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### The Appalachian Angel in the House

Life for women in America in the 1920s and '30s was astronomically different than it is today. Women had much fewer rights, privileges, recognition, and respect, just to name a few. Further, women were defined by multiple stereotypes that supposedly encompassed the entire gender. For example, women were portrayed as an "angel in the house," or a domestic angel, in the dichotomy of monster versus angel in the house. This term implied that women acted as the caretaker of the home, raised the children, and, perhaps most importantly, were subservient and passive to men. The angel in the house selflessly devotes herself to both her husband and children. One book that turned this view of women on its head is *Serena* by Ron Rash. The novel's main character, Serena, is certainly not defined as an angel in the house for several reasons; she is anything but subservient and passive to men, she does dirty work rather than house work, and she is a manipulative, cunning, and deadly criminal. On the other hand, an angel in the house figure does exist in *Serena*: Rachel. While Rachel does not exactly adhere to the typical gender roles of the time, she is an angel in the house insofar as she selflessly takes care of her child and tends to house and family work. Ron Rash's *Serena*, set in the Great Depression Era, directly challenges and complicates the pre-conceived notion that all women in the 1920s and '30s are an angel in the house. Rather, Serena is a monster while Rachel is an angel in the house.

To begin, women were held to a number of stereotypical expectations in the 1920s and '30s; there were several behaviors and attitudes that females were expected to adhere to. Mainly,

women were expected to work in the house rather than out in the workforce with the men; women belonged in the home. Some people went as far as to say, “A home, no matter how small, is large enough to occupy [a wife's] mind and time” (Moran). In other words, a woman only needs to concern herself with matters within her home; she needn't worry or tend to matters outside the home for that was the man's responsibility. Such stereotypical associations regarding women were not entirely illogical; women did not, legally, have the same rights as men until 1920. The passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment that year gave women the right to vote as well as men. Clearly, the country was used to women not being treated as equals to men for quite a long time; therefore, it is not much of a surprise that stereotypes such as the angel in the house still existed for years after the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, including the years during the Great Depression in which *Serena* is set.

Even after the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, a large majority of the society continued to believe in and act on the typical stereotypes laid out for women. However, Ron Rash complicated the common expectations of women in the early 1900's with his book, *Serena*. The main character, Serena, is a woman who does the exact opposite things that are associated with women of her age. She directly rejects the patriarchal norms for females during the 1920's and '30s. For example, females during this time were expected to work solely in the house as opposed to out in the work force with the men. This expectation correlated to the angel in the house persona; a proper angel in the house stayed at home and tended to the housework and cleaning. Serena, on the other hand, did not work in her home; she worked out in the timber yard with the men. In fact, she was more of a boss to the men working in the field rather than a worker, which further separates her from the angel in the house definition. As aforementioned, angels in the house worked exclusively in the home and tended to housework; Serena preferred

to do the dirty work with the men. She is also seen shooting bears out with the men: “As Pemberton fell, he turned and saw Serena place a second shot just above the bear’s eyes” (Rash, 72). Killing bears is definitely not a characteristic of an angel in the house, proving that she is an anomaly regarding women in the 1920’s and ‘30s. In addition to working with the men, she is in charge of the male workers and was in a boss-like position next to her husband. This is even more unheard of for the women in this time; it is one thing for a woman to work next to men, but to work above one was certainly a sight to see. Throughout the book, Serena is seen hiring and firing employees and making executive decisions that one would typically associate with male employees rather than women. By working amongst and above the men in her town rather than sticking to housework, Serena proves that she is not an angel in the house.

Not only does Serena work out in the field with the men, she also participates in meetings and decisions with the owners of the industry and company. It is one thing for a woman to be working out in the field with the other men, but it is an entirely different thing for a woman to be a part of the higher-ups in the company. She takes part in hiring and firing employees and creates important business partnerships for her and her husband’s company. In fact, she does not like some of her husband’s business partners, and she uses her authority to get rid of them and find more suitable ones immediately. Also, she is not afraid to tell a group of men who should be promoted to certain positions and why. For example, she is the reason Galloway was promoted to foreman. Serena tell the men, “A crew won’t be laggards for a foreman they’re afraid of... I would argue that’s more important than his lack of social graces” (Rash, 55). Here, Serena sternly states her opinion on the characteristics of a foreman which is something that an angel in the house would certainly not do. Instead, a domestic angel would remain silent and passive and let the men make the decision. In this scene, one of the men disagrees with Serena, but the others

know not to cross Mrs. Pemberton: “Buchanan was about to continue the argument when Wilkie raised a hand to silence him” (Rash, 55). This sentence shows that even the higher up men in the company know not to cross Serena; without a doubt, she asserts her power over the men, and they know it. Obviously, this means that Serena is not an angel in the house.

