

*The Box of Silver Dollars: Analyzing Gendered Economics in the Female Gothic with Shirley Jackson's We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

Literature, and art generally, has historically served as a valuable mode of analyzing and even just simply understanding human behavior in social, political, emotive and economic spheres of life. Oftentimes, more fantastical literary works tend to provide the most clarifying sociological insights due to their being purely contrived; these narratives often illustrate either what respective authors might view as idealized or unfavorable modes of existence, which speaks to larger ideological and structural realities. The female gothic subgenre of literature proves to be exceptionally rich in terms of informing and complicating larger narratives, due in part to the creation and purpose of the subgenre itself. Its name alone reveals an important rhetorical goal of the literary works it encompasses: to make the gothic genre feminine. Notorious for placing women in distressed damsel archetypes, characterizing men as persistent heroes and evoking feelings of human horror, the Gothic genre reveals much of the misogyny inherent to gendered economic and labor systems. Women characters in Gothic works tend to be at the receiving end of violent male rage, supernatural inflictions, and familial tragedy; they are also cast as beneficiaries of male main characters, reliant on the strength, wealth and courage of the hero. In order to contest the genre that infantilizes and objectifies women and fetishizes female suffering, women writers began creating similarly horrific novels that place women, rather than men, in positions of power and agency. The characteristically female gothic heroine does not, however, follow any single archetypal path across different works as the Gothic hero tends to. Rather than casting a female that embodies the same brute strength, emotive/intellectual fortitude and chivalrously charming demeanor over and over again, the most effective (in terms of noticeably refusing to align with norms of the Gothic genre) heroines tend to be those that are perfectly average and flawed women who fail to align with gendered social conventions.

That much is the case of Merricat in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, who is a sociopathic, reclusive and clearly self-infantilized 18-year-old with a far-from-heroic demeanor. Jackson places her heroine on the massive estate owned by the parents she murdered, alongside her only surviving family members: her Uncle Julian and older sister Constance. After killing her family members by poison, Merricat and her sister were left by themselves in a village that is aware of the crimes committed, on a property in which they created essentially their own subsistence lifestyle utilizing their own garden and facilities for self preservation, effectively keeping them away from the outside world. Having been left with their parents' immense wealth, combined with their fairly minimal fiscal needs, these girls developed a cavalier regard for finances and fungible currency. As previously mentioned, literary works provide clarifying insights into sociological phenomena, and as much can be said about the sisters' economic situation and how their evasion from typical capitalistic consumption patterns serves as an acknowledgement and simultaneous criticism of the gendered economic conventions that oppress women; this is embodied especially through the box of silver dollars that Merricat has buried on the edge of her parents' property in the novel.

It is worth noting that the standard Gothic novel has an acute focus on grandioseness, particularly that of material objects and status symbols, often owned by men. The same can be seen in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, as Jackson continually describes the architecture of the Blackwood family home and other objects that signify material wealth throughout the work. The box of silver dollars, however, presents an especially interesting criticism of capitalism and its gendered structure due purely to the varying characters' respective regard (or disregard) for it. The box is first introduced by Jackson in an explanation by Merricat of her treasures and their use as "safeguards" (p.41) on the Blackwood property; she mentions how the box was among her

collection of “treasures” and she had it buried down by the creek. This introduction is confusing, in that Merricat acknowledges the box as a treasure but also explains its being buried in a hidden location; this obviously suggests that it is of high personal value to her because she feels it needs to be protected, but it does not hold economic value because she has no qualms burying money with no intention of digging it up. These unspoken sentiments are echoed by her sister Constance, as she never reprimands Merricat nor demands that the money be dug up for expenses.

The notion that the box of silver dollars embodies the two sisters’ rejection of capitalism and its associated gendered conventions is further solidified by the introduction of their cousin Charles into the story, who takes on a keen fixation of the Blackwood family’s material wealth during his stay. After the first few days in the house, Charles manages to find the box of silver dollars and is both baffled and outraged at its being buried; he notes that it might be “twenty or thirty dollars” (p.88) and that it does not belong to Merricat *because* it is “money” (p.88). The entire preconception that Merricat does not take propriety of the box simply because it is fungible income simultaneously asserts the common misogynistic ideal that women should not have money to handle on their own because they do not know how to properly or intentionally handle it; this coincides with the capitalistic urging of women into the private labor sphere of motherhood so that men may be the professional laborers, thus rendering them the family breadwinners whose hands alone manage finances, ultimately keeping the money away from women.

Merricat’s status as a female gothic heroine is additionally bolstered right after Charles’ finding the box, as she thinks to herself: “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, scrabbling after my silver dollars” (p. 88). In her wanting to see Charles on the ground scrambling for the money, Merricat is implicitly scoffing at capitalistic consumption patterns because she sees it as demeaning to do such a dramatic thing as gather up money from the ground; simultaneously, the simple idea that there is a possibility that he might do such a desperate act for money helps indicate the gendered nature of capitalism, as well as the fact that capitalism directly places money only in the hands of men. This augments her heroine status as well because it shows that she rejects gendered conventions, and also it places her in the position of power because she is not swayed so easily by menial things like material wealth as is her cousin.

The box of silver dollars plays a small role in the larger motif of money and material wealth in *They Have Always Lived in the Castle* but the characters’ respective regards for it all serve to illustrate the gendered nature of wealth accumulation in capitalist societies, as well as the author’s rejection of such an economic structure. This dynamic ultimately helps further qualify the novel as a fitting work for the female gothic subgenre because it so specifically counters the norms of the Gothic genre that place men in positions of power, and also augments its qualifications by even making jest out of such male behavior, as is seen in Merricat’s acknowledgments of Charles. 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.