GENDERED ECONOMICS & THE FEMALE GOTHIC HEROINE IN WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE BY SHIRLEY JACKSON

by Katie Hopewell

INTRO TO FEMALE GOTHIC:

Notorious for victimizing and objectifying women, characterizing men as persistent heroes and fiscal beneficiaries, and emphasizing grandeur, the Gothic genre relies upon central structures of patriarchal economic and labor models.

To contest the genre that consistently places women at the receiving end of masculine rage and at the mercy of masculine wealth and strength, women authors redefined gothic horror by casting women, rather than men, to fulfill positions of power and agency.

Unlike the everpresent, formulaic Gothic hero with brute strength, emotive desensitivity and a chivalrously charming demeanor, the most effective female gothic heroines tend to be perfectly average and flawed women who operate outside of a genre-prescribed formula and fail to align with gendered social conventions.

THE CHARACTERISTIC FEMALE GOTHIC HEROINE DOES NOT FOLLOW ANY SINGLE ARCHETYPAL PATH ACROSS DIFFERENT WORKS, AS THE GOTHIC HERO TENDS TO.

CONCLUSION:

Although through uncanny means, Merricat assumes a position of economic and gendered power by burying her box of silver coins because that action illustrates how she, unlike her male cousin and the villagers, is not swayed so easily by menial things like material wealth.

In spite of her unheroic tendencies, Merricat serves as a valuable female Gothic heroine and her burying the box of silver dollars is the ultimate rejection of capitalism and its innate misogyny.

MERRICAT’S SILVER COINS:

MERRICAT’S EVASION FROM CAPITALISM

After killing her family members by poisoning them at dinner, Merricat Blackwood and her sister, Constance, were left to fend for themselves and care for their elderly uncle.

Due to all of the other villagers’ knowledge of Merricat’s murders and their general disdain for the family, the sisters manage to essentially create their own subsistence lifestyle utilizing their own garden and household facilities for all facets of self preservation—from simple nourishment to designing clothing. By doing this, they are effectively kept away from the outside world and, consequently, any extraneous financial consumption.

Having been left alone with their parents’ immense wealth, combined with their fairly minimal fiscal needs, these girls developed a cavalier regard for finances and fungible currency. Through the many manifestations of this evasion from capitalistic consumption, Merricat establishes herself as an ideal female gothic heroine by refusing to participate in structures that subordinate women and exclusively enable men.

THE BOX OF SILVER DOLLARS

In step with the Blackwood sisters’ evasion from capitalistic consumption, Merricat is known to bury varying objects of sentimental value, which she calls ‘treasures,’ around the family’s property, believing they serve as “safeguards” for their estate from the outside. Among these treasures is a box of silver dollars, which Merricat buried down by the creek, at the edge of her property.

Being buried in a hidden location suggests that it is of high personal value to her, but its being buried asserts its lack of economic value because its only use is self-contained. These unspoken sentiments are echoed by her sister, who never reprimands Merricat for this bizarre action, nor demands that the money be dug up for expenses.

The role of the silver dollars as a symbol of feminine fiscal agency is bolstered when the sisters’ cousin Charles, who takes on a keen fixation of the Blackwood family’s material wealth, comes to stay with them.

Charles finds the box of silver dollars a few days in, and is angrily baffled by its being buried. When scolding Merricat about her cavalier regard for the money, he notes that it might be “twenty or thirty dollars” and that it does not belong to Merricat because it is “money.”

His belief that Merricat does not take propriety of the box simply because it is fungible income mimics the common misogynistic ideal that women should not handle money on their own because they lack the faculties to properly or intentionally spend it. This, too, coincides with the capitalistic urging of women into the private labor sphere of motherhood, thus rendering men the family breadwinners, whose hands alone manage familial finances.

“CHARLES WAS STILL SHOUTING, SHAKING MY BOX OF SILVER DOLLARS BACK AND FORTH VIOLENTLY.

I WONDERED IF HE WOULD DROP IT; I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE SEEN CHARLES ON THE GROUND, SCARBLING AFTER MY SILVER DOLLARS”

-MERRICAT, PAGE 88

Jackson, Shirley. We Have Always Lived in the Castle. Viking Press, 1962.