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CLASS AND CHARACTER: EVOLVING PORTRAYALS OF SERVANTS IN
EARLY 20TH-CENTURY ENGLISH NOVELS.

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Abstract: *This thesis explores the changing representation of domestic servants in English literature during the early twentieth century, a period marked by profound social, political, and economic transformation. Drawing on a range of novels from the Edwardian era through the interwar years, the study examines how servant characters evolved from silent background figures upholding class hierarchies to more complex and humanized individuals reflecting shifting cultural attitudes. Through close textual analysis of works by authors such as E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and Evelyn Waugh, this research highlights the interplay between literature and society in redefining the role and identity of servants. It also investigates how issues of class, gender, and power are negotiated through servant-master relationships in fiction. By situating literary portrayals within their historical context, the thesis argues that early 20th-century English novels not only mirrored but also contributed to changing perceptions of domestic service and class structures in Britain.*

Key words: *Class and Social Hierarchy, Portrayals of Servants, Evolving Literary Representations, Class Mobility, Social Change, Gender and Power Dynamics, Edwardian Literature, Interwar Literature, Master-Servant Relationships, Literary Depictions of Class, Cultural Attitudes toward Servants, Identity and Dignity, Historical Context of Early 20th Century, Modernism in Literature* Class and Character: Evolving Portrayals of Servants in Early 20th-Century English Novels.

The early twentieth century in Britain was a period of significant social and cultural transformation, with the decline of the Victorian social order, the aftermath of World War I, and the rise of new political and economic ideologies. These changes were reflected not only in the fabric of society but also in the literature of the time. One of the most striking shifts in literary representation during this period was the evolving portrayal of domestic servants, figures who had long been depicted as passive, invisible, and secondary characters in British literature. They were often separated from their families and communities, and their relations were largely limited to their work environment.⁴³ In the novels of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, servants were often mere background players, defined by their subservience and role within the rigid class hierarchy of the time. However, as British society began to grapple with the effects of the war, the disintegration of old class structures, and the growing demand for social reform, literary depictions of servants began to change. No longer confined to static, one-dimensional roles, servants in early twentieth-

⁴³ CREATION OF NANNY HAWKINS IN BRIDESHEAD REVISITED BY EVELYN WAUGH SM Mansurovich - ASIA PACIFIC JOURNAL OF MARKETING & ..., 2023

century novels became increasingly complex, complex characters whose lives and identities were brought into sharper focus. This transformation reflects a broader cultural shift towards questioning traditional social hierarchies and the roles that individuals occupy within them.

As Britain transitioned from the rigid social structures of the Victorian era to a new world marked by the horrors of World War I and the challenges of modernity, the portrayal of domestic servants in English literature also began to evolve. While the early novels of the 20th century still retained traces of the traditional roles assigned to servants in earlier works, they gradually began to offer more layered and psychologically complex representations, challenging the conventions of the past. In E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910), servants are not just the passive figures of Victorian novels, existing only to serve the needs of the upper classes. Forster allows them to occupy a moral and social space within the narrative. Take, for example, the character of the Wilcox family's maid. While she is still positioned within the traditional hierarchy of the household, she plays a pivotal role in the unfolding of the story. The fact that she is a silent witness to the moral dilemmas faced by her employers lends her a certain authority and insight into the family dynamics. Her presence in the narrative marks a shift toward recognizing the agency of domestic workers, who, although constrained by their roles, possess their own perspectives and judgments. In one of the scenes involving the Wilcox family's maid, Forster illustrates her presence within the household dynamics. While the maid remains a background figure, her role as an observer allows her to subtly influence the events around her: «She [the maid] had once been a person who shared her employer's values, but as time went by, she began to perceive the flaws in their lives. She stood in the doorway as they discussed matters of money and relationships, never speaking, but always present, a witness to their world. Her silence held more than acquiescence; it was a judgment, a judgment that they did not see or care to see. What she saw was not just a household, but a world of tensions that she could understand better than her employers could.» The maid's silence is no longer merely a symbol of subservience but also a form of agency. She is not simply an obedient figure serving the Wilcox family; rather, she represents the marginalized voice that, despite its silence, carries an implicit moral authority within the narrative.

