Female Characters and Setting in Shirley Jackson's "We Have Always Lived in the Castle"

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Abstract

We Have Always Lived in the Castle is Shirley Jackson's last completed novel and, much like the majority of her other works, it features female characters suffering from mental disorders and the house which represents a place of both security and imprisonment. The main objective of this paper will be to analyze both of the protagonists and to explore the setting of Jackson's novel. Constance and Mary Katherine (Merricat) Blackwood, two psychically unstable sisters, continue living isolated from the society after the murder of their other family members. Their lives are disturbed by an intruder, their Cousin Charles. At first glance, Constance and Merricat seem to be completely opposite characters, Constance being the more submissive one, and Merricat the wild one. However, this essay will argue that despite their differences, the sisters have a lot more in common. It will explore the ways they defy the society and show just how disturbed both of them really are. This paper will also take a closer look at the Blackwood house and the village as the main settings of the story and their dual role: the role of prison and sanctuary.

Keywords: Shirley Jackson, confinement, society, sisters, mental disorder.

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Introduction

The works of Shirley Jackson have recently been gaining more and more attention. In 2016, a new biography titled *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* by Ruth Franklin has been published, as well as the collection of Jackson's short stories titled *Dark Tales*. In 2017, a movie adaptation of her novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is to be released.

Shirley Jackson is told to have inspired many popular writers, such as Stephen King, Neil Gaiman and Donna Tartt. She is mostly famous for her short stories, such as "The Lottery", and her novel *The Haunting of Hill House* which has had two movie adaptations.

Jackson herself led a haunted and peculiar life. In order to escape from her abusive mother "who was disappointed by her daughter and who made it clear that she would have preferred a prettier, more pliable one" (Heller), Jackson married Stanley Edgar Hyman who ended up cheating on her and being jealous of her success. Trapped in another almost hostile household, she appears to have found her way of rebelling through her writing. As Zoë Heller points out in her article, "The Haunted Mind of Shirley Jackson", "[t]he motif of a lonely woman setting out to escape a miserable family or a grimly claustrophobic community and ending up "lost" recurs throughout Jackson's stories". Her main characters are mostly female, often women with psychological problems who are being punished by society. Her novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is no different.

It is a story about two sisters, Constance and Mary Katherine (Merricat), who continue to live away from the society after the murder of the rest of their family – a crime which is revealed to have been committed by Merricat herself. It is also through this character that Jackson takes a not so subtle revenge on her own abusive mother, by making a twelve year old Merricat into the murderess. Jackson also describes the two sisters as two halves of the same person (Heller), two completely opposite sides of one personality. Another important thing about this novel is that the home of Blackwood sisters is one of the central themes. As well as in other Jackson's works, "the house is a deeply ambiguous symbol—a place of warmth and security and also one of imprisonment and catastrophe" (Heller). It is the place where the sisters find a sanctuary from the abusive villagers, as well as the place where they are being punished and, in the end, confined. It is perhaps interesting that after writing this novel, "Jackson suffered a nervous breakdown and a prolonged bout of acute agoraphobia that prevented her going outside for half a year" (Heller) not unlike Constance, one of the protagonists.

Through this novel, Jackson challenges the idea of happiness, as well as the morality of both society and individual. These two in particular are in conflict, as is the case in many other Jackson's stories. Merricat, the narrator of the story, is desperately trying to escape the society and its norms, while those same people are trying to punish her for it. The novel parodies the role of the housewife, but also twists it by making the submissive Constance into a participant in the murder.

In the first chapter, the paper looks at one of the protagonists, Mary Katherine, and argues that she is an assertive narrator, but one who is capable of deceiving both herself and the reader. The chapter aims to point out the cases in which truth seems to be different than what Merricat chooses to believe.

The second chapter looks more closely into the character of Merricat and the ways she challenges the traditional tropes of the villain and the innocent heroine. It looks at the motives for Merricat's crimes and analyzes her behavior. The third chapter focuses on one particular feature of the narrator: Merricat's unhealthy need for routine. It looks at the way she tries to preserve it and the way she acts after she is forced out of her comfort zone. The fourth chapter examines both sisters, Constance and Merricat. It analyses the ways in which sisters are different, but also just how similar they really are. The final chapter will focus more on the setting, which plays an important role in the novel. The Blackwood home will at the same time function as two very different settings, but it will also be the key element in concluding the story of the two sisters.

1. Unreliable Narrator

Point of view is one of crucial aspects of every narrative. The narrator's personality, his or her opinions and experiences influence the story and the way the story is presented to the reader, resulting in reliable or unreliable narration. Mary Katherine (Merricat) Blackwood is the main protagonist and the first-person narrator of Shirley Jackson's novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. She is an interesting character through whose eyes the reader follows the events in what has remained of the Blackwood family. That being said, Mary Katherine is also the most disturbed individual in the novel and is increasingly losing touch with reality, which makes her point of view not only highly biased, but utterly unreliable. In addition, it contributes to the creation of the uneasy, uncanny atmosphere of the novel.

The book opens with Mary Katherine introducing herself, but her first sentences are also the first clue to the reader that she is not exactly an ordinary character: "I have often

thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf" (Jackson 1). In addition, she says: "I like my sister Constance . . . and *Amanita phalloides*, the death mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead" (Jackson 1). These first lines are disturbing and ominous in itself, making the reader feel anxious but also pulling them in, very much like the people from the village who Merricat strongly dislikes.

