretions, however, do not go without punishment. This is an important point to highlight because it juxtaposes the sympathy we are led to feel about Ethan’s lack of autonomy. Had Mattie and Ethan escaped Starkfield or successfully killed themselves, Zeena could be labeled the monster because she was a force that must be escaped. Interestingly, as Mattie and Ethan take what they think is their final coast, “suddenly his wife’s face, with twisted monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal, and he made an instinctive movement to brush it aside. The sled swerved in response . . . and then the elm” (Wharton 83). Here Zeena’s powerful influence of mother/dutiful caretaker prevents the immoral action of suicide, much to her husband’s chagrin. Because Mattie and Ethan live through their suicide attempt and must return not just to the Frome house, but to the care of the woman they tried to escape, reinforces Zeena’s positive, motherly role of the caretaker— and thus the story comes full-circle as Zeena returns to the role that attracted Ethan in the first place and ironically, Mattie becomes the Zeena Ethan grew to abhor. One of the last descriptions of Mattie “her face bloodless and shriveled, but amber-tinted, with swarthy shadows sharpening the nose and hollowing the temples…and her dark eyes had the bright witch-like stare” (Wharton 85) if read out of context, would seem as if it might be describing Zeena. Interestingly enough, this shell of a sickly woman is Mattie— the once vibrant young woman—and now Ethan is stuck “living” with the characteristics of a woman he previously tried to escape in the stead of the previously attractive qualities under the watchful eye and care of the woman he once tried to escape. He has no choice but to become the nurturing one
himself because he thwarted Zeena’s mothering guidance in his attempt to force the incapable Mattie to be the nurturer.

While Ethan and Zeena are still technically married at the end of the text, the trust and nurturing have been severed. The death of their marriage and life as they know it is foreshadowed in the text quite early on, for there is the repeated mention of the graveyard not being far off from Ethan’s home towards the start of the text. As Ethan approached his home with the narrator at the start of the text, we learn “They turned in at the gate and passed under the shaded knoll, where enclosed in a low fence, the Frome grave-stones slanted at crazy angles through the snow. Ethan looked at them curiously. For years that quiet company had mocked his restlessness, his desire for change and freedom. ‘We never got away—how should you?’ seemed to be written on every headstone” (Wharton 25-6). While the stifling nature of Starkfield is evident through most of the text, the proximity of the graveyard—full of Fromes—greets those who venture to the Frome house, suggesting that death and life are so closely mingled that one cannot address the living separate from the dead. As the reader recognizes at the end of the text, those left living in the Frome house are no more alive and cared for than those in the graveyard because of the rejection of the mothering forces of Zeena that tried to keep them alive.

Conclusion

Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* examines the limited roles available to women and illustrates the devoted mother figure of Mrs. Grose and the fledgling governess who collectively do their best to protect and mother the motherless children Miles and Flora. Though the governess eventually begins to exhibit signs of
insanity, it is her intention to emulate the positive mothering role Mrs. Grose has modeled for. Unfortunately, that ultimately results in her harming of "her" own children. It is also important to note the benevolent nature Mrs. Grose has for the governess and the guidance she provides someone also of the servant class, albeit slightly higher in status than she. Recognizing these points disrupts much of the previous readings of servant competition in Gothic literary criticism. I maintain the governess has been judged all too quickly for her ultimate actions of smothering Miles. Until her limited abilities as a mother figure and the limited roles available to her as a young, unmarried woman are acknowledged, can we recognize her final actions at Bly as her final attempt to be the protective mother she wants so desperately to be for Miles.

Similarly, upon close examination, the servants and mother figures in Edith Wharton’s “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” “All Souls,” and Ethan Frome are not the cold, calculating ghost-like figures they have been made out to be in much of the past scholarship on American Gothic literature. Wharton’s depiction of the relationship between Mrs. Brympton, Hartley and the dead Emma in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” leads us to understand the power servants have to positively influence one another in the attempt to protect the mistress of the home to their best ability. Emma’s ghost might seem daunting, and Agnes’ omissions might seem manipulative, but only when the reader examines the full scope of the household and their influence on Hartley do we see how the servants not only work together but also join forces for the ultimate protection of Mrs. Brympton, the woman they protect like a child from her brusque husband. Wharton’s “All Souls” also subversively illustrates the
mothering power of Agnes and her influence over Sara (Mrs.) Clayburn. The absence of a mother can truly be daunting, and though much of the story recounts the feelings of loss and abandonment Sara feels as she is alone, Agnes has not abandoned her and upon her return, Sara recognizes the comforts and the safety Agnes provides for her daily. Lastly, *Ethan Frome* illustrates Zeena, the stoic mothering figure, and the battle she faces within her home to encourage and inspire morality to Mattie, her hired help (and cousin) and her husband Ethan. Though Zeena has been hardened by the winters of Starkfield, just as her husband has been, she should be viewed as a mothering figure whose intention is to guide and maintain virtue within her marriage and impose it upon Ethan, rather than the monstrous mother figure many critics have chosen to depict her. Zeena has the power and influence to guide Ethan to the righteous path, and in her doing so, exerts her ultimate mothering power over both Ethan and Mattie by thwarting their immoral intentions. It is essential to recognize that despite Zeena’s right to shirk the care of Ethan and Mattie because of their intentions, she chooses to act upon her mothering instincts and care for them in their time of need.

According to many critics of American Gothic literature, servants and mother-substitute figures should be viewed as potentially dangerous social climbers and manipulators of the home in which they serve. On close analysis, however, it becomes clear that many of the female servants in James’s and Wharton’s Gothic literature's intentions are to protect those for whom they care, even in spite of the small abuses in power they exert over others to reach their ultimate goal: to mother.
Works Cited


