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Savannah F. Gregg

Davis & Elkins College, greggs@dewv.edu

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Clawing for Power:

Merricat and Constance's struggle over patriarchal oppression

Savannah Gregg

Davis & Elkins College

Abstract

In this essay I explore the ways Shirley Jackson's revision of the traditional gothic in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* provides the illusion of matriarchal dominance. Critics typically read this novel as a celebration of female power, which the women hijack from male authority figures, but I argue that by analyzing the feminine objects in the novel, we can see that the illusion of matriarchal power actually supports a patriarchal society. Historical and cultural contexts, including Shirley Jackson's biography, allow us to see the psychological oppression placed on women in twentieth-century American society. This background moreover illuminates women's roles and responsibilities as well as the importance of objects like food and jewelry in women's lives. As a result, we can see the power Jackson gives her female characters—a power based in domestic authority—is really only an illusion. Ultimately, I argue, the novel is a critique, not a celebration, of matriarchal power.

Keywords: Class Structure, Dominance, Illusion, Matriarchy, Oppression, Patriarchy, Traditional Gothic

Shirley Jackson channels and heavily uses elements of the traditional gothic to show gendered oppression in her 1962 novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Her use of the

traditional gothic enforces the idea of legacies of the past, showing the oppression of women through said legacies. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, it would be the Blackwood women being birthed into predetermined domestic roles and their property and objects of monetary value being passed to the Blackwood men. The traditional gothic is characterized by four main themes; legacies of the past, extreme terror, oppression, and obscurity with setting. Jackson draws from these themes to produce and play off of anxieties of female oppression as well as plays with the societal fears of female independence and the rigidity of class structure.

According to John Parks, Jackson also draws from the female gothic by revealing a “pattern of ‘assault, depiction, betrayal,’ where a woman as victim is the protagonist and her defenselessness is the story” (Parks, 26). In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat fills this roll. The readers, because of Merricat’s narration, have to assume that Merricat is the victim even though she is responsible for murdering her family as well as the destruction of the Blackwood mansion. This defenselessness mentioned could be seen at the end of the novel with the Blackwood house in shambles and villagers, who stand as representations of the patriarchy, at her door. It could also be seen with thoughts and interactions with the villagers. Jackson’s balance and use of the traditional gothic and elements of the female gothic show how her “protagonists are emotionally violated and must struggle desperately to overcome their estrangement and dislocation, and most of them fail” (Parks, 16). We see the illusion of matriarchal victory when Merricat and Constance are left in the remnants of the Blackwood mansion. However, their perceived victory is overshadowed by the destruction of their safe haven, the mansion, which is a representation of the destruction of female power, as well as their property being constantly encroached upon by villagers and tourists coming to ogle the mansion with the “cannibalistic” sisters (Jackson, 141). The reader is forced to watch the women in

Jackson's novels claw away at these oppressive forces surrounding them. These patriarchal forces are reflected in Jackson's life and are heavily seen in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

In this essay I will explore Jackson's use of the female gothic and how it provides the illusion of matriarchal dominance over patriarchal figures through objects, places, and roles that both genders embody. The objects that Jackson uses further shows the clash and constant struggle for the female and male figures to overcome one another and the Blackwood mansion shows the hijacking of female power by the Blackwood males. Shirley Jackson's biography allows us to see the psychological oppression that was placed on women during the 1960's at the hands of twentieth century American patriarchy. The context will also illuminate the roles and responsibilities women were expected to play in to and the importance of objects like food and jewelry. Because of this context, we can now see the illusion that Jackson sets up of matriarchal power overcoming the patriarchy through Merricat's poisoning and in the final scenes of the destruction of the Blackwood mansion in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

The psychological oppression and abuse that Jackson faced in her life from her mother and husband reflect onto *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Throughout her life, Jackson was constantly mentally abused, harshly criticized or deprecated by those around her. She married her "brilliant and contentious" husband, Stanley Hyman, when she was twenty-one. Jackson's husband was aspiring writer like her; however, he was largely unsuccessful (Churchwell). He turned his anger and feelings of invalidity to his wife. Hyman, as a result of this, was "exploitative, bullying, controlling and selfish. He recognized her talent and encouraged her writing — as well he should, since her income kept them going for years — but he also kept her insecure and subordinate by flaunting his affairs with thinner women (Showalter)." Hyman's demeanor and forced pressure to conform towards his wife caused her to blame herself and take

on both the stereotypical male and female roles by being both the “breadwinner” and the caretaker. Jackson’s mother was another powerful oppressive force whose opinions and harsh views of Jackson often sent her into downward spirals and agoraphobic periods that would last for months. After the publication of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the Times ran an article on Jackson to which her mother replied: “Why oh why do you allow the magazines to print such awful pictures of you? . . . I have been so sad all morning about what you have allowed yourself to look like (Showalter).” Ruth Franklin, the author of *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* states that Jackson wrote a furious reply to this letter, however, never sent it to her mother. Instead, Jackson “stifled her anger instead and internalized her pain in an attack of agoraphobia that kept her housebound for six months (Showalter).”