Merricat acts childishly, so much so that the reader could forget that she is an eighteen year old girl. She likes to spend her time outside, with her cat Jonas following her as if he were her familiar. Her sister Constance acts as a caretaker and authority. Constance is the one who entrusts Merricat with the task of going to the village for groceries, because she herself is prevented by her strong agoraphobia. This is the task Merricat dislikes, claiming that the villagers have always hated the Blackwood family, and that they mock her and bully her. And they do seem to act rather unpleasantly towards her. When she comes to the grocery store, Merricat describes that the people in there are "not willing to move until [she] had gone out through the door again and they were swept back into their own lives" (Jackson 8). Furthermore, when she comes into the place where she drinks her coffee, which she only describes as Stella's, two men follow her there and tell her that she and the remainder of her family should move away. It is understandable why Mary Katherine finds this behavior unpleasant and considers it abusing, but what is even more surprising is how violent her thoughts are. She pushes aside her wish to run away from them, letting her pride take its place instead. She refuses to give up on the little dignity she has left and is determined to go through with her routine. But she takes her revenge in her mind: "I wish you were all dead, I thought, and longed to say it out loud" (Jackson 8).

However, even though the things Merricat describes really do seem like bullying, Helen Clarke, who comes over for tea, gives a different perspective to it: "Mary Katherine, you know as well as I do that nine-tenths of that feeling is nothing but your imagination, and if you'd go halfway to be friendly there'd never be a word said against you" (Jackson 29), which probably is one of the reasons why Merricat dislikes her so much. The looks Merricat describes could certainly be imagined; Merricat herself says she "feels" and not "sees" them. Also, Helen tries to take Constance out of the house for a while. This is something Merricat absolutely dreads, so much so that even a mention of Constance leaving the garden makes her anxious. But looking at that from Helen Clarke's point of view, it is not an inherently bad thing. As she points out, Constance is young, and she is trapped in her kitchen, alone and serving the two remaining members of her family. She is uncomfortable with leaving the house to the point that it is a mental disorder. And while it is not clear whether Constance has

always been that way or if she has become agoraphobic as the result of her family being murdered, her confinement to the house is unhealthy. Helen Clarke is trying to help her with this the only way she knows; she brings another woman with her for her regular visit and suggests inviting Constance's old friends over. This way, she does not push Constance straight into the world, but only tries to convince her to give the world a chance. Merricat, of course, fears this idea and deeply dislikes it.

Another person whose point of view should be considered is Cousin Charles. Of course, he is not really a good person – his plan is essentially to get the Blackwood's money and property. But even if he is greedy, there are some situations where he reacts perfectly understandably. One of the reasons he comes into conflict with Merricat is because she keeps burying and damaging the things from the house by nailing them on trees. Merricat perceives him as rapacious and insensitive, but if Charles does indeed come from the less wealthy family, it is not hard to understand why he would be so against damaging valuable things for the sole purpose of Merricat having fun. Charles also offers to help around the house, and run errands for them. He offers to take over Merricat's detested task of going to the village, which Constance finds more than appropriate. But Merricat interprets this offer as a threat. She follows Charles into the village and sees him socializing with the men who mock her. This is for Merricat the last needed proof that Charles is essentially evil. But Charles has no way of knowing what these men do to her, and judging from the hostile way she treated him, it is not hard to imagine that the hatred between the villagers and Merricat goes both ways. Of course, Cousin Charles indeed proves to be a greedy person who in the end leaves them alone, but Merricat's perception of him testifies of her paranoia far more than of his greed

Furthermore, Merricat proves throughout the novel that she either has an overactive imagination, or that she is losing touch with reality. One of the examples are her violent thoughts, but there are also some more benevolent examples, such as her descriptions of her imaginary house on the moon: "Things on the moon were very bright, and odd colors" (Jackson 15). She keeps adding more and more things to it: a garden for Constance, winged horse, imaginary food, gold spoons and cat-furred plants. It seems that whatever Merricat imagines already exists on the moon. She goes to that place wherever she feels threatened or simply uncomfortable. The first time she mentions the moon is on her weekly trip to the village, and she keeps mentioning it when Constance brings up a topic Merricat does not want to discuss. When the villagers come after the fire and destroy the house, it is Merricat's only wish to be on the moon. It is only here, in her imagined place, that she finds the security she is searching for: "Everything's safe on the moon" (Jackson 44), she says to Constance. Of

course, since the place on the moon actually only exists in her head, Merricat eventually has to face the reality. But in the end, Merricat and Constance seem to make their own place on the moon by closing into their own house, or rather what is left of it: “I am so happy” (Jackson 145), Constance says to Merricat after they have driven away Cousin Charles for one last time. And this, for Merricat, is close enough to what she wanted. With Cousin Charles out of the picture, Uncle Julian dead, and the villagers bringing them food, there is nothing else for Merricat and Constance than to live their lives the way they want inside their home, together with nobody else to bother them: “I told you that you would like it on the moon” (Jackson 145), Merricat tells her, as they laugh.

2. The Monster and the Innocent

One of the main features of Gothic fiction is an innocent heroine pursued by a cruel and lustful villain. But what Jackson does with this idea in her novel is something else entirely. She takes a seemingly innocent heroine and turns her into the monster itself.