Rather than being a domestic angel, Serena is a monster. The monster in the dichotomy of monster versus angel is passionate, rebellious, dangerous, and uncontrollable, all which Serena is. As opposed to being a pure and meek domestic angel, Serena is passionate and sensual. She is confident in her body and her sexuality, and she is not afraid to be straightforward with her husband. For example, one night the couple is having a rather serious talk about business and the employees, when she randomly decides to take off her clothes and initiate coupling with her husband: “Serena stepped out of her undergarments. As Pemberton gazed at her, he wondered if it was possible that a time would come when he’d look at her naked and not be stunned. He couldn’t imagine such a moment...” (Rash, 117). Here, Serena is the one who brings about the lovemaking rather than her husband. Typically, this is something that a man would bring about instead of a woman. Part of being an angel in the house involves tending to her husband’s needs and desires, including lovemaking. Therefore, a domestic angel would likely wait to perform this act until her husband brings it up, rather than bringing it up herself. Since Serena initiates the act herself in this scene, and several other times throughout the story, she is clearly demonstrating that she is passionate and sensual. These characteristics are those of a monster and not an angel in the house.

Another important aspect of Serena’s character that shows she is not an angel in the house is her position of authority. Part of why Serena is able to stand in positions of authority amongst the men in the town is thanks to her husband’s insistence of her being equal to any man.

When George first introduces his wife to the workers, he makes it very clear that Serena should not be treated any differently simply because she is a woman: “She’s the equal of any man here, and you’ll soon find the truth of it. Her orders are to be followed the same as you’d follow mine” (Rash, 22). Here, Mr. Pemberton makes sure that the workers know how he expects them to act toward his wife. She is her husband’s equal as well as an equal to all the other men there. He also tells the men in this instance that they are to listen to her directions like they would listen to his. This is a rather bold statement on George’s part by telling a huge group of men who have never worked with a woman to listen to her orders as if she were a man. Clearly, this was not a common sight in the time of this story; women were expected to be subservient to men and not the other way around. This is one of the most important characteristics of an angel in the house. The angel in the house remains submissive and compliant to her husband without question. In this example, Serena proves that she will not be submissive to any man, and can therefore not be defined as an angel in the house.

Serena uses her position of authority amongst the company to show her fierce dedication and unwavering opinions. For example, Serena refuses to back down when the Secretary of the Interior approaches the Pemberton’s and tells them he would like to buy their land to be used as a National Park. If they bought the land, that would mean less jobs for timber workers, and ultimately, less money for Serena and her husband. Therefore, she has to make sure the park doesn’t happen. She also knows that the Department of the Interior does not have their plans solidified and they are still up in the air. While this makes some people nervous, Serena stays steadfast to her refusal of the park. Serena says, “Let them keep blustering and we’ll keep cutting” (Rash, 160). Serena uses her strong characteristic of dedication and hard-headedness to ensure she gets what she wants. This is certainly a trait that an angel in the house does not have.

One excellent example of Serena being anything but submissive to males involves Galloway. Galloway is one of the men working under the Pemberton's who happens to have his life saved by Serena. After accidentally having his hand chopped off, Serena rushes to the rescue, ties up his arm to stop the bleeding, and carries him on her horse back to the doctor. Thanks to this literal life-saving favor, Galloway pledges his allegiance to Serena and wills himself to do anything she wishes, for she is the woman that his mother prophesized would save his life. Serena uses his devotion to her as a cunning ploy to get him to take out her enemies; he becomes her hitman. If Serena wants someone dead, he obeys her order without question: "...Galloway still lagging behind Serena in the manner of a dog taught to heel" (Rash, 181). This is an especially important quote insofar as it first establishes the relationship between Serena and Galloway. Rash describes it as "a dog taught to heel;" clearly, the submissive one in this situation is the male and not the woman. After this description of Galloway being Serena's dog, he kills multiple people for Serena, or at least attempts to, including Rachel and her infant son, Jacob. Obviously, there are no boundaries stopping Galloway from doing Serena's bidding; he is even willing to kill an elderly old lady and a baby without question. Therefore, Galloway's intense dedication to Serena proves yet again that she does not adhere to the stereotypical female associations of the age, and she is definitely not qualified to be an angel in the house.