In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat and Constance both feel societal oppression and abuse from the villagers and their family. The Blackwood family members, especially the males, have neglected and put pressure on the females of the family to conform; “We relied on Constance for various delicacies which only she could provide” (Jackson, 35). However, we see that women play heavily into this role as well by immortalizing traditions that support and enable the patriarchal values of the Blackwood home; for example, the women, when marrying into the family, give up their property to the men and begin a life of domesticity, with the exception of Merricat and Constance’s mother. Merricat faces the “ghost signifying the problematics of femininity” that is a feature of both the female gothic and traditional gothic. To escape the neglect and oppression she underwent from family members, Merricat poisons and kills all of them except two. Her attempt at erasing this patriarchal oppression inside of the mansion, however, fails when Julian survives. Julian is a constant reminder to the psychological abuse that she is faced with as well as the invisibility she felt in the Blackwood household. In *We*

Have Always Lived in the Castle, Julian begins talking about Merricat's perceived death with Charles Blackwood; "My niece Mary Katherine has been a long time dead, young man. She did not survive the loss of her family (Jackson, 93)." Julian's statement characterizes Merricat as dependent on the help of her family, a stereotypically feminine quality. Julian goes on to say "Mary Katherine died in an orphanage, of neglect, during her sister's trial for murder (Jackson, 93)." Julian states that Merricat is dead from neglect but, in saying that she is dead, he too is oppressing her by neglecting her presence, showing her attempt at breaking free from the patriarchy of the Blackwood mansion was not wholly successful.

A way of coping with this psychological oppression that Merricat as well as Jackson uses is creating imaginative worlds where they are in control. Jackson; in order to cope with the pressures of a patriarchal society, an overbearing and abusive husband, as well as a degrading and harsh mother, would project her feelings and experiences into the fictional worlds she created on paper. "The racism and anti-Semitism of the conservative community showed up in many of her stories, along with cold mothers, matricidal daughters and vain, cruel husbands (Showalter)." Jackson's marriage soon became a constant source of stress and maltreatment which caused her mental and physical self to spiral, pushing her into substance abuse and caused many bouts of agoraphobia until she got to the point where she was unable to leave her room.

Despite all of this,

she never stopped writing. Drawing on journals, diaries and unpublished fiction, [...], as Jackson recorded lurid nightmares, plotted murderous fantasies and planned her escape to 'that great golden world outside' in which she would be independent and free. 'Writing is the way out,' she told herself in those psychologically tumultuous years (Showalter).

We see her character, Merricat, drawing from the coping mechanisms Jackson uses herself to escape persecutions that were similar to Shirley Jackson's. In one section of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, following an argument with Charles, Merricat escapes to her summer home and recreates the image of her family as well as her standing within its structure. In this recreated memory, Merricat attempts to console herself by claiming her space, or rather attempting to do so; "I sat between Constance and Julian, in my rightful, my own and proper, place at the table (Jackson, 95)." With the domestic role filled by Constance and role of heir filled by her younger brother, Merricat is left forgotten in the middle.

The violent thoughts that come from Merricat show her rebellious nature and how Merricat challenges the rigid structure people, specifically family members, have tried to place on her. Some of this inner dialogue also helps outline the rigid class structure. These violent thoughts are seen constantly throughout the book, for example, "I wished they were dead. I would have liked to come into the grocery some morning and see them all, even the Elberts and the children, lying there crying with the pain and dying" (Jackson, 9). Constance, however, willingly steps into a nurturing and domestic role but gains a place of immense and hidden power over the Blackwood family- the Blackwood's had become dependent on her "We relied upon Constance for various small delicacies which only she could provide (Jackson, 35)." Constance also participated in the ritual of preserving and canning like the Blackwood women before her and took pride in doing so. This role that she steps into supports the patriarchy by providing sustenance and catering to their needs. While the preserved food is a product of matriarchal figures, the cans left in the final scenes are still upholding these patriarchal values.

All the Blackwood women had made food and had taken pride in adding to the great supply of food in our cellar ... Even our mother had left behind her six jars of apple jelly.

Constance had worked all her life at adding to the food in the cellar ... All the

Blackwood women had taken the food from the ground and preserved it (Jackson, 42).