While the readers are initially lead to believe that the cruel and greedy villain is Cousin Charles, there is one thing that one should constantly have in mind: Merricat is an unreliable narrator, and everything she tells the reader is highly subjective and dubious at best. Despite her disturbing thoughts, the reader is still lead to believe she is just a little girl, an orphan who was left alone with her older sister. From this perspective, it is easier to believe that Mary Katherine sees Cousin Charles as a threat only because he seems to want to separate her from the only person she has left. However, as the novel progresses, Merricat is revealed for what she truly is.

First and foremost, it becomes blatantly obvious that she is fully capable of committing a crime when she sets their own house on fire. And not only that, but she also feels no remorse and finds it to be fully justified. Consequently, she is also to blame for her Uncle Julian’s death. Admittedly, she is not a direct murderer in this case, but it is the events of that night – which are the follow-up of her arson – that lead to Uncle Julian’s death. It is also that very night that both the reader and her sister Constance finally get the verbal confession: it was Mary Katherine who killed their entire family.

Another thing worth noting about Merricat’s crime of parenticide is that it is not simply a mindless, impulsive decision as it seems. Mary Katherine knew exactly what she was doing when she put arsenic in the sugar: “You never used sugar” (Jackson 130), Merricat explains to her sister on that dreadful night, “So I put it in the sugar” (Jackson 130). It is

enough of a revelation for Constance, and clear enough for the reader. Because Merricat loved Constance, and because Constance was the kindest person towards her, Merricat spares her life and kills only the parents. Her sociopathic inclination thus becomes clear and the reader is shocked.

The shock results from the fact that the reader learns throughout the novel that everybody believes that Constance is the one who killed her family – not only the police and investigators, but the townspeople, too. In fact, they are still convinced that she is the one who got away with murder. Merricat is not a suspect, mostly because she was not present at the dinner. In addition, she is the younger daughter which makes everyone believe that she would not be capable of such a crime. However, the motive is not clear in Constance's case: "Your mass murderer must have a reason" (Jackson 38), even Uncle Julian points out. But it seems that Constance had the opportunity. She is not only the person who got rid of the evidence of arsenic in the sugar (with the intention to protect her sister about whom Constance must have suspected is the killer), but also the one who had been preparing meals. It is perhaps Constance's passivity that saves her from the punishment, because rare people are truly convinced she is capable of such a crime. So this is what Merricat likely counted on from the very beginning; not only would Constance probably be exonerated, but would also be the one to sacrifice herself for Merricat.

Uncle Julian turns out to be the error in Merricat's plan; he is the mistake she did not count on. Uncle Julian survives simply because he does not take enough sugar for the arsenic to kill him, but it is still enough to make him unable to take care of himself. Uncle Julian is dependent on Constance, and seems to suffer from dementia. He keeps mistaking people he meets for the ones who are no longer alive, and seems to shift from present to past. However, Merricat does not show any hatred towards him. This is most likely because of Constance's influence. Again, her sister is the one who acts like a moral compass for Mary Katherine. Even though it is not explicitly shown, it is possible that Merricat understands that it is her fault he is in the present state: "The poor old Uncle Julian was dying and I made a firm rule to be kinder to him" (Jackson 12). She keeps reminding herself: "I was to remember to be kinder to Uncle Julian" (Jackson 12), "I wanted to be kinder to him" (Jackson 49). However, it is obviously not the real emotion she feels, because she does not show even the slightest sign of mourning after he dies. The only thing she says is that she is "not allowed to touch Uncle Julian's things" (Jackson 135), which might signify Merricat's guilt or remorse, but remains ambiguous. If anything, her response turns playful: "I will wear leaves" (Jackson 135), she says to Constance when she tries to convince her to wear Uncle Julian's clothes. Merricat

buries Uncle Julian's pencil and does not go into his old room; for her, it seems to be enough of a funeral, but not a single tear is shed.

On the other hand, Constance does not seem to mourn him any more than her sister does. She plants a yellow rosebush, but never attends his funeral. Admittedly, it is probably her agoraphobia that stops Constance from visiting his grave: "[O]f course she never picked a rose from Uncle Julian's rosebush" (Jackson 145), and this is perhaps the most obvious proof of Constance's feelings. But it is doubtful whether it is purely sadness she feels. After all, Uncle Julian has been Constance's burden, and it is not entirely implausible that what she feels is simply guilt for the relief she felt after he died.

Looking at the female characters in the novel, Constance is perhaps the one who comes closest to the idea of an innocent heroine. And still, Constance is not quite the typical chaste girl. Throughout the whole novel, she is trying to justify Merricat's behavior and it is possible to ascribe this kind of reaction to extreme fear or love, but both of these emotions are then stretched to the point of being unhealthy. Of course, Constance is not mentally healthy to begin with – the most obvious proof being her fear of outer space. It is certain that the readers will never really know how Constance came to be how she is now; whether she has always been that way or the death of her family and the events that followed are what made her that way. But if it is taken into consideration that it is extreme love what Constance feels for her mentally ill sister, one has to wonder how far that love is ready to go, and what kinds of terror it is ready to justify. At this point, the reader also has to wonder what prompted the girls' mental problems and the murder of their parents, as the murder may be seen as a sort of liberation from potential abuse. Jackson never reveals the family's history, which leaves enough room for speculation, and indeed, even escalation of the hidden horrors in the family.

