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# The Angel No Longer in the Household

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An interesting thing about human culture is this: the more things change, the more they stay the same. A bit cliché, but it happens to be true. For example, the Victorian ideal of womanhood is called the Household Angel, or occasionally household nun. A very nurturing, docile, selfless person, the Angel in the Household was all her name would suggest. This concept came about due to the problem presented by the ruthlessly competitive world of business, according to *Idols of Perversity*, by Bram Dijkstra. Complete focus on victory was necessary in order to move up the economic ladder, but what of the cost to the soul of the businessman. The solution was that the wife would act as caretaker of the husband's soul, refreshing it with her own purity. An interesting idea in my mind; crazy and easily leading to sexism, but still interesting. This idea was what caused the concept of the Household Angel, something pure enough to keep the businessman from going to hell for his ambition by being married to her. And if you think she was killed over the past century, which was filled with many cultural revolutions, you might want to take a look at various modern fiction, in which you would discover that she has instead transformed into the Guardian Angel, a being just as nurturing and, sometimes, selfless, if not as docile, and with a decidedly different purpose. In this essay, I will show just how the Household Angel appears in the late twentieth century, via the famous novel *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker, and how she has moved from Household to Guardian.

I would guess that everyone has heard of *Dracula*. It set the "rules" of the vampire, and remains a staple in literature courses to this day. In this ever-explored novel, one of the main characters shines, occasionally literally, as a perfect example of the ethereal, caring Household Angel: Mina Harker, the wife of one of the main heroes, who puts her considerable intellect to use in -- what else? -- the effort to destroy Dracula. Never showing anything like ambition or arrogance, her only thought is for helping those around her, nursing her husband Jonathan back to health and organizing the group's information. She is the symbol of purity for the vampire hunters, which is why the attack on her by Dracula so inflames their efforts. With her intelligence and compassion, Mina's only weakness is a complete lack of self-defense ability. A trademark of the Household Angel is fragility, often being compared to a flower, and Mina certainly has it as greatly as her tendency for nursing. Throughout *Dracula*, Mina is the beautiful beacon of goodness, the Angel in the Household. It really is not as nauseating as it sounds, by the way.

To reiterate, the traits of the Household Angel were as follows, as can be seen in the original concept and the character of Mina Harker: caring, nurturing, beautiful, pure, and delicate, with no ambition or anything like an iron will or independence, and a tendency to stay in one place, where you left her, in the Household. Not to say that these traits are negative, but applied as a stereotype, they are certainly unfair, and they were certainly applied as a stereotype, an ideal, in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century. Now, what do we see in some fictional characters in more recent times, specifically, the heroines of Resident Evil, a popular video game series?

There is a genre of video games called “Survival-Horror.” While this genre probably has its origins in the *Alone in the Dark* series from the early 1990s, the 1996 game called *Resident Evil*, which was made by the game company CAPCOM, named, defined, and popularized the genre. Along with such lines as *Mario* and *Final Fantasy*, *Resident Evil* is one of the most well-known series of games. Simply put, the genre of survival-horror involves the main character (or characters, as the signature survival-horror game, *Resident Evil*, allows you to play as two different main characters, one male and one female, both human, in each game) in an enormously bad situation, from which s/he must escape with extremely limited options and supplies. Gameplay-wise, this means a survival-horror game will provide the player with only a few weapons and severely limited extra ammo, with no ability to “buy” ammo or weapons or find them easily, as is the case in a shooter game. Camera angles are commonly used to create a sense of tension, wariness, and claustrophobia. In *Resident Evil* (at least until RE4), you can never see what’s around the next corner, as opposed to being able to use the controllable camera of platformers, shooters, adventure games, etc, to peek around corners and see what is waiting, and enemies have a nasty habit of bursting through windows or from openings in the ceiling to boot.

Now, remember what I said about the traits of the Household Angel? Well, here are short descriptions of two of the main heroines of *Resident Evil*: Firstly, Rebecca Chambers, who is a medic, apparently selfless, and often in physical danger. And secondly, Jill Valentine, who is very kind, and rescues and is rescued by others on many occasions. If you notice a similarity between those two and the previously enumerated traits of the Household Angel, you are not alone.

Just by glancing at two modern-day characters, it is clear that the Household Angel has not completely vanished over the past century, merely transforming into something different, which I have dubbed the Guardian Angel. This archetype shares all of the traits of the previous incarnation, but with a general trend towards greater strength of character (and physical strength

and capability), independence, and less of an air of frailty or etherealness, not to mention the fact that she does not have to be utterly pure and virtuous. So, essentially, the big difference between the Household and the Guardian is personal strength, or power; the Household has little to none, whereas the Guardian has moderate to great. The understanding and kindly nature remains a constant, as can be seen in the story of Jill Valentine in the first *Resident Evil* game. When her partner Barry Burton is manipulated into betraying her, she spares his life and is eventually saved by him in turn (a running theme between the two; there is a suspicion in my mind that Barry has a Jill-in-danger radar). She immediately accepts his clumsy apology, saying that it was not his fault. Now, if that is not understanding and compassionate, I do not know what is. While Jill is a skilled soldier, particularly considering her young age, there can be little doubt that her personality closely resembles that of Mina’s, only Jill is approximately a hundred times more strong-willed. Her goals, on the other hand, are rather different. Compared to Mina’s objectives, which are to aid her husband, Jill’s are more varied and out-going. A member of an elite team of soldiers, Jill is constantly trying to discover information on the corrupt pharmaceutical company Umbrella while avoiding or defeating its terrible creations.

