



## A critical study of the blackwood family in Shirley Jackson's "We have always lived in the castle"

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### Abstract

We have always lived in the castle is a gothic novel by Shirley Jackson, it is arguably one of her finest works. The story of this novel revolves around the life of Blackwoods, who live in a secluded house, away from the hustle and bustle of the nearby village. The entire family has died in a tragic event of poisoning via arsenic except for the main character Mary Blackwood, her sister Constance Blackwood and their uncle Julian Blackwood. It was a perfectly normal routine dinner when John Blackwood, his wife Ellen and his sister-in-law Dorothy were poisoned by arsenic which was mixed with the sugar that they were consuming. Julian Blackwood was also at the dinner table but he was saved somehow, similarly, Constance and Merricat were also saved as the former didn't consume sugar and the latter one was absent from the dinner table as a punishment.

Jackson portrays something quite unusual for the 1960's decade, the two sisters living with each other in a perfect harmony, despite knowing the fact that one among them is the murderer of their whole family. The power of family and the self-reliant nature of the two female protagonists is what this research paper will be discussing in detail.

**Keywords:** gothic, family, secluded, self-reliant females, 1960's decade

### Introduction

One can never deny the importance of family. Whether it is the relationship which we have with our parents or siblings or which we don't have, the presence and absence of a family do impact our lives. There is always an emotional and psychological requirement to have people around us, whom we can trust in our difficult times. Without such emotional back-up, one might fail to withstand the misfortunes of life. Shirley Jackson explores the concept of family as an emotional support in the novel. Although, the family here in this novel only comprises of two sisters and their old uncle yet it still has all the love and care which we find in full-fledged families. The novel begins with a peculiar introduction of Merricat, the younger of the two sisters:

My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and Amanita phalloides, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead (1).

She describes the entire family as dead but she never describes herself responsible for the murderous scene. In a trial for the death of the Blackwood family, Constance, the elder one of the two sisters was tried but was later found not guilty due to lack of evidence. Now a unique post-apocalyptic world surrounds the entire Blackwood house, in this world Constance barely leaves the house and Merricat is the only person who has access to the world, outside because she visits

the nearby village on Friday and Thursday:

Fridays and Tuesdays were terrible days because I had to go into the village. Someone had to go to the library, and the grocery; Constance never went past her own garden, and Uncle Julian could not. Therefore it was not pride that took me into the village twice a week, or even stubbornness, but only the simple need for books and food (1).

Merricat manages to leave the house despite knowing the fact that the village people hated her and her little family. The main reason for her to survive the torture of the people talking about them in the village is the fact that she has created her own mental world wherein she can protect her sister, and dump the past like the little things which she often dumps around the property of the Blackwoods. The bond between Merricat and Constance is further strengthened with the latter playing a true instructional elder sister who advises her sister not to hate people as it could only weaken her own soul. Merricat has always idealized her sister even as a young child, she thought of Constance as a "fairy princess" (8) whom she would draw and color with crayons:

When I was small I thought Constance was a fairy princess. I used to try to draw her picture, with long golden hair and eyes as blue as the crayon could make them, and a bright pink spot on either cheek; the pictures always surprised me, because she did look like that; even at the worst time she was pink and white and golden, and nothing had ever seemed to dim the brightness of her. She was the most precious person in my world, always. I followed her across the soft grass, past the flowers she

tended, into our house, and Jonas, my cat, came out of the flowers and followed me (8).

For the few hours Merricut leaves home to go to the market, Constance misses and longs for her only companion. The difference in the personalities of the two sisters is quite apparent, Constance doesn't go beyond the garden yet she doesn't mind a few guests at home, Merricut, on the other hand, is anthropophobic, she wishes for the people to die. She lives in her own world and wishes for a utopia, a house on the moon where she would "put a fireplace" (6) and sit outside in the garden with Constance and Uncle Julian. She is tired of people talking about her and the property of Blackwoods.