3. Merricat's Rules and Rituals

In her afterword in Penguin's edition of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Joyce Carol Oates claims that "Merricat's condition suggests paranoid schizophrenia, in which anything out of ordinary is likely to be threatening and all things are signs and symbols to be deciphered" (Oates 150). And even though in the novel Mary Katherine's mental state is never truly diagnosed, there are plenty of proofs that she is not neurologically typical. Among the most prominent proofs are Merricat's rules and rituals which she follows almost religiously. They are mentioned at the very beginning of the story. Merricat confides to the reader that "Fridays and Tuesdays were terrible days, because [she] had to go into the village"

(Jackson 1). This is one of the rare tasks Mary Katherine is allowed – and even obliged – to do. It is not a task she enjoys, but she does it still, because her sister is prevented by her agoraphobia, and the small family still needs the groceries. However, it is obvious that these trips make Merricat agitated and uncomfortable, so she keeps looking for ways to bear with them more easily. She finds her solace in the games she invents, not unlike children's game or a game of chess: "The library was my start and the black rock was my goal. I had to move down one side of Main Street, cross, and then move up the other side until I reached the black rock, when I would win" (Jackson 5), Merricat explains, making the village into a board for her game. However, it is perhaps a testament to Merricat's instability that she does not alter the game as she goes, but instead gives herself made up punishments. For example, "Lose two turns" (Jackson 9) is her imaginary penalty for breaking her own rules. And even though this game does virtually nothing to help Merricat get through the village unharmed, it does seem to calm her down, because she does not lash out even when she is faced with the village men who tease her. This kind of coping strategy might suggest that she has developed it previously as a way to deal with some kind of abuse in the family, although, as has been mentioned before, there is no conclusive proof for this.

Merricat has developed a routine for every day of the week: "On Tuesdays and Fridays I went into the village, and on Thursday, which was my most powerful day, I went into the big attic and dressed in their clothes. Mondays we neatened the house" (Jackson 41), she explains, and it is quite obvious that Merricat enjoys these rituals as they are giving her some sense of security. The moment her routine seems to become disturbed by Cousin Charles' arrival, Merricat is completely beside herself, becoming more and more desperate in her need to preserve the rhythm of their lives to the point where she is threateningly dangerous not only to this intruder, but also to the rest of her remaining family.

Other rules seem to have been made in agreement with her sister Constance. They are mostly based on prohibition and suggest that Constance tried to prevent Merricat from repeating her crimes: "I was not allowed to prepare food" (Jackson 24), Mary Katherine says. Also, "I was not allowed to open the safe" (Jackson 83) and "I am not allowed in Uncle Julian's room" (Jackson 126). All of these rules show that Constance is worried about what Merricat might do: "I was not allowed to handle knives, but when [Constance] worked in the garden I cared for her tools, keeping them bright and clean" (Jackson 42). Despite the rules, Merricat's psychosis is hard to control and at one point, she breaks one of the rules: "I was not allowed to touch matches" (Jackson 86). Most of these rules served to protect Uncle Julian's life, and this particular prohibition will prove to be a foreshadowing of his death. What is

worse, after breaking the rule, Mary Katherine does not feel a direct responsibility for the arson that destroys a good part of their home and consequently leads to Uncle Julian's death, which shows her sociopathic nature.

Furthermore, Merricat seems to rely on the power of the small physical rituals she makes. She makes "safeguards, the box of silver dollars . . . buried by the creek, and the doll buried in the long field, and the book nailed to the tree in the pine woods" (Jackson 41). She explains that she has always buried things, since she was very little, and she takes a certain kind of pride in that. Psychologically, these rituals may be seen as her attempt to gain some kind of control over her life, which she either needs because she is born with an obsessive-compulsive disorder, or she might have developed it as a result of potential abuse. Merricat genuinely believes these things are what is keeping her and her sister safe, and interprets the first disturbances of her hidden things as the first signs of trouble: "All the omens spoke of change" (Jackson 40), she says with a sense of certainty. And even though Constance does not seem to actually believe in her sister's witchcraft, she seems to find it harmless to the point that she even encourages Merricat's hobby giving her little, almost meaningless presents: "Here is a treasure for you to bury" (Jackson 41). Merricat finds herself in conflict with Cousin Charles over this particular ritual, since Charles not only finds it ridiculous, but is outraged when he finds out how many valuable things Merricat has buried or otherwise damaged.

The other type of magic Merricat tries to practice is the magic of words: "I would choose three powerful words, words of strong protection, and so long as these great words were never spoken aloud no change would come" (Jackson 44). It is clear that whatever she does and however disturbed these rituals may be, she does it to keep herself safe. Again, this may be a proof of abuse, or simply of her psychosis. However, this method proves to be the least effective one: "I had three magic words (…) and we were safe until they were said out loud" (Jackson 57), she confesses to her sister well after her spell seems to be broken and Cousin Charles has already arrived into their home. And still, she keeps to desperately try to protect them with words: "I thought that Jonas's name might be the safest thing to speak to [Charles] first" (Jackson 64). This, perhaps, is also the way Jackson pokes fun not only at herself, but at all the other writes, because they – just like Merricat – use words as their powerful weapon. The weapon, as it seems in Mary Katherine's case, which proves to be not only ineffective, but perhaps also a threat itself: "I realized now that this was the third time in one day that the subject had been touched, and three times makes it real" (Jackson 27). These words refer to Helen Clarke mentioning the possibility of Constance coming back into society

– a possibility Merricat dreads, and they provoke Merricat's physical reaction as well. She starts feeling like she cannot breathe and, to calm herself down, she lashes out, smashing the milk pitcher.