In fact, Serena is the opposite of an angel in the house; she is a monster, as mentioned previously. The monster exists as the other side of the dichotomy between the angel in the house and the monster. Many women of this age were likely to be considered an angel in the house because they were expected to be submissive to men, take care of the housework, and raise the children. However, it is clear at this point that Serena is not an angel in the house because she does none of those things. Another example of her acting as a monster is shown in the

aforementioned section. Serena is willing to kill, or have someone else kill, an innocent old woman and an even more innocent baby. Neither of these people have done Serena any wrongs; she would just rather have them dead because it suits her better. Another example of Serena's monstrosity is shown in the very beginning of the novel right after George kills Rachel's father. Serena informs Rachel to sell the knife her father had used in the fight: "...You can get a good price for it if you demand one. And I would," she added. 'Sell it, I mean. That money will help when the child is born. It's all you'll ever get from my husband and me" (Rash, 10). This is an extremely heartless comment made by Serena to Rachel after meeting each other for the first time. As Rachel is leaning over her dead father, Serena makes matters worse by saying that her and her husband will never give anything to Rachel or her baby. Without a doubt, this is not a characteristic of an angel in the house, and makes Serena look like a monster. This instance between Serena and Rachel proves, yet again, that the former does not adhere to the expectations aligned with women of the time.

Not only is Serena heartless and cruel, she is also a serious criminal. She is responsible for several murders throughout the novel, which is something that a domestic angel would certainly not do; it is something that monsters would do. As mentioned previously, Serena tells Galloway that she wants him to murder an innocent baby for her; while Jacob does not end up being killed, several other people do get murdered thanks to Serena. For example, Serena demonstrates how uncontrollable she is when she decides that Buchanan must be eliminated. Buchanan threatens Serena's desire to keep the land they are using rather than letting it be turned into a national park; Buchanan is willing to sell his portion of the land to be used for the park. For Serena, this is a very bad thing. If Buchanan sells his land, it will ruin her plan and her business; therefore, she tells her husband nonchalantly to go hunting with Buchanan and implies

that he should shoot and kill Buchanan. Serena says, “Ask Buchanan to come along as well... You probably won’t get a chance to talk afterward” (Rash, 141). This is where Serena implies that Buchanan will be dead, and therefore not have a chance to speak to Pemberton after the hunt. She even mentions to kill him herself after her husband seems hesitant: “I need to get that skidder up and running Sunday morning, but I could join you in the afternoon. I can do it, if you want me to” (Rash, 141). Without a doubt, Serena shows her monstrosity in this scene by offering to murder a man herself in order to secure her business. An angel in the house would never suggest murdering an innocent, let alone offer to do the deed herself. Therefore, Serena shows how monstrous she is when telling her husband to kill Buchanan.

By this point, it is clear that Serena embodies the monster rather than the angel in the house. Murdering one innocent person is bad enough; Serena murders several people throughout the story. This killing spree represents a very important characteristic of the monster; uncontrollability. No one can control Serena when she makes up her mind, not even her husband. While Serena has reasons to want to kill Buchanan and Jacob, she has absolutely no reason to kill Doctor Cheney besides pure anger. She blames the doctor for the death of her unborn child, which is somewhat understandable. When she experienced extreme pains and called the doctor, he said there was nothing to worry about, so Serena and George didn’t go to the hospital to get it checked out. As it turns out, there was something to worry about, and Serena thinks the doctor should have known it and told her to go get it checked out. Therefore, Cheney is responsible for the baby’s death in her eyes. Luckily, Serena has her trusty steed, Galloway, to take care of it: “Galloway. He come by an hour ago asking where Doctor Cheney was” (Rash, 209). While Rash does not outright say that Galloway went to murder Cheney, readers can read between the lines and understand that this is obviously what happened. Along with Cheney’s death, Serena is also



responsible for Widow Jenkins' death, Buchanan's death, and the attempted murder of baby Jacob. Her killing spree clearly shows how uncontrollable Serena is, which is a main characteristic of the monster.

Another absurd and disturbing instance in which Serena demonstrates her monstrous tendencies is the way in which she goes about the death of the people she's killed. Rather than feeling guilt or any sadness whatsoever for the deceased individuals, she takes pride in her accomplishment. Now that they are out of her way, she can get back to doing what she wants, how she wants it. After Mr. Pemberton killed Buchanan for Serena, she is so happy that she decides to make love to George: "It's time to make our heir," she says (Rash, 153). Serena decides that they should celebrate the news of Buchanan's death by making a child. As if this reaction wasn't monstrous or disturbing enough, she also doesn't mind seeing Buchanan's blood on their clothes. After George returned to Serena, he was covered in Buchanan's blood: "...When Serena stepped back Pemberton saw a thin smear of red on her lower stomach. Serena saw it as well but did not go to the bathroom for a washcloth" (Rash, 153). Here, Serena acknowledges Buchanan's blood on her and her husband, and instead of cleaning it off of them, she decides to keep it there, even while they make love. Further, Serena's decision to make love after Buchanan's death suggests that George is merely a victim of her seduction; Serena uses her confident sexuality to convince her husband to kill Buchanan and reward him with an heir. If it wasn't clear that Serena was monstrous up to this point, it is unquestionable in this scene. In fact, this is more than monstrous; her actions here are almost psychotic. By choosing to celebrate Buchanan's death and making love amidst his blood, Serena shows yet again that she is a monster and not an angel in the house.