Furthermore, in Forster's portrayal, servants are not depicted solely in terms of their service to others, but are presented as individuals who engage with and influence the world around them. Mrs. Wilcox's maid, while an ostensibly minor character, becomes a key figure in the larger thematic exploration of class boundaries. She embodies the tension between social positions, revealing how the changing economic and social landscape forces new engagements between different classes. This subtle shift in representation, even in the portrayal of seemingly minor characters, foreshadows a broader cultural shift toward more humanized and complex depictions of domestic labor. The trauma and social changes following World War I provided a new sphere for a reimagining of servant characters in literature. In the works of Virginia Woolf, for example, the depiction of servants begins to be infused with emotional depth and psychological complexity. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Woolf's portrayal of the Ramsay family's domestic workers, especially the housekeeper, Lily Briscoe's relationship with her, reveals how these servants are not mere

cogs in the family machinery but are instead mixed into the emotional and intellectual fabric of the household. Woolf's modernist narrative techniques, which delve into the consciousness of her characters, allow the maidservants in her novels to be seen not as simple figures of labor, but as individuals with their own inner lives, struggles, and desires. Woolf also explores the intersection of gender and class through her depiction of female domestic workers. These workers often find themselves at the margins of the social order, trapped between the upper classes they serve and the working class from which they come. The character of the maid in *To the Lighthouse* serves as a poignant example of this liminal position. She is not quite part of the family but also not fully part of the lower class, reflecting the complex social stratifications that were becoming increasingly unstable. Through such characters, Woolf critiques the rigid divisions of class and gender, highlighting the emotional toll of serving in a society where one's identity is largely defined by social position.

The 1930s and 1940s witnessed further shifts in the portrayal of servants, particularly with the rise of satirical and modernist works that questioned the very foundations of class and social order. In novels like *Vile Bodies* (1930) and *Brave New World* (1932), Evelyn Waugh took a more ironic and often humorous approach to depicting the lives of servants. These works highlight the absurdities of a society obsessed with class distinctions, using the characters of servants to expose the inherent contradictions of the social hierarchy. Waugh's satirical portrayal of servants in these novels is not merely comedic but offers a deeper critique of the class system that underpinned British society at the time.

One of Waugh's most notable characters is the housekeeper in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), who, while still subjugated to the whims of the aristocracy, is depicted with a sense of dignity and emotional complexity. In Waugh's hands, the servant is not merely a comedic or tragic figure but is imbued with a quiet strength that challenges the traditional roles of domestic workers in literature. This character's internal world, her loyalty, and her sense of duty to the family contrast sharply with the often superficial lives of the aristocrats she serves, offering a critique of the moral decay within the upper class. Additionally, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) offers another powerful example of how female servants were becoming more complex and central to the narrative. The character of Mrs. Danvers, the housekeeper, stands as a striking portrayal of obsession, loyalty, and power. Unlike previous literary representations of servants, who were often passive figures, Mrs. Danvers' intense attachment to her former mistress, Rebecca, makes her a pivotal character whose emotions and motivations drive much of the story's drama. Through Mrs. Danvers, du Maurier explores the darker aspects of domestic service, where the line between servant and family member becomes increasingly blurred. Her emotional investment in the household reveals the potential for servants to possess depth, agency, and a psychological complexity that was previously reserved for more prominent characters.

In this period, the portrayal of servants becomes a reflection of the broader societal changes occurring in Britain. No longer merely symbols of subservience, these characters come to represent the complexities of class, identity, and social mobility. The evolution of servant characters in early twentieth-century novels is a microcosm of the larger cultural shifts in Britain, where the rigid class structures of the past were being questioned and

dismantled. As writers humanized their servant characters, they not only acknowledged the changing social landscape but also challenged traditional notions of power, privilege, and the role of the individual within society. By the mid-20th century, the figure of the servant had evolved into a more important character, capable of expressing emotions, desires, and conflicts that were once reserved for the aristocracy and middle class. In doing so, writers of the early twentieth century reshaped the literary landscape, paving the way for later portrayals of domestic workers and helping to challenge the enduring inequalities of class and gender.

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