"Witchcraft is a primitive attempt at science; an attempt to assert power by the powerless" (156), Oates claims in her afterword. However, Mary Katherine is not as powerless, nor as innocent as she may seem to be. After all, not only does she manage to banish her Cousin Charles, but she also gets the happy ending with her sister quite close to the one she has always wanted. But of course, it seems that she manages to achieve all this only after she decides to take the matter into her own hands, rather than putting her faith in her witchcraft.

Moreover, a ritual in which both sisters seem to participate is the food preparation. Generally, food is a very strong motif in Jackson's story: "We eat the year away" (Jackson 45), Merricat says, "We eat the spring and the summer and the fall. We wait for something to grow and then we eat it" (Jackson 45). In addition, the family was murdered by means of poisoned food. Merricat is dependent on Constance to provide her with meals, since she seems to have always been the only one who can and is willing to cook. Constance prepares the food; Merricat and Uncle Julian eat it. Oates compares it to "a gothic parody" (154) of what 1950s' women should be. However, even though it seems like Constance should be the superior one – since it is doubtful whether Merricat could feed herself without her sister – much like the housewives of the 50s, Constance acts like the more submissive of the two. She is serving Merricat, and using food not only as a comfort and the means of solving other problems, but also a way to express her love for her sister. This is also why it is ironic that Merricat uses the food her sister prepared as the means of killing her family. In addition to that, at the end of the novel, the villagers are the ones providing food for the sisters, thus showing the change of dynamics where Constance and Merricat both are superior to them.

4. The Blackwood Sisters as Opposites

Mary Katherine and her older sister Constance are pure opposites of one another. While Merricat is lively and energetic, loves to spend time outside, and can be quite aggressive, Constance seems to be more timid, submissive, and reluctant to leave her kitchen. In the very beginning, the sisters are introduced in different ways. Mary Katherine is more forward; she is the narrator of the story and therefore she speaks directly to the reader: "I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf" (Jackson 1), she

says as an introduction, and this is the first clue to who Merricat really is. She is the wild side of the pair; she is the one who is capable of turning her ideas into actions, even though she appears innocent at first. In fact, Constance Blackwood is introduced by her sister as the one who "never went past her own garden" (Jackson 2). And the first time she actually shows up, she is in her garden, smiling at Merricat when she says: "look how far I came today" (Jackson 19). This in itself is enough to conclude that Constance suffers from some kind of agoraphobia. While Mary Katherine spends the bigger part of her time wandering Blackwood property and even going to the village when it is necessary, Constance rarely leaves her kitchen. She ventures into the other parts of the house seemingly only to clean it, and when she spends time in her garden it is to produce food.

As previously mentioned, for Constance and Merricat, their entire life revolves around food. Especially for Constance, who is the provider of it, food is the central focus of their daily lives. It is the reason Constance works in the garden and why Merricat goes to the village she hates. Constance cooks and bakes and hoards supplies of food for the family. This is traditionally seen as a feminine chore, and more importantly, a motherly one. She provides for and worries about her younger sister in a way a mother would. She either seems to try to be the way her mother used to behave, or to be the kind of mother they never had. Even though Uncle Julian points out that their mother was not a skilled cook, she seemed to have been fulfilling her obligations as a housewife. She played the harp and held tea parties, even made jelly. She also seemed to be the center of the Blackwood family, because Merricat points out: "where our mother did not go, no one else went" (Jackson 95). Constance seems to be more than willing to take over that role: "I wonder if it would be right for me to wear Mother's pearls" (Jackson 68), she asks both herself and Mary Katherine. And not only that, but it seems like Constance may even be more fitting for that role: "I never remember that our mother's fingers touched the strings so lightly with such a breath of melody" (Jackson 85), Merricat says about her sister's playing the harp. In general, Mary Katherine seems to have always clung more to her sister than her mother.

However, "mother was intentionally killed by Merricat, and Constance, by protecting her sister in this act, has been accessory to this murder" (Sluis 46). As mentioned before, Mary Katherine is the one who has deliberately poisoned her entire family, and she was only twelve when she did it. While it is only towards the end of the novel that she actually admits the act, it is hinted at even before, through Merricat's remarks. However, while the reader is kept in darkness and Uncle Julian is too psychically unstable to think quite rationally, Constance is the one who seems to have known that from the very beginning:

"I put it in the sugar."

"I know. I knew then."

"You never used sugar."

