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The Physicality of Deviance in the Nancy Drew Mystery Series

Nancy Drew, an attractive girl of sixteen, was driving home along a country road in her new, dark-blue convertible. She had just delivered some legal papers for her father. 'It was sweet of Dad to give me this car for my birthday,' she thought. 'And it's fun to help him in his work.' Her father, Carson Drew, a well-known lawyer in their hometown of River Heights, frequently discussed puzzling aspects of cases with his blond, blue-eyed daughter.

--The Secret of the Old Clock

The early part of the twentieth century was a time of transformation and turmoil for young men and women in the United States, as the concept of adolescence took hold and spread. Scientists, social reformers, parents, and young people themselves were carefully constructing this life phase. Popular press and literature played no small role in this formation. Nancy Drew cruised onto the literary scene in 1930 with the publication of *The Secret of the Old Clock*, the first of fifty-six volumes in the mystery series. In the first few pages, Carolyn Keene introduces the reader to Nancy Drew and her trademark characteristics. The reader quickly learns several important things about Nancy: she is “a girl,” attractive, involved in her father’s work, and sixteen years old. Keene defines Nancy’s “attractiveness” further in describing her as “blond” and “blue-eyed.” The description also establishes Nancy’s class status: her father practices law in the suburban-sounding River Heights. Mr. Drew’s success as a lawyer is suggested not only through his reputation, but also by Nancy’s birthday gift: a brand-new convertible. Keene does not need to discuss Nancy’s race explicitly; her hair and eye color, as well as her social standing and surname, make clear that she is white. Nancy Drew may be the heroine of the adolescent mystery world, but her status as “normal” or “ideal” depends heavily upon a stark contrast against the villains in the series.

Racial and ethnic minorities almost exclusively play the role of “Other” in the Nancy Drew stories, starring as villains or relegated to roles as menial laborers. To showcase Nancy’s racial superiority, Keene emphasizes Nancy’s freedom by juxtaposing it against characters that have less than full freedom or personhood. In the Nancy Drew stories, immigrants or individuals of foreign descent are portrayed as dangerous, suspicious, untrustworthy, uneducated, and criminal. Language often acts as an indicator of a character’s status as white or non-white. Nash notes, “Keene uses dialogue to signal Otherness: non-whites and white ethnics usually speak in broad dialects, while Anglo villains reveal a contemptible lower-class status through their poor grammar.”¹ The descriptions of villains reflect a technique used in some filmmaking, where the heroes and heroines are always attractive and the villain is identifiable by his or her ugliness or deformity. This pattern seems particularly true for female characters, whose outward appearances are a clear depiction of their inner qualities. Aside from Nancy and her close friends, women in the series are relegated to menial work and are often poor, unattractive, and racialized.

While all non-white characters are working class in the stories, the depictions of racialized characters vary based on their gender. The two African American characters in the beginning of the series offer an interesting insight into the gendering of race. In *The Secret of the Old Clock*, an old African American man named Jeff Tucker plays a minor role as the drunk, lazy caretaker of the Tophams’ summer cottage at the lake. Jeff represents many of the stereotypes associated with black behavior and character. He stumbles upon Nancy, locked in the closet, and asks her what has happened to the place. It is clear that Jeff is intoxicated, and he shows little concern that his employers’ residence has been vandalized under his watch. When

¹ Nash, p. 53

Nancy questions him “indulgently” and “gently” as though she is speaking to a child, he expresses remorse:

I was just all fed up bein' a caih-taker and takin' caih o- all dis truck from mornin' till night. It ain't such an excitin' life, Miss, and while I's done sowed all mah wild oats, I still sows a little rye now and den. [...] I reckon you's right, Miss. Ole Jeff done gone and made a food of himself. I realize dat whatever I gets, I's got it a-comin'.'²

Although Nancy deals with Jeff somewhat kindly, she clearly views him as a child, one incapable of taking care of himself and his family, much less valuable property. Jeff's dialect indicates that he lacks intelligence and practicality; his age and employment remove any threat to Nancy, and she engages with him as she would a wayward child. This depiction supports the premises of recapitulation theory, which suggested that African American adults were equal in mental development to white children. Although the scene was clearly included for humor, the representation is nevertheless negative. Donnarae MacCann writes, “The author presents [Jeff Tucker] as a drunkard, a liar, a person who has constant run-ins with the police, an unreliable employee, and a fool [...] Every detail in the scenes with Jeff points to blacks as unruly, untrustworthy, dissipated, and mentally deficient.”³ The treatment of Jeff Tucker also reflects the arguments of many who worked to disenfranchise African American men in the years after the Fifteenth Amendment until the Voting Rights Act of 1965, when African Americans were considered hampered by enslavement and permanently unfit to participate fully as citizens.

We meet the second African American character in *The Hidden Staircase*. We learn that Nathan Gombet employs an African American woman as housekeeper or servant. As Gombet leads Carson Drew into his home, they pass through the kitchen where a fat, slovenly looking

² Keene, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, p. 141, 143

³ MacCann, p. 132-133

“colored woman” is working over the stove.⁴ Rosemary and Floretta, the elderly sisters whom Nancy helps in the story, offer an interesting description:

‘Nathan has always been queer,’ Floretta remarked. ‘As long as we can remember he has lived alone.’ ‘Not exactly alone,’ Rosemary broke in. ‘He keeps a servant. A colored woman who looks as though she were an ogre.’ ‘And birds,’ Floretta added. ‘His house fairly swarms with them.’⁵

