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The Gilded Six Bits: How Missie May Rejects Female Archetypes

In one of her world-renowned novels Jane Austen once wrote “I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives”. Decades later African-American writer, Zora Neale Hurston, wrote her short story “The Gilded-Six Bits” and the story, it seemed, embodied the totality of Austen’s statement. When a wealthy hustler is introduced to the small town where Missie May and her husband, Joe finds out that Missie May has been cheating on him with Slemmons and the two experience overcoming infidelity in marriage. Zora Neale Hurston’s “The Gilded Six Bits”, demonstrates a female character that rejects the “angel” or “monster” stereotype because of how Hurston describes Missie May, her portrayals of Missie May and Joe’s relationship, and how Missie May switches the gender roles in marriage through her infidelity.

Hurston’s descriptions of Missie May call attention to her rejection of the “angel” or “monster” stereotype. Missie May is loud and spunky character. She is the woman of the house, happily married with a normal daily routine. Joe goes to work, and Missie waits for him to come back home. Missie and Joe seem to have a perfect life and Missie appears to be very happy with her life. This can be seen when, in the beginning of the story, Hurston describes Missie’s reaction when Joe comes home, “there came the ring of singing metal on wood…Missie May grinned with delight” (542). Missie is young and playful. She is not the meek or the quiet wife in the scenario that can be seen in previous novels with female protagonist.

It is important to note that in the time that Hurston wrote this story, women were often portrayed as either one of two stereotypes, the “angel” or the “monster” (Brown 67). Hurston used literature as a place to explore different feminist themes in her exploration of her female protagonist’s emotions, life choices and relationships, much like the “New Woman” authors that came before her. Unlike the female characters in well--known novels, such as the Wizard of Oz, Missie rejects common female archetypes. In *The Wizard of Oz*, not speaking of the stories feminist symbol, Dorothy, the female characters are either wholly good or wholly bad. This can be seen in how exact opposites the witch characters are. Glinda, the Good witch depicts the ideal feminine archetype. In page 14 of the book, the author wrote, “she was both beautiful and young to the eyes,” (Baum). She is sensitive, empathetic, but also intelligent.

On the contrary, the Wicked Witch of the West is depicted as being more powerful than Glinda. A woman in control, or in power was often seen as being evil or as being a witch (Brown 68). She is clearly not the damsel in distress of the story, she commands her army and the trait of being in command is often associated with male characters. She is shown to readers as having one eye, and it is obvious that she is ugly. Hurston doesn’t write too much detail about Missies’ appearance, probably to draw attention to her more admirable traits. Only describing that Missie has “dark brown skin” (541). When looking closely at Missies’ character throughout the story, we begin to see that she is both strong, and weak, both ugly and beautiful, as it pertains to her heart.

Minnie is strong because she does not take no for an answer and she considers herself to be on the same level as her husband. In a playful altercation with her husband, as part of their Saturday night routine, Missie states, “Nobody ain’t gointer be chuckin’ money at me and Ain’t not do ‘em nothin,” (542). She is married, and yet her voice is independently her own, this is her strength. Her weakness can be seen when she breaks down when Joe catches her and Slemmons sleeping together. Hurston writes, “Missie May was sobbing. Wails of weeping without words…Missie May kept on crying,” (546). She broke down because, at the end of the day, she was sensitive to her husband’s emotions and pursued Slemmons only because he held what she desired, money. Missie’s “ugly” traits can be seen with how she goes behind Joe’s back with Slemmons. Hurston doesn’t go into detail about how long the affair was happening and refraining from stating this information depicts Missie as sneaky, driven by her need for money. Of course, Missie isn’t wholly bad and it is apparent that she loves her husband despite her love of money. There is a moment in the story, before Missie met Slemmons, where she soothes Joe’s apparent insecurity about not being rich. She states, “Ah’m satisfied with wid you jes’ lak you is, baby. God took pattern after a pine tree and built you noble. Youse a pretty man,” (544). This is a remark that a woman who was purely evil wouldn’t make. Here, Missie again rejects the “monster” stereotype.

In addition to this, the portrayal of Missie May’s and Joe’s relationship is another way that Hurston shows how Missie breaks out of the mold of the “angel” and “monster” archetype. Missie and Joe’s marriage isn’t typical because of Missie’s personality. They both harbor control in the relationship, it isn’t one sided. Of course, Joe still does the work and Missie, as far as we know, stays home and maintains the house. This would be a typical relationship during those times (Jones). Yet Joe allows Missie to be her complete and utter self. This can be seen in the first part of the story when Joe comes home, and they partake in a wrestling game that seems a part of their Saturday night routine. The wrestling, or what she gets from it, appears to be the highlight of Minnie’s day, and she is a tough opponent. Hurston writes, “He ran inside but could not close it after him before she crowded in and locked with him in a rough tumble. For several minutes the two were a furious mass of male and female energy…Missie May clutching on Joe and Joe trying, but not too hard, to get away,” (542).

Therefore, this little tiff shows how Missie is a powerful woman in the relationship, but she still isn’t the “monster” because of this. Her power is seen as her strength in the relationship, this is what Joe loves about her as they both laugh and shout throughout the time that they wrestle around, it shows a glimpse into their domestic happiness (Hardy). When she attempts to sift through his pockets to find out what he bought her, Joe tells her to stop and she responds, “Ah ain’t, Joe, not lessen you gwinne gimme whateve’ it is good you got in your pocket,” (542). Joe smiles and proceeds to let his wife take what she wants. Missie is a woman with power who is not afraid to play the wife role.