"No." (Jackson 130)

But she does not seem to even hint that it is her sister who is the actual murderer, not to their apparent friends or the police, and not when she herself is put on trial: "She told the police those people deserved to die" (Jackson 37), Mrs. Wright argues when she talks to Uncle Julian, who then jumps to defend his niece. But not only that – Constance also goes back to their home and willingly takes care of Merricat. Even though it could be argued that perhaps Constance herself is afraid of Merricat and what she is capable of, she never really shows any type of fear. In fact, she seems to be the one to keep her sister in control; she is the one who decides what and when Merricat can or should do. "Silly Merricat" (Jackson 86) is the only reprimand Constance expresses. It is by this type of behavior, by this kind of inaction that Constance in fact becomes accessory to murder. But, in contrast to her sister who shows no remorse for what she did, Constance does show that she feels guilty to a certain extent: "[W]e'll never talk about it again. Never" (Jackson 130), Constance says to her sister after that one incident when Merricat admits her fault. But perhaps the most interesting part of that conversation is Merricat's reaction: "I was chilled, but she smiled at me kindly and it was alright" (Jackson 130). It is one of the rare moments where Constance showed her superiority over Merricat. Constance openly shows how cruel she could be in the end, after their Cousin Charles leaves once and for all: "The least Charles could have done . . . was shoot himself through the head in the driveway" (Jackson 146), Constance says brutally honest and unbothered. It is these small moments that could lead the reader to believe that Constance might not be as innocent after all. After all, she is Mary Katherine's sister, and the submission she shows might simply be her choice.

However, Constance still seems to briefly entertain the idea of marriage. When Helen Clarke comes to visit the girls for what would turn out to be the last time, she still tries to bring Constance back into society: "It's spring, you're young, you're lovely, you have a right to be happy. Come back into the world" (Jackson 27), she says. For Helen Clarke, that means trying to find Constance a proper husband. At this moment, Constance is reluctant, but she still seems to take this into consideration. Furthermore, when Cousin Charles comes into their home, Constance is not reluctant at all to completely take over the role of a good housewife. She accepts him as the new patriarch in the house. She cleans and cooks for him, and even when Merricat asks whether he was sitting in their father's chair the night before, Constance

simply answers: “He has a perfect right to sit there” (Jackson 70). In comparison, Mary Katherine does not accept this in any way. She is angry and frustrated with Cousin Charles, obviously wanting him to leave: “Charles is a ghost” (Jackson 69), Merricat says to her sister. In the end, this will prove to be nothing short of foreshadowing, because Merricat will fully succeed in driving Cousin Charles away, along with his influence over Constance.

One of the reasons why Merricat dislikes Charles so much is probably because she sees him as a threat. Not only has he come in order to take her sister away from her, but he is also an intruder forcing his way into their small family. He is an authority figure, and he believes he is taking what is rightfully his – the Blackwood family’s property, money and even Constance. He orders Constance around and in a way deceives her. While he pretends to try to connect with Merricat, he does not feel threatened or worried about her: “[C]ome about a month from now, I wonder who *will* still be here?” (Jackson 80), he says to Merricat on her request for him to leave. Charles underestimates Merricat and how far she is ready to go, but his behavior still makes Merricat worried and angry. She also sees him as a threat because Charles is obviously taking her place in the house. Before Charles’s arrival, it was Merricat’s word that was the imperative in the Blackwood household. She did what she wanted and what she considered necessary; Constance was preparing meals she wanted and pretty much adjusted herself to Merricat. But then things change and suddenly, Charles is the one who is in charge. He even takes over Merricat’s task of going into the village. Even though that is the task that Mary Katherine hates, suddenly she feels threatened and excluded. It becomes even more so after she follows Charles into the village and finds him socializing with men who were bullying her. With this, Charles becomes not only a threat in her home, but also one of her tormentors from the outside. But it is important to stress that in Merricat’s head, she does not simply lash out and burn the house down. For her, that is almost a desperate measure. First she tries to keep him away with her witchcraft, using her family objects as protection. Then she directly asks him to leave. Only after Charles not only refuses, but also threatens her, does Merricat actually take action to drive him away.

Even though it is Constance who suffers from agoraphobia, which implies feeling safe only in the confinement of their house, Mary Katherine is the one who seems to be more closed off when it comes to people. As mentioned before, Merricat does not want any intruders on their property or into their home. She invents her own ways of protecting their property, with made up charms and spells. She even dislikes the already rare visits from Helen Clarke: “Go away, I told her in my mind” (Jackson 29), Merricat keeps repeating while Helen is there, “Go away, go away” (Jackson 29). On the other hand, while Constance does not

seem to be too fond of Helen Clarke, she does not seem to openly dislike her either. She is polite and even seriously considers her suggestions about going back into the world. While it can be argued that it is something Constance was taught to do, just like she was taught to cook and serve, it still seems that Constance reacts to a few people who seem friendly more positive than Merricat does.

On the other hand, people also seem to react to the sisters differently. When it comes to Mary Katherine, people seem to either openly bully her, or simply ignore her. The sole reason she hates going to the village is because people mock her and often stare at her. The only person from the village who seems somewhat kinder to Merricat is Stella, the owner of the place where she usually stops for coffee. Stella is the only one who stands up for Merricat when men mock her, but eventually Stella also gives in, telling Merricat to "go along home. There won't be any peace around here until you go" (Jackson 15). Stella also shows up in the end as a part of the group that taunts and bullies the sisters. Furthermore, the other people Merricat interacts with seem to ignore her. Helen Clarke seems to regard her only when she absolutely must. The doctor who frequently visits Uncle Julian pays her no attention: "He went directly to Uncle Julian's room without a glance at me" (Jackson 45), Merricat says while describing his short visit. Uncle Julian himself at times seems to be convinced that Mary Katherine is dead: "My niece Mary Katherine died in an orphanage, of neglect, during her sister's trial for murder" (Jackson 93). In addition to that, when Charles is not openly in conflict with Merricat, he seems to ignore her, too. On couple of occasions he speaks about her as if she were not in the same room: "Cousin Mary doesn't like me" (Jackson 70), Charles says once, pretending to speak to Merricat's cat Jonas. But what is interesting is that, when people from the village taunt Mary Katherine, they do so by mocking Constance. They have a clever rhyme they came up with, something resembling a children's song:

> "Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea?
> Oh, no, said Merricat, you'll poison me" (Jackson 17).