On the other hand, there is one character in *Serena* who fits the typical understanding and portrayal of women in the 1920s and '30s: Rachel. While she does not exactly fit the description of an angel in the house, she exemplifies it much more than Serena. There is one flaw that Rachel has that prevents her from being a true angel in the house, which is her one-night stand with George Pemberton. Rachel and George sleep together without being married, and Rachel falls pregnant from the affair. The angel in the house is "...Passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all—pure" (*Angel in the House*, 2011). To some, the most important aspect of a domestic angel is purity. Further, part of being an angel in the house involves endlessly caring for one's husband, which means that the angel in the house would obviously have to have a husband. Through that husband, and that husband only, the angel in the house can have children. There is no room for affairs or flings with other men since the angel in the house is so devoted and faithful to her husband. Therefore, Rachel Harmon cannot be identified as an angel in the house simply because she slept with a man without being married to him, and had a child as a result of the affair. This is the one main reason why Rachel cannot be identified as a domestic angel, even though she possesses many of the other qualities of the angel in the house.

Aside from her scandalous one-night stand with Pemberton, Rachel can be looked at as an angel in the house, certainly. As mentioned previously, another one of the dominant traits an angel in the house has involves intense devotion for her children. Not only is she expected to dote on her husband, she is also expected to act this way to her children. She must provide them with the ultimate care and self-sacrificial love. In Coventry Patmore's poem, "The Wife's Tragedy," Patmore writes, "Dearly devoted to his arms; / She loves with love that cannot tire" (20-21). This poem shows that the angel's love is endless and unwavering. Rachel shows this

precise characteristic when caring for her son, Jacob. At one point in the book, both Rachel and the baby fall incredibly ill. Rachel thinks that Jacob's fever will break and they will be back to normal within a few days, but that is not the case. She decides in the middle of the night that she absolutely must get Jacob to the hospital if he is to survive; she makes the journey even though she is extremely sick herself: "Rachel stopped walking, too fevered to be sure where she was" (Rash, 93). Clearly, Rachel is not fit to be walking around anywhere given her very ill state, let alone walking barefoot along a desolate and dark road with a sick infant in her arms. However, Rachel urges on despite her illness thanks to the love she has for her child. She knows that the environment around her is dangerous and scary and is only multiplied by her and Jacob's sickness. Despite the danger, Rachel is motivated to get Jacob to a doctor no matter what the circumstances. When the doctor finally talks to Rachel, he tells her, "That was almost a mile walk and you sick as him, and barefoot to boot. I don't know how you did it. You must love that child dear as life" (Rash, 97). Here, the doctor clearly states how dangerous it was for Rachel to make the last night's walk, and comments on how much Jacob must mean for her to risk their lives making the walk. It is obvious in this instance that Rachel is an angel in the house insofar as she puts her child's needs above her own. Selfless love is an important characteristic of the domestic angel, and Rachel clearly possesses this trait herself.

Another telltale characteristic of the angel in the house is their ability to take care of the household work and well-being of the members of the family. The angel is the one who tends to the cleaning and cooking around the house, and Rachel performs these duties for her little family entirely by herself. One instance in *Serena* that shows Rachel performing household duties is when she is preparing meals: "Then Rachel went back inside, fixed some oatmeal for Jacob. She set him on the floor and began cutting the rhubarb stalks into inch-long pieces" (Rash, 296). This

is just one moment in which Rachel has to provide daily needs like meals to herself and her son; she performs these responsibilities every day like a proper angel in the house would. Also, she clearly tends to the well-being of her son. He is healthy and happy thanks to his mother's determination to take care of him. Though she is a single mother and struggles to make ends meet, she ensures that Jacob is happy, healthy, and safe. She works extremely hard for her family: "Rachel worked the early shift, the hardest because breakfast was the camp's biggest meal. She lit the lantern and took Jacob to Widow Jenkins each morning and then walked down to the depot and rode the train to the camp, arriving at 5:30 to help fill the long tables..." (Rash, 127). Here, it is made clear how hard Rachel has to work to be able to provide for herself and Jacob; she works the hardest, earliest shift in order to make money for her and her son. While this is not an exact characteristic of a typical angel in the house because most of these women do not have jobs outside the home, Rachel still exemplifies a domestic angel because she does what she has to do to make sure Jacob is well-taken care of. Though she works outside the home, Rachel can still be considered an angel in the house thanks to her commitment to provide for Jacob.