Furthermore, it appears that this is what Missie May considers to be her power. For instance, when they are partaking in their mock battle, it is suggested that Missie almost tore Joe’s clothes to which Joe responds, “you de one dat pushes de needles round heah”. To which Missie makes no response because she knows that he is correct. And, when it comes time for dinner and Joe tells her to have it on the table when he gets out of the tub, she responds in a feisty way stating, “Don’t you mess wid mah business, man. You git in yo’ clothes. Ah’m a real wife, not no dress and breath,” she then goes on to state, “If you burn me, you won’t git a thing but wife ashes,” (543). From a historical perspective, Joe would have been the source of economic power while Missie stayed at home to master the housework and support her husband. This would have given her a sense of responsibility and pride in being a wife (Hardy).

Usually women who are strong and opinionated in literature were depicted as being single, divorced and having a hard time finding a mate. This is because they confused the commonly placed structure of the gender roles too much. Through that way that Hurston wrote Joe and Missie’s relationship, Hurston shows that strong women can also be married. As the story reveals it is Missie’s own infidelity that disrupts their environment. The infidelity that occurred in Joe’s and Missie’s relationship shows how fluidly she can move between the two identities of “angel” and “monster” and reflect a real human woman, just put on paper.

For instance, the way that Hurston writes the details of the infidelity shows how Missie May switched the gender roles in marriage. That is to say, it seems that in life men are often thought to be the most likely to cheat. Often women find themselves asking questions like, “do all men cheat”. The world would think that a man would cheat far quicker than a woman (Nina). This idea comes from the “angel” archetype of women. Especially if the woman seems beautiful, innocent, and happy. In “The Gilded Six Bits”, Zora Neal Hurston was ahead of her time when she switched the institution of marriage that readers were used to reading and seeing. She did this through the way that she went about writing Missie’s infidelity, she shows that Missie has her own thoughts, desires and emotions.

It is important to note that Missie had seen Slemmons before. When Joe first tells her that they’re going to the ice cream parlor, Missie mentions how she went to the store to get a box of lye and she saw Slemmons and he passed her, tipping his hat. After Joe shows some insecurity in stating how fine Slemmons’ clothes are. Missie states, “Aw, he don’t look no better in his clothes than you do in yourn” (543). Hence, Joe trusts her and, as readers, so do we. In this moment, she appears to be playing the role of comforting wife. She doesn’t even seem to show any interest in Slemmons. In fact, Joe talks more about him then she does on the way home from the ice cream parlor. But, it seems that Slemmons had took some interest in Missie as Joe states that Slemmons proclaimed, “Ah have to hand it to you, Joe. Dat wife of yours is jes’ thirty-eight and two. Yessuh, she’s forte,” (545). But, the connection between the two still isn’t made.

Rather than seeing images of Joe being the unemotional one in the relationship, like some men are portrayed, he is apparently deeply in love with Missie. We see this on the long walk that he takes on his way home from work one night. He saw a “lean moon” on his walk home and Hurston writes that he “saw it with his feelings. It made him yearn painfully for Missie.” On this walk, we see more into Joe’s own perception of Missie and his relationship. He wants kids, and he can’t wait to wash the fertilizer off himself before “presenting himself to Missie May” (545). He obviously thinks nothing but the best about his wife and her presence in his life holds such a power over him because he wants to make himself presentable to her, suggesting his respect.

In other words, it isn’t until Joe finds out that Missie has slept with Slemmons that we see him have a bit more strength then Missie in the relationship. Rather than have the cunning response that could be expected from a woman who intentionally slept with another man, Missie is repentant. She knows what she’s done is wrong, but it seems like she couldn’t help her own desire. She is not the nonchalant one in this scenario, Joe is. He says to her in the aftermath, “Missie May, whut you cryin’ for?” She responds, “Cause Ah love you so hard and Ah know you don’t love me no mo’” (546).

With this phrase Joe begins to realize, just like the reader, the type of person that Missie is. He tells her that she doesn’t “don’t know de feelings of dat yet”. It can be concluded that he meant that she doesn’t know the feelings of love yet. Because after she tries to explain her infidelity, he is silent for a minute. He then tells her not to cry anymore and that he got the gold piece for her. Joe’s stunned silence can very well mimic the calm surprise that a reader would get from Missie’s infidelity. The pure shock that, all this time, she had been harboring her own desires that had nothing to do with Joe, while Joe was completely devoted to her and wishing to start a family. Had Missie caught Joe in a cheating situation, the surprise of the infidelity wouldn’t be as prevalent to readers because he was a man.

This infidelity shows Missie’s character development even more as their Saturday night ritual doesn’t make another appearance in the story until the end. This shows that some of the power in their relationship has shifted from Missie, to Joe. Even though they, without open communication that we are made aware of, decided to stay together, Missie begins to walk on eggshells around him. It isn’t until she has a baby that Joe is brought back to his senses and they have a playful encounter when the sign that he was coming home the “ring of singing metal on wood, fifteen times” came. He bought her candy kisses, a symbolic gesture that suggests that their relationship is now back on good terms.

In conclusion, Zora Neal Hurston’s “The Gilded Six Bits” showcases a female character that breaks out of the common “angel” or “monster” archetypes that female characters are often placed in. Through her depictions of Missie’s personality, her descriptions of Missie May and Joe’s marriage relationship, and how she uses Missie’s infidelity to switch the insititution of marriage. Missie May is her own person, not just a married woman, or a woman in general. She has her own wants, needs and desires that become very evident by the end of the story. She is not an archetype, she is a human female.

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