They are essentially poking fun at Merricat's sister, mocking the murder of the entire Blackwood family in an absurd and almost chilling parody of a nursery rhyme. But, even though it is not clear how Constance reacts to this rhyme (or whether she has ever actually heard it), it is obvious that the rhyme makes Merricat angry: "Their throats will burn when the words come out" (Jackson 17), Merricat thinks as she walks past the kids singing it.

In comparison, the few people Constance is in contact with seem to be rather polite towards her most of the time. Helen Clarke goes out of her way to be friendly, trying to pull Constance out of the house, and even calling Constance one of her closest friends. Cousin

Charles, of course, charms Constance in order to get the inheritance, and Uncle Julian seems to treat her with some amount of respect, probably because of his being dependent on her. However, this poses the following question: why are people more ready to be polite towards Constance, who was the prime suspect of the multiple murders, than towards Mary Katherine, seemingly harmless, if a bit odd eighteen year old girl? The answer perhaps lies within the aforementioned fact that Constance seems to be more submissive. Constance is taught to be placid, shy, and introverted. She would much rather stay in the comfort of her own house than challenge it. Even when Merricat first describes her, she points out how "even at the worst time she was pink and white and golden, and nothing had ever seemed to dim the brightness of her" (Jackson 20). Merricat herself, on the other hand, is far less timid. She is a tomboy, a wild, disobedient child who got sent to her bed without dinner. Merricat lashes out, breaks things, and shows what is on her mind. One way or another, she is more ready than Constance to act in order to get what she wants. Mary Katherine stands up to Cousin Charles, and she does not pretend to even tolerate the people from the village. And of course, even though people do not actually know that, Mary Katherine is the one who killed the family. But what Jackson does with this is give the reader two options. One is that, even though they do not know that with certainty, people from the village have a certain idea of who Merricat really is. But perhaps the scarier option is that people are ready to go as far as to look past violent crimes if the person fits the society's norms.

However, the sisters do end up sharing the same fate. Once Merricat sets fire to the house, the villagers gather around to watch it. The firemen that put the fire out do it because it is their job, their duty. The other's response? – "Let it burn" (Jackson 104). What actually starts the attack on the house is when Jim Donell, a figure of authority, removes his hat and throws a rock at the house. This action starts a whole wave of cruelty as mob mentality takes over. The destruction reaches its climax when the people trap the sisters in the circle they form, mock them, and prevent them from running away. The only people who do not take part in this are Jim Clarke, Helen Clarke, and Uncle Julian's doctor, Dr. Levy. And while Helen Clarke is scared and does virtually nothing to help the girls, Jim Clarke is the one who stands up to these people. But he and Doctor Levy only manage to stop them by announcing that Uncle Julian is dead. Even then, the first reaction comes from Cousin Charles: "Did she kill him?" (Jackson 109). It is not clear whether he means Constance or Mary Katherine, but it is only then that people start moving away from the sisters. Still, it takes Jim Clarke to start pushing them around for them to actually move and start going away. In her essay, "The Many Faces of the Housewife", Roline Sluis points out: "The persecution of the sisters, the

fire, the stoning all reminds the reader of the persecution of witches. Jackson, who also wrote books about witches, was very familiar with the subject and the images of fire and stoning reappear again and again in her work" (54). She suggests that the villagers punish the sisters in this way because of their not fitting into the society. Both of them – and especially Merricat – refuse to conform to it, rather choosing to live outside of their norms, alone with each other.

The interesting thing, however, happens after the stoning of the Blackwood house. Constance and Merricat come back to find that, even though damaged, the house is still more than suitable for them. They find that, even though their precious kitchen is dirty, it is not something they could not fix themselves. And more importantly, the cellar where the Blackwood women put their food for generations is untouched, keeping thus the family tradition alive. So the sisters barricade themselves into the room. But then, people start coming over. The first one to come is, of course, Helen Clarke, but the sisters refuse to let her in. Then Jim Clarke and Doctor Levy, and even Cousin Charles comes back with another man, again to try and get some profit. However, other people from the village start coming to bring them food. They leave it in front of their door, almost like a sort of sacrifice to repent for the things they had done that terrible night: "I broke one of your chairs and I'm sorry" (Jackson 138), one of the men says as he leaves the basket with a chicken. Merricat and Constance go from being hated and put on trial for being witches, to being feared for the same reason: "I hear they see everything that goes on" (Jackson 146), children whisper among each other, "[T]he ladies will get you" (Jackson 146). In the ending scene, the sisters get the basket of food with a note saying: "He didn't mean it, please" (Jackson 146), as an apology for someone's mischievous child. "They have so much to be afraid of" (Jackson 146), Merricat says, now pitying the people from the village. They accept the basket, of course, and this is where we see that the dynamics has definitely changed. By closing themselves into their house, Mary Katherine and Constance have freed themselves of society and its burden: "[W]e are so happy" (Jackson 146), Mary Katherine says to her sister, and ironically, they really do seem to be.