Jackson portrays Blackwoods as a rich family, who own a huge farm known as the "Blackwood farm", they have a whole lineage of ancestors who always made sure that they had enough of land and property:

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 (1).

Even the villagers thought the Blackwoods can survive many generations while doing no work at all. But the property of the Blackwoods like the family name could only be passed down through the male line, and the sons would inherit the family property instead of daughters. Women in the Blackwood family like the women in the 1960's decade were considered to be under the rule of their fathers until their marriage, and after their marriage their husband would rule them both emotionally as well as physically. Family in itself was an institution for patriarchy and female oppression. Merricut in the novel seems to practically deny this whole legacy of male domination, she is not the kind of a girl to be tamed by a male patriarch.

The world of male dominance is portrayed by Charles Blackwood in the novel. Charles Blackwood is the cousin of Constance and Merricut but he has his own ulterior motives behind coming to the Blackwood farm. Before the arrival of Charles, Merricut feels an inevitable "change" (21) approaching the Blackwood house, a change that would make the days of love and affection between the two sisters come to an end. Charles son his arrival, finds Merricut too weird to be tamed so he opts for Constance. His coming into the house and his conversations with Constance makes Merricut feel that she was never talked to even when their parents were alive, nobody would call for her:

They always had something important they wanted to tell Constance, whether they were pushing at the door or yelling outside or calling on the telephone or writing the terrible terrible letters. Sometimes they wanted Julian Blackwood, but they never asked for me. I had been sent to bed without my supper, I had not been allowed in the courtroom, no one had taken my picture. While they were looking at Constance in the courtroom I had been lying on the cot at the orphanage, staring at the ceiling, wishing they were all dead, waiting for Constance to come and take

me home (23).

The presence of Charles creates a gap between the two sisters, Merricut feels neglected, while Constance enjoys the affection of a male cousin. He is obsessed with money and other materialistic possessions of Blackwoods. Constance is fooled into believing that after the death of their uncle, who never liked his brother or his family, Charles has hurriedly come to help them but Merricut already knows the truth that their cousin is trying to take the position of their father, first by taking over his room, second by sharing the responsibilities of the house. His act of occupying the father's chair and even his facial similarities with the father of Merricut and Constance pose a threat to the female-centric world of the house.

Apart from damaging the relationship between the sisters Charles is unkind to Uncle Julian too, he makes Constance believe that their Uncle was just a liability upon them and that he should sit quietly in some corner of the house without calling out for her. Charles towards the middle of his visit to the Blackwoods also tries to replace Merricut, as he himself inquires about money and goes out to get things for the house:

The house was not secure just because Charles had gone out of it and into the village; for one thing, Constance had given him a key to the gates. There had originally been a key for each of us; our father had a key, and our mother, and the keys were kept on a rack beside the kitchen door. When Charles started out for the village Constance gave him a key, perhaps our father's key, and a shopping list, and the money to pay for what he bought. "You shouldn't keep money in the house like this," he said, holding it tight in his hand for a minute before he reached into a back pocket and took out a wallet. "Women alone like you are, you shouldn't keep money in the house." (31)

Charles is a misogynist, who thinks that the rightful owners of money and property are men, women cannot handle money nor can they be self-reliant like Merricut to go out and fetch food and drink.

Towards the end of the novel, Merricut tries to burn down the entire Blackwood house by putting the still burning pipe into a wastebasket, even when the whole house has caught fire Charles can only think of keeping the money safe as he shouts "get the safe out of the study downstairs"(43). After the whole fire incident he returns just once on the door of the half-burnt house just to fool the two sisters into believing him once again but this time even Constance takes a stand and refuses to open the door for him.

Shirley Jackson's this novel explores the dynamics of a family which is largely matriarchal. The unique characterization along with the relationships discussed above make it a complete masterpiece of American literature.

## References

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2. Family. Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family.