In this passage, we see that Merricat and Constance's mother has trouble following the traditions of the Blackwood females. Her deferral from traditional values has left her daughter, Constance, to take her place and continue the Blackwood legacy of female submission and oppression. "Mrs. Blackwood's indifference to the kitchen and garden not only sets her apart from her daughters but violates the creative tradition of the Blackwood women (Carpenter, 33)." This is also where we see Merricat, again, stray from her suggested role. Merricat is eighteen years old which in most societies would be where one is considered to be an adult yet Merricat has not started to contribute to the legacy of the Blackwood women and she has even made self-imposed rules against doing things that would fall under feminine roles. Some examples are; "I was not allowed to prepare food (Jackson, 20)", "I was not allowed into Uncle Julian's room (Jackson, 42)", and "I was not allowed to handle knives (Jackson, 42)". Her reluctance to go into Uncle Julian's room prevents her from stepping into a caretaking role and her decision to not prepare food or handle knives challenges main characteristics of domesticity like cooking. Her rules and protection spells "constitute attempts to gain power over a world in which, first as the second girl in a patriarchal family and then as a grown woman in a patriarchal society, she is essentially powerless (Carpenter, 34)." Merricat's constant struggle for attention and a place in the family causes her to rebel against her gendered role.

The Blackwood males follow a very rigid system of gender roles as well that play off of both dominance and wealth. As Carpenter explains, "John Blackwood's power in his family and his community derived not only from his gender but also from his material wealth (Carpenter, 32)." Julian provides insight as to what the Blackwood males hold as important, "His invalid

state no doubt confirms the general belief that financial failure for men leads to powerlessness, dependency, emasculation (Carpenter, 33).” Julian surviving the poisoning serves as a reminder as the roles and responsibilities the women were supposed to step into.

Jackson, much like her female characters, was forced into a role that was societally accepted, and expected to do so by her family members. Her husband, after getting a job at Bennington College, the college he was previously fired from, required that Jackson become “a supportive faculty wife and a tireless, inspired hostess for his friends and colleagues (Showalter)”, and she complied. However, her anger and feelings of being ostracized by community members in their Vermont town as well as her anger towards her mentally abusive husband is transferred into her fiction. Her conformity to the rigid societal systems did not come without struggle and a hidden rebellion, much like Merricat’s violent and abrasive inner thoughts. Jackson’s projection of her own oppression onto the Blackwood females and the failure of the Blackwood females in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* shows the suffocating power of society and societally stereotypical dominant figures.

One theme that Jackson uses to separate the male and female systems and values in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* are objects and the Blackwood mansion. Jackson plays with the ownership of many of the feminine objects and roles in the novel, however, many are unknowingly contributing and nurturing the men in the Blackwood family. The Blackwood women are responsible for keeping the house tidy, as seen with Merricat and Constance’s intense and scheduled cleaning. However, the house is hijacked by patriarchal values and is shadowed by the patriarchal value of wealth and the importance of outward image/appearance. The conflicting patriarchal and matriarchal representation that hang over the house shows that the solace the sisters gain in the end is more complicated than the reader is first led to believe. The

objects that are most prized “appear [to be] objects as artifacts from the domestic history of the Blackwood women (Carpenter, 33).” The objects that hold the most power for women in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* are food and kitchen centered objects that have been passed down through the Blackwood women. The years of preserving food and the importance of the tradition shows the value it holds to the Blackwood women as well as the collection of dishes and silverware from past generations. However, the practice of canning food, in Jackson’s novel, and the passing down of material objects focused around the kitchen requires women to step into the role of domesticity and “house-maker” to both participate in the practice of preserving food and fully appreciate the objects.

Masculine objects in Jackson’s novel focus on wealth or are objects that are seen as unclean, like Charles’ pipe. Charles, Merricat and Constance’s cousin and the Blackwood heir, is very concerned with jewelry and specifically objects that belonged to John Blackwood and was constantly caught wearing his clothes and jewelry by Merricat. His pipe also serves as a strong masculine symbol and a threatening and destructive symbol to Merricat. “Charles was sitting at the table smoking his pipe [...] “I wonder if Cousin Mary knows how I get even with people who don’t like me? (Jackson, 70)” The ash from his pipe also fell and singed a chair in their mothers drawing room, “A spark from his pipe had left a tiny burn on the rose brocade of a chair in the drawing room (Jackson, 78).” Another important masculine object is newspapers. In the scene of the house fire, “I brushed the saucer and the pipe off of the table into the wastebasket and they fell softly onto the newspapers he had brought into the house (Jackson, 99).” In this scene, Merricat uses two masculine objects to burn down the remaining objects from the Blackwood patriarchal figures. The objects in the attic were the last reminders of Merricat’s oppressive past,

but in burning the rest of the patriarchal objects, Merricat also had to destroy feminine objects like the saucer and the Blackwood mansion.

Shirley Jackson's balance of traditional gothic elements as well as the use of the female gothic enhances her characters struggle over the patriarchal values that continue to oppress them even after they become bound to their house in the end scenes. Merricat and Constance simultaneously overcome and are snuffed out by their systems of oppression by being forced into a place of wanted ostracism and solitude. Their comfort in staying in their house reflects on Jackson's history of agoraphobia and also shows their perceived victory over their oppressors. However, the destruction of the house, a feminine symbol, and the constant visitation of villagers and tourists prevent the sisters from leaving, even if they wanted to. Constance and Merricat's "happiness" are overshadowed by a sense of destruction of both the house and the family.

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