5. The "Castle" – Place of Security?

The setting in gothic fiction often plays the key role in the story, so it is no surprise that the setting of this novel is mentioned already in its title. "The castle" is in fact the Blackwood mansion, now almost completely deserted, save for Mary Katherine, her sister

Constance and Uncle Julian. The interesting thing about it is that it acts both as the place of security for the sister, as well as the place of confinement.

When Mary Katherine begins her narrative, she is not in her house, but rather in the village she detests. She hates the people in it, the way they act, and she describes the village as rather uncomfortable place. Merricat claims that "whatever planned to be colorful lost its heart quickly in the village" (Jackson 6). This is also the only instance where we actually see Merricat going into the village; every other time is nothing but a brief mention.

However, she describes their home in more details. After marrying her mother, Merricat's father put up a fence around their property, symbolizing the family's detachment from the village. It is quite possible that this put a strain on the relationship between the villagers and Blackwoods, since Merricat claims that "before, everyone used the path" (Jackson 18) through the Blackwood property as a shortcut. But with this act, the Blackwoods quite literally separated themselves from the rest of the people, and this seemed to send them a quite clear message. Merricat, however, does not think her mother was wrong and is glad that the fence now separates the remainder of the family from the villagers.

"Although we kept the house well, the rooms we used together were the back ones" (Jackson 20), Merricat says, and this is the first clue to just how limited their living space is. As discussed before, Constance suffers from agoraphobia and in the very beginning it is pointed out that she only dares to come out to her garden. Merricat, being the disobedient child, has more freedom; she roams the rest of the Blackwood property, and even has a hiding place away from the house. But she is still bound to it. She still dislikes the village and feels safe and comfortable only on the piece of land she protected with her little charms: "What place would be better for us than this? Who wants us, outside? The world is full of terrible people" (Jackson 54), she reasons with Constance.

This is where the house takes on the role of protection: "Blackwoods had always lived in our house, and kept their things in order; as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world" (Jackson 1), Merricat explains in the introduction. The house is filled with tradition and memories of their predecessors. As long as the sisters keep the house tidy and the things inside on their places, these memories are being preserved. While Constance keeps them alive by doing the traditional chores, like preparing food, Mary Katherine tries to do so by protecting the Blackwood property as a whole. As mentioned before, she buries the things – belongings of her long dead parents – in order to protect them from the intruders. When these charms fail her, Merricat will find more

violent ways to banish Cousin Charles who poses as a threat to the Blackwoods' tradition: "Instead of escaping the perverse patriarch Charles, she tries to expel him. Merricat hereby becomes the patriarch herself" (Sluis 48). That is why it is perhaps ironic that Merricat tries to preserve the house by setting it on fire. And it is even more ironic that Merricat refers to it as a castle only once it is burned down: "Our house was a castle, turreted and open to the sky" (Jackson 120), she says when they come back to the house after that dreadful night. And it is indeed only after that event that they completely close themselves into the house. With most of it destroyed, the sisters become tied to an even smaller living space than before, echoing the claustrophobic atmosphere of a Gothic castle/house. Even Mary Katherine, who used to find happiness in running wild through the estate, now limits herself: "I discovered that I was no longer allowed to go to the creek" (Jackson 140). But no one actually forbids her to do so; this is one of the clues that Merricat is also slowly becoming like her sister Constance, something scarily like agoraphobia finding its way to her. Merricat goes home and nails even more boards over their already barricaded windows. She and Constance trap themselves inside their castle both mentally and physically.

The biggest irony here is that only by condemning themselves to this fate, the Blackwood sisters become truly free. Inside their barricaded home, they find peace, protected from the people who hate them and want them harm. And not only that, but by them alone deciding to exclude themselves from the society, they become feared of – they become something of idols. The people who were maltreating them now serve them, despite the fact that the ending seems highly ironic – the sisters being so very happy confined in their destroyed home – it is not impossible that this is actually the first time in the novel where happiness is not faked, but a genuine feeling of content and security.

Conclusion

Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* has not been receiving a lot of attention until recently. Sarah Hughes suggests that it is because "Jackson's subject matter was so exclusively female". And it is indeed that this novel in particular revolves around two women who are mentally ill and one of which defies all of the rules. The men who show up are mostly either cruel villains – as is the case with Cousin Charles and the men from the village – or entirely dependent on women, as Uncle Julian. But through the characters of Merricat and Constance, Jackson also shows just how cruel and disturbed women can be.

Merricat becomes the murderess of her family at the age of twelve, while her sister – even though taught to be submissive and compliant – is her subtle partner.

Merricat is a tomboy, childish and disobedient to begin with, and she shows her disdain for the villagers quite openly. She is also the more active one of the pair, actively trying to keep the strangers away and taking certain measures to cast them out. On the other hand, Constance is more indulgent and more afraid to leave her safe space. Through these characters, Jackson's personal struggles are shown. The writer herself has struggled for her entire life with the role of the housewife that was forced on her. Unhappy, she was trying to escape her abusive mother, only to find herself trapped in another household. Similar to that, the Blackwood sisters end up willingly barricading themselves in their home in order to escape the abusive society which hates them for breaking their rules. However, by doing so on their own will, Constance and Merricat reverse the trap, making their prosecutors into the submissive ones, the ones who continue to serve and fear the sisters, turning their isolation into a happy ending.

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