A second example of the Guardians of *Resident Evil* is Ada Wong. Ada is probably a more interesting figure when you consider how the Household Angel came about. While she may be working for the “bad guys,” she is dedicated to the protagonist Leon S. Kennedy. She is dedicated to him above herself in some cases, in fact, as she risks her mission, job, and life in order to help him in the events of *Resident Evil 4*. As mentioned before, selflessness is a defining trait of both Angel types. Ada may seem to be heartless, using her beauty as much like a weapon as her gun, but it does not take the rookie cop Leon, with his loyalty and innocence, very long to accidentally capture her heart, thereby proving its existence. Even when she is pointing a gun at him, Ada still cares about Leon’s safety, shown by the fact that she has never actually shot at him despite holding him at gunpoint about three times to date.

Ada is an interesting case amongst the Guardians of *Resident Evil*, as she does not work for nice people, and unlike all three other Guardians in *Resident Evil* (Jill Valentine, Claire Redfield, and Rebecca Chambers), she projects a cool exterior, as noted above. In fact, she works for, or rather is pretending to work for, the main villain, Albert Wesker, though as she herself puts it in *Resident Evil 4*, “I don’t always play by your [Wesker’s] rules.” While seemingly self-serving, Ada has shown her compassion, at least in regards to Leon, too often to not be included from the list of Guardian Angels, though she has almost nothing in common with the Household Angel. For one thing, she never stays in

one place. There have been at least half a dozen times when she has charged off with someone, usually Leon, calling after her to wait; not very Household-like behavior. The woman does not stay put, ever. She drops in, occasionally literally, to help Leon or otherwise interact with him, and then neatly, or sometimes not-so-neatly, escapes the area, back to the shadows. She also does not particularly care about the state of anyone's soul, whether her own or Leon's. She cares about his safety, obviously, but there is no hint of any "refreshing of the soul" by Ada, though the argument could be made that Leon is actually doing that, an interesting reversal.

Claire Redfield is, along with Jill, perhaps the best example of the combination of sweet and strong, rescuer and rescued, that is the Guardian Angel of Resident Evil. In Claire's introduction, we quickly see that while she is understandably frightened by the fact that Raccoon City has been taken over by zombies, not to mention the later appearance of even worse creatures, she never freezes, and recovers remarkably well from the heavy shocks the plot of Resident Evil 2 --and later, Code: Veronica X-- throws at her. Along the way, she encounters a young girl named Sherry, and, what with the girl's biological mother being more worried about her transformed-himself-into-a-monster-that-just-will-not-die husband than her daughter who is being chased by said monster, becomes a mother-figure in about five minutes, keeping Sherry from being infected by the nasty viruses flying all over Raccoon City.

If Jill Valentine and Claire Redfield are the embodiment of the Guardian and Ada Wong is a new angle on it, neatly reversing the traditional roles of the Household Angel while retaining a few of its characteristics, Rebecca Chambers is the link between the Guardian and the old Household. For one thing, unlike the other three, she actually stays in one place as often as not. She does not go racing all over the crazy geography of the world of Resident Evil the way Ada does, or even show the ability to vanish into thin air like Claire. In Resident Evil 1, she spends most of her time ready to dispense healing to Chris Redfield, and needing a rescue from a stray Hunter, a deadly reptilian creature. She does, however, move around a couple times, to fry the roots of a plant-monster so Chris can actually fight it, to play the particular piano tune that triggers yet another secret of the mansion, and to set off its self-destruct system, a regular feature in all secret bases. In each of these incidents the hero needs specific help, of course. Rebecca is also the only Resident Evil heroine who has been more frequently rescued, as opposed to Jill and Claire who have more balanced records, and Ada who is more often the rescuer. Although Rebecca was shown to be much more capable a fighter in the prequel Resident Evil 0, she still does not match up to the other heroines in strength of character. This makes her more like the Household Angel than the Guardian, though again

Resident Evil 0 put her a bit more towards the latter. Evidence of how well the Household Angel has survived over the last century, can be found in Rebecca Chambers. On the flip-side, Ada Wong shows how much it has changed.

The Household Angel's transformation into the Guardian Angel is an interesting topic that touches on the differences between Victorian culture and today's culture -- and their occasional similarities. With both, compassion in some form is a constant, along with a non-self-serving goal; but while the Household Angel achieves this goal through passive virtue, the Guardian takes an active role in preserving what she wants to preserve and destroying what needs to be destroyed. So similar and yet so dissimilar: the Angel is still there, but no longer in the Household.