Perhaps the most important and crucial trait the angel in the house possesses is selflessness. This trait is what truly defines the domestic angel, for selflessness allows her to serve her family to the fullest extent possible. By being able to put her own needs and interests aside, she is able to fully immerse herself in the well-being of her family, which is what the angel in the house lives for. Rachel exemplifies this selfless trait in several instances throughout *Serena*, such as when she walks barefoot along the road to get Jacob to do the doctor. Another clear instance of Rachel's selflessness occurs in even small moments like getting dressed for the day: "Instead, she put Jacob in the smock Widow Jenkins had sewn from overalls Rachel had

taken from her father's chest of drawers. Then she dressed herself in her raggiest gingham dress" (Rash, 191). On this occasion, Rachel dresses Jacob in much nicer clothes than herself; she makes sure that he is comfortable while she wears her "raggiest" dress. She puts Jacob's needs above her own in this moment even if it is just a small need. She has clothes that are wearable, but are not exactly favorable. Instead of wearing higher quality clothes or making new clothes for herself, she continues to wear old, worn-out clothes so Jacob can have newer, nicer clothes. This is not the only instance in *Serena* where Rachel sacrifices her own needs for her son's. She puts Jacob ahead of herself wherever she can, proving that she is truly selfless. Rachel's selflessness definitely defines her as an angel in the house, and rightfully so.

Serena Pemberton and Rachel Harmon are two women that spark and advance feminism. They challenge the idea of all women being an angel in the house who follows all of the "rules" of being a perfect woman. Obviously, in the early 1900's, feminism, or the equal treatment of women, would not be much of a concern for much of the population. There were other things of more importance to worry about at that time, like the Great Depression. Not many people cared about how women were treated or how they were perceived. However, Rachel and Serena are two women who got the ball rolling for feminism; both of them seriously strayed from typical gender roles of the times which both helped and hurt them. Both Serena and Rachel experienced success through their independence; Serena ran a successful company while Rachel raised her child and made a living. However, both of them met downfalls thanks to their deviation from the angel in the house persona; Rachel and her son had to go on the run to avoid being murdered, and Serena ended up being killed by a vengeful ghost. This seems to suggest that women of all types will suffer consequences, so being an angel in the house is irrelevant. The two women are incredibly strong and fiercely independent, proving that not all women have to be dependent on

men and stay in the house. Rather, Rash's creation of Serena and Rachel shows that feminism likely existed in the early 1900's by strong women such as the two in *Serena*.

Overall, Serena and Rachel are two extremely different women. However, they do have one thing in common: neither of them fits the typical expectations of women in this time period. Women in the 1920's and '30s were supposed to be pure, proper, doting housewives, and neither Serena nor Rachel fits this expectation; this was the expectation associated with the angel in the house. While Rachel does not fully encompass what it means to be a domestic angel, she is much closer to the definition than Serena is. Rachel proves throughout *Serena* that she is a dedicated, hard-working mother who is willing to make sacrifices to care for her child. She does not have a stable income, excellent housing, or a husband to provide for her and her child, but she does everything she can to make sure her and Jacob survive. She is an amazing mother, which is one of the main characteristics of the angel in the house. While Rachel isn't married and works outside the home, she is still a domestic angel.

On the other hand, Serena is anything but a domestic angel. She aligns closely with the monster in the dichotomy of angel in the house versus monster. She is passionate, sensual, hard-headed, and independent. She does not rely on her husband for things like angels in the house do; rather, she is able to work and speak her mind despite the stereotypical gender associations existing in this time period. She is certainly not afraid to express her thoughts and opinions to men, which is quite uncommon in the early 1900's for a woman. While some of her characteristics are notable, respectable, and promote equality for women, most of what she does is terrifying and monstrous. The ease in which she kills people, or has them killed, rather, is monstrous indeed. Rash's novel succeeds in questioning and complicating the gender ideals and expectations of this time through the creation of the complex characters of Serena and Rachel.

His book forces readers to look at gender roles in an entirely new light, and complicates the angel in the house versus monster dichotomy.

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