Gombet, who has already been described in animalistic terms, “keeps” a woman just as he keeps birds. When Nancy sees the woman in Gombet’s house, she thinks, “I never saw a more surly-looking creature. She looks positively vicious!”⁶ Nancy expresses concern that the woman’s presence makes her journey into Gombet’s home “very dangerous.” Keene describes the woman further as old, fat, and awkward.⁷ She possesses many of the stereotypical black traits that we see in Jeff Tucker, particularly the broken dialect. Unlike Jeff Tucker, Keene portrays the “old negress,” as Nancy continually refers to her, as dangerous and violent. When Nancy and the local law officers arrive at Gombet’s to arrest him, she meets them with a sawed off shotgun, angrily threatening to “fill yo’ system full of lead.”⁸ She repeatedly warns the officers that she will fire, and only succumbs when Nancy and the sheriff surprise her from behind. Keene depicts both Jeff Tucker and the African American servant as uneducated, unkempt, and disorderly. However, I find it important to note the very different ways they are represented. Jeff, as an older servant, behaves childishly and intends no harm, like the “Sambo” imagery made popular in the 1930s and 1940s. The female servant in *The Hidden Staircase*, however, is ruthless, vicious, and belligerent – the “angry black woman” so often depicted in literature as a danger to society.

⁴ Keene, *The Hidden Staircase*, p. 108

⁵ Keene, *The Hidden Staircase*, p. 123

⁶ Keene, *The Hidden Staircase*, p. 132

⁷ Keene, *The Hidden Staircase*, p. 144

⁸ Keene, *The Hidden Staircase*, p. 185

Earlier I discussed Jeff Tucker and Nathan Gombet's servant, two African American characters that play substantial roles in the first two stories. A third African American appears in the third story, *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*. Although brief, this appearance cements the typical depiction of people of color in the series. Before Nancy interviews Mary Mason for the housekeeping position, she receives three other references from the employment agency. The first is an African American woman:

As [Nancy] opened the door her heart sank within her. It was indeed the colored woman sent by the employment agency, but a more unlikely housekeeper Nancy had never seen. She was dirty and slovenly in appearance and had an unpleasant way of shuffling her feet when she walked. Inviting her into the house, Nancy asked a few questions which the woman answered in unsatisfactory manner. She was unable to produce references of any description.⁹

As with the servant in *The Hidden Staircase*, we are not given a name for the woman, only a description of her unkempt appearance and unpleasant demeanor. Notably, the woman does not have proper references from prior employment, suggesting that she has failed to perform properly for other privileged white employers. Although the woman only occupies a brief space in the story, her negative description and Nancy's dismissal of her reinforces the suggestion that all African Americans with whom Nancy comes into contact with are inferior, dirty, poor, often rude, and sometimes dangerous.

The two other women whom Nancy interviews for the housekeeping position reflect common treatment of other non-white characters in the series. Nancy tells her father of her disappointment with "the colored woman" and promises she will find a replacement before the weekend, as Mr. Drew is expecting an important guest. She relates her troubles over dinner:

'This morning the agency sent me an Irish woman, but she was even worse than the one that came yesterday. She was the most unreasonable housekeeper I ever interviewed [...] After the Irish woman left I called another agency and they sent me a Scotch lassie. She

⁹ Keene, *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*, p. 16

looked promising, but I found she hadn't had a particle of experience and knew little about cooking. I'm completely discouraged.'¹⁰

Finding a replacement for Hannah Gruen proves particularly difficult, as a necessary balance of respectability and deference is needed. An African American woman who appears dirty and untrustworthy will never do. The Irish woman seems "unreasonable," and the Scottish woman lacks competence. Nancy finds her satisfactory housekeeper in Mrs. Sadie Carter, "an elderly woman who suited her in every way. Mrs. Carter was neat in appearance and thoroughly experienced. *Her references were of the best* and her demands not at all unreasonable."¹¹ (Emphasis added) Mrs. Carter's references seem particularly important; Keene's wording indicates that Mrs. Carter has worked for *the best*, presumably other white, wealthy River Heights residents. These valuable references, along with Mrs. Carter's appearance, assure Nancy that she has found a suitable housekeeper. Hannah Gruen and her temporary replacement, Mrs. Sadie Carter, exhibit all of the characteristics and behaviors of respectable, middle class white people, and they must do so in order to be employed in the Drew household. Only miserable misers like Nathan Gombet would employ the sort of women Nancy turns away. Although the potential housekeepers in *The Mystery at Lilac Inn* are not necessarily villains, they fall into the same category of "bad poor" – untrustworthy and dirty people who are pushed outside of Nancy's inner circle. The existence of the characters discussed in this chapter work to maintain Nancy's superior existence, as well as to reinforce popular notions about poor immigrant and African American people.

Overall, the conflation of racial minorities and working class individuals with deviance in the Nancy Drew series emphasizes the most important characteristic of the villains – they are

¹⁰ Keene, *The Mystery of Lilac Inn*, p. 17

¹¹ Keene, *The Mystery of Lilac Inn*, p. 24

dangerous. The threat of harm, particularly to the adolescent Nancy, enthralls young readers while frequently reminding them that being an adolescent – specifically an adolescent female – is a treacherous venture. Nancy’s physical body and sexual virtue are constantly under threat of attack, and her narrow escapes and near-failures act as a warning to young readers. Further, Nancy’s sleuthing and character traits also represent fears about adolescents as a potential menace to society themselves. Nancy frequently ventures into places she, as a white upper class girl from a respectable family, should not be. Nancy’s ease in moving between safe, acceptable spot and unfavorable locations is equally unsettling; she often lacks the supervision required to keep adolescents in their prescribed place. The threat, then, lies not only in the shadowy villains, but also in Nancy’s constant contact with them. Her risky interactions with treacherous villains and questionable characters also reflect the authors’ anxiety concerning race and class mixing, a certain danger to society if adolescents are left